# Just Relocation for Isla Puting Bato

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But this research is intended to understand the difficult reality of slum relocation. And it is to that end that the residents of Isla Puting Bato must be remembered and thanked for allowing me to step into their community and lives. Their cooperation and help made this all possible, and helps bring light to this harsh reality that many around the world are facing. May God be with you all during the continuation of this process.

# Table of contents

Introduction 3

Background 3

Point of interest 3

Purpose of research 4

Methods 4

Isla Puting Bato 5

Data 6

Description and observation 6

Analysis 18

Reflection and application 30

Personal interaction with the research 30

Significant findings 30

Further research 31

Self evaluation 31

Personal outcomes 32

Appendices 33

Project Plan 33

Works Cited 34

# Introduction

## Background

Slum relocation is a primary solution to the influx of informal settlers that reside in Metro Manila. With many leaving the province to look for employment in the city, slum communities have swelled. While the government stance is to prioritize on-site resettlement, off-site relocation, then out of city-relocation in that order, land scarcity has forced many of the relocated to locations on the fringes of Metro Manila.

Often these relocation sites are lacking in necessities including utilities, access to employment, and access to services. This is in spite of very clear statutes outlined in the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992, which outlines the context of resettlement and relocation, including government responsibilities to the people such as the provision of utilities. Articles within UDHD hold the government responsible for the provision of ‘basic services.’

There is currently no standard by which to deem a relocation “just.” This is due mainly to the fact that despite that information outlined above, often relocation and resettlement happen and the rights of the resettled have not been secured and government has not followed through on its legal obligations. In the case of Isla Putting Bato which is classified as danger zone and residents are under threat of demolition, it is important to define a just relocation scheme as the future of their residence is decided.

## Point of Interest

I have been living in an urban poor community for almost two years. I have been studying community development from a grassroots level. My father is a planning director of small city in California. With my experience and knowledge of \_\_\_\_\_, I was deeply intrigued by the current ‘best practices’ being implemented to handle the rapid urban growth of the world, specifically here in Metro Manila where I am living. With relocation being the solution to the informal settlements, I was curious as to the success rate of these relocations. Informal surveys indicated that many of the relocations were more harmful than helpful when it came to the well being of the people themselves. Relocations seemed to be a solution for a government problem, but would in turn create many new problems for the thousands relocated. It was for this reason I was intent on looking into the complexity of slum relocation. I was fortunate enough for UPA allowing me to come alongside them as they advocate for the community of Isla Puting Bato which has been under threat of demolition for a few years. Isla is community that inhabits the water break which protects the North Harbor in Tondo, Manila.

## Purpose of Research

In order to really understand the complexity of relocation, while working on behalf of the community I was working with, I needed to focus my attention on certain particulars of the process. But with so many relocations being failed in many senses of the word, mainly in unfair or unjust manners (lack of basic services, lack of employment, lack of facilities etc.), it was clear to me that injustice has become a common factor in relocations occurring within the Philippines. It for that reason my main research question became: "What would a just relocation scheme for Isla Putting Bato look like?”

This question brought into play many variables that are part of the relocation process. Within Metro Manila the primary actors are the community, the National Housing Authority and the local government. But there are factors beyond these which influence how each will make decisions. These factors work together and result in relocation or resettlement. But that relocation can look like many things, another slum, an underfunded project, a human rights debacle. or a just relocation. Furthermore, there are competing agendas which impact what the relocation looks like. Often the result is a relocation that does not fully provide for the needs of the residents. While relocations like this happens often and without organized opposition, it clearly fails to meet the statues upheld in United Nations legislation concerning the right to housing, let alone their own legislation regarding socialized housing for informal settlers.

## Methods

This research was conducted through interactions with Isla, UPA and the NHA. From the start this was intended to be participatory which is why I made myself familiar to the community members through attending a few local meetings that were hosted by UPA. I also did a windshield survey of the community with a local and my UPA supervisor as my guide. My relationship with UPA allowed me to see the working of the local leadership and for them to become familiar with my presence in the community. This later culminated in a focus group discussion with the leadership group over the entire community which consists of 10 men and women that represent all five *puroks* or areas of the Isla community. A one on one interview with my UPA supervisor was held in the UPA office. Our relationship had built trust through my participation in the Isla community. A final interview was held with a high ranking NHA official. This interview was very forthright and offered much insight into the governmental process of relocation. All of the interactions were recorded and later transcribed directly into Tagalog and then translated from Tagalog to English with the aid of my research assistants.

# Isla Puting Bato

Isla Puting Bato started out when fishermen who fished the local waters eventually moved their family closer to their work. They carried with them stone and soil and eventually expanded the jetty turning it into a home. The physical area itself is actually a water break that protects the North Harbor area of the Port of Manila.

The community today is split into 5 *puroks* or areas, each now with its own leadership which was facilitated with the help of UPA. There is also one overall leadership group with representatives covering all 5 *puroks*.

The residents of Isla Puting Bato desire to rebuild after a fire that claimed 1,066 houses in May 2012. But the location on the water-break that protects pier is a location that officially has the government concerned for the safety of this community. Most residents of Isla Puting Bato work at the Pier or at the nearby shopping area Divisoria. It is for that reason residents desire to stay in the area, because it is close to there are of employment.

There are thousands of homes in Isla, but the final numbers have not been tallied as it is an informal settlement. Residents come from all walks of life but generally from the lower socio-economic rung. Isla is a community in Tondo, Manila, which is generally noted for its high levels of crime and poverty. Isla is a community common in Tondo, high levels of poverty, overcrowding living conditions and in many areas unsafe and unhealthy living conditions.

The community has partnered with Urban Poor Associates to address these things as they fight for land tenure.

# Data

## **Data and Observation**

Eight variables that are pertinent to the relocation process have been identified as playing a role in the case of Isla Puting Bato. A number of variables were identified prior to the data collection portion of this research, being perceived as common factors within any relocation case within Metro Manila. But a number of variables were identified as being ‘in-play’ after focus group discussion and interviews were conducted.

Each case of relocation includes all these variables though they may vary in complexity or degree. The case of Isla Puting Bato which has been under threat of demolition since 2006 has both elements of commonality and uniqueness in which each variable must be carefully analyzed in order to provide a fair and just relocation scheme for the community.

A focus group discussion was conducted on Saturday, February 9th, 2013 with 9 leaders from Isla Puting Bato, representing all 5 puroks and who are the acknowledged leadership group within the community. On Friday February 22nd, an interview was held with an Urban Poor Associates community worker. And on Tuesday, March 12th, 2013 an interview was conducted with a high ranking official from the National Housing Authority. These three interactions will provide the basis in which to understand how each of the 8 variables plays a specific role in the case of Isla Puting Bato.

Isla Puting Bato has been under threat of demolition for years now, but is not under immediate threat. There are four parties involved in this case, the community itself, Urban Poor Associates (UPA), the Philippines Port Authority (PPA) and the National Housing Authority (NHA). Each party has its own set of goals which come into play which fit together in a rather complex relocation scheme.

Isla Puting Bato was once just the water break protecting the pier. Overtime the fishermen who fished the local waters brought with them soil and rocks and began to expand the slim water break. As the water break grew the fisherman began to build homes and move their families onto the jetty. That was the start of the community and over the years it has grown into a community housing thousands of people.

This community which now seeks to take an active role in their own future is amidst a process to gain the rights to the water break as their place of residence as opposed to being relocated to another location. This process with its’ conflicting agendas will eventually culminate in a decision that will affect thousands. It is to that end that the question is asked: “What would a just relocation scheme for Isla Puting Bato look like?”

Needs of community: *The needs of the community are a cornerstone in gauging whether the relocation process has been just. If the needs of the community are not being addressed then there is a shortcoming somewhere in the process.*

The Urban Development and Housing Act (UDHA) was signed into law in 1992 with the intention of addressing housing shortages throughout the country. It addresses the right to housing for the homeless and underprivileged. Key sections outline the rights of informal settlers, the responsibility of the government, who is eligible for housing and what provisions will be made for informal settlers. According to the NHA it is most important piece of legislation concerning the urban poor and urban poor housing.

The government has outlined three provisions that the government is responsible for informal settlers that are part of a relocation program. These provisions are the perceived needs of informal settlers as perceived by the government. The NHA shares, “Consultations were made from affected families, various organizations and congressman,” to draft the UDHD into legislation.

The most dire needs are basic services which by mandate of the UDHA must be provided in every relocation scheme and include: potable water, access to primary roads and transportation facilities, power and electricity and an adequate power distribution system, and sewerage facilities and efficient and adequate waste disposal. This is followed by a list of services which are to be given ‘priority implementation.’ This list includes: health, education, communication, recreation, security, relief and welfare. The last provision is a “location near areas where employments areas are accessible,” with the caveat of, “if feasible.”

First and foremost residents of Isla Puting Bato desire to remain on the water break. Instead of being relocated they wish to turn the water break into a settled and official community of Manila. But residents understand that on-site relocation may not be possible. If the government in this case the Philippines Port Authority does not agree to allow residents to reside on the water break, residents will alternatively be forced to relocate elsewhere.

One leader of Isla shares, “The in-city relocation is our second option if they will prove to us that Isla is really not a safe place to live.” But residents don’t feel the Isla is really a danger area despite what the PPA says. In fact, many members say, “According to Philippine Port Authority, Isla Puting Bato is considered a danger zone. But for us, it is not. We experienced many storms but nothing bad happened to us. Last Ondoy, Metro Manila was fully damaged and covered by the flood but not here in Isla. Though we are near the sea, we never experienced such things.” But despite the experiential argument being made by community members, “Waterways, creeks and esteros have been made a priority clearing zone,“ says the NHA, “They have been made a priority danger zone by presidential order.”

There have been a few proposed locations within Manila, but according to residents of Isla, “The places that we found are for commercial purpose and cost millions of pesos. The land at PNC and the one owned by NHA are also for commercial purposes and not for residential so we are still not allowed there.” And the NHA doesn’t deny their ownership of commercial property sharing, “It was an area given by the government to fund and develop that area, cross-subsidizing the amortization payment of families of Tondo in dagat-dagatan.” Meaning, the property in discussion is intended to subsidize other relocation projects, not become a relocation site itself.

Ultimately the Isla community desires to actively participate in the process. As one well respected community leader says, “They (NHA) want to be the ones who will choose the place where we will live, but we want to choose the place because we are the one who will live there and it is not for free, we will pay it so we have the right to choose as well.” As leaders explain, the costs are not completely subsidized by the government; there is a heavy financial investment averaging about 240,000 pesos over 25 years. The NHA holds that the communities under threat of relocation have the option to choose their relocation sight. More than that, they are encouraged to actively take a part in their own relocation. The NHA offers, “We have this program called community; it is a community initiative. The families of these informal settlers have the chance to select their relocation site from a short list or long list.” Right now that list includes Cavite (1.5 hours away), Bulucan (2 hours away) and Laguna (2 hours away). While the UDHA encourages community participation, it guarantee that communities can decide where they relocate to. Often with the threat of demolition, communities are pushed into decisions rather than communities having fully control of their relocation.

One alternative to traditional in-city relocation schemes is to build medium-rise buildings in which families can rent to offset the high cost of land. But leaders are firmly opposed to this notion, “We are not in favor of MRBs because that will never belong to us. That’s what you call temporary housing because if you agree to MRBs after 5 years they will demolish it also. We will not be given the right to appeal because we signed the relocation terms.” While community members may often feel that their opinions are not taken into account when it comes to government action this is one case in which the government, specifically the NHA appears to have listened. “Well, that was the initial plan but we are also considering other opinions and suggestions. They want to own the property although they live in condominiums or condo units, they want the security of tenure and they want to have the title of the properties,” reveals the NHA. Continuing on, “Yes, the original plan is to rent but we are just now waiting the finalization of the list of the beneficiaries selection approach the program where in we give into their request. Instead of renting we have the option to purchase the property over a period of time.”

The focus group discussion firmly reiterated the desire of the community to stay in Isla. “But if the NHA could provide us with all the services listed in UDHA, it would not matter where we lived.” But the biggest issue has always been ‘hanapbuhay,’ or livelihood, and according to UDHA, that is the last priority listed in the UDHA. Community members throughout the focus group discussion mention the need for ‘hanapbuhay.’ It is for that reason that most came to reside in Isla. “Here in Isla, the flow of money is contagious and fast because the Isla itself is a source of income,” explains one middle aged man. “For example, we can dive under the sea to look for sea shells, sell it in the market or as wholesale. Or in Divisoria, we can sell vegetables there. We can also be a pedicab driver or tricycle driver. And during Christmas, Divisoria is so rich that we earn a lot from there. Unlike in other places where there is almost no jobs which is why so many families are so poor. And that’s what the government can’t see,” he states matter of factly.

Another lady shares her own experience, “My spouse works at the Pier. When we were staying in Alabang, my husband would arrive home late at night, and my daughters were already asleep. And when he left for work in the morning, it was too early. We rarely were able to see each other so we decided to transfer here where we can be near his place of employment even though the water and electricity cost a lot because here there are no basic services being offered.”

The point is further clarified by an UPA worker, “Here in UPA, we advocate in-city or on-site. We do not want off-site because based on our experience from the people who were relocated off-site, they keep on returning to the city due to employment. If they are earning a minimum wage but living outside the city, they will lose a lot from the transportation fare plus the food for their family. They like to stay in Manila because here, they do not have to pay for a fare since most of their jobs are walking distance. There is an advantage if they are here, they can save a lot and use it for the health and education of their families.”

But the NHA appears to understand, “If you take the majority, they are working in Divisoria as vendors or distributors along the pier...once they are relocated, their employment opportunities will also be affected.” Both parts seem to be aware of the same issues, but they simply function from two different frame of reference and reality.

Political environment: *There is a political aspect that must be considered, especially as political environments change, so do the official government stance on low-income housing and helping the poor. There are two political entities at play in this case, the National Housing Authority and the Philippines Port Authority.*

One community leader explains, “When the government was making the railway, our house was one that had been demolished and they told us that Isla will serve us a staging area. They promised us that after 2 years they will give us a relocation area. Unfortunately they forgot about it, maybe because no one did a follow up about our relocation.” The UPA worker expounds, “In my experience with PPA, they just put the people from the railroad in Parola on the Isla which is only a break water. If they were following the law, they probably would look for a safer place for the people and not just throw the people on the Isla even if it will only serve as a staging area. They are saying that Isla is not for housing but they are the one who put the people there.” The government had made Isla a staging area but did not follow through. “Ningas-kugon” is what the UPA calls the government because of this lack of follow through, which means that they are only good at the start but never finish it.

While the lack of follow through is not the only thing that current residents find problem with, they believe that the government has held more to the letter of the law than the spirit of the law. With the UDHA being the most important piece of Filipino legislation on urban poor housing, the information should be shared with informal settlers. But Isla residents say otherwise, “One reason why we believed the government officials before is that we did not know our rights. We never even talked about it and no one gave us information about the UDHA that is why we are always following everything that the government told us to do.”

In the same way that the NHA has not been fully forthcoming with information about the rights of informal settlers, there has been a history of government mistrust which started with the city of Manila. A long time resident recounts, “In 1991 Mayor Lim, he had this water project. They put a water pipe here in Isla, we thought that it is a project that would really grow into something but after the picture taking and Mayor Lim left, the water stopped flowing. Today the pipes are gone. The people sold it since no water was flowing we do not know the reason why it was like that. They did not even tell us the reason though it was the Mayor Lim – barangay water project.” Seemingly the local government uses Isla as a press opportunity and at times a voting bloc, but show little interest in actually changing the situation the community finds itself in.

That mistrust seems to have carried and resounds in the sentiment, “Unlike today we have a firm organization and we have learned our rights. The government treats us as an enemy since we are now thinking and not just simply doing what they want us to do.” It is with this zeal that one member says, “ We filed a petition to the government that states that they need show us the research that proves to us that Isla is really not a safe place to live and if it’s really not, we will look for a place where we can live safely. But what is happening is that when we find a place, they tell us that it is already allotted for other purposes.” As a counterpoint, the NHA offers, “Well it is accepted here in Manila that during rainy season or typhoon season manila is drowned by floods. So it is the recommendation of the government that priority of clearing should be conducted within the danger zone near, within or adjacent the water ways.”

On May 11, 2012, a fire broke out in Isla affecting some 2,000 families, most of whom were forced to relocate outside of Metro Manila. Even that incident is not without a shadow of suspicion. The trust lost by the NHA and the city of Manila extends to the PPA. The most vocal leader in the room asserts, “The PPA is using strategies against us so that little by little we will be moved away from here. The last fire incident, they told us that they were just helping us but what we saw is that when only few of us are left there will likely be a massive demolition.” Even the UPA worker seems to echo these thoughts, “Most of the areas in Metro Manila, not only in Isla were being burned and after the fires, they were not allowing the residents to enter the area again. So what does that tell you?” The community worker went on to explain that it is common for areas under threat of demolition to ‘accidently’ have fires break out. Although the NHA acknowledges the fire that took place last May, they in no way seem to indicate it was anything other than an accident. But as the NHA shares, “There is a move now, because Isla Puting Bato was recently damaged by fire last year, about 1000 of this families will be relocated. The PPA management coordinated with the NHA. So we were given the initial approval for first 600 families that will be relocated.” The actual cause of the fire may never be discovered, and the intentions of the PPA may never fully be revealed, but all parties agree that many in Isla have already been subjected to relocation. The political agenda of which may be controversial should it ever be revealed.

“Aside from fire incident, the government has this project entitled Clean-Up Manila Bay. They are the ones who are clearing the houses beside seas. This is not a danger zone with the exception of the fire incident, since it was intentional,” says one man. When interviewed, the UPA field worker confirmed that generally speaking Isla is less of a danger area than other nearby communities in regards to flooding. But does admit that like any other poor community, the overcrowded nature of informal settlements means there will always be a fire risk, including Isla. But she clarifies more about the North Harbor Modernization Project, explaining that the project is aimed at beautifying the area and preparing it for commercial uses even though there are no real concrete plans for construction at this time. as UPA reports, “According to the NHA ‘they cannot decide because PPA is the one who owns the Isla’” Unlike neighboring communities like Baseco and Parola, “Isla Puting Bato is at the northern most point of Parola and will be affected by the North Harbor so that’s in conflict to PPA infrastructure project,” admits the NHA. Further clarifying, “The PPA already gave us money to start clearing this area for the port operations.”

UPA reports, “Most of the urban communities do not have basic services though it is required by the UDHA. The point of the UDHA is that, if you are the developer of the housing project, you must put a water, electricity and drainage on the project. But today, the home owner is the one responsible for such provisions.” This falls outside the legal statutes, clearly an unjust and illegal relocation scheme. But UPA goes on saying, “They are not following the law. They are the ones making these legal documents to serve the poor, but they are also the first to disobey it.” Defending itself the NHA says, “It’s not the fault of NHA if the developer does not complete the provision of power and water. Because we will not pay him if he does not provide those things. Once a family will occupy the housing land they will immediately be provided the power and water before they will sign the documents for NHA.” Both parties do not seem to see eye to on this, and neither can it be that both are right.

The details within the UDHA are just as UPA agrees, “In terms of giving houses, UDHA is fair.” But without proper implementation it means little. Empirical evidence suggests that full implementation is not common, which is why UPA believes that, “In terms of housing projects or the relocation without the package of employment is not fair. The housing project is not free. The people are paying it. But how will they be able to pay it if they do not have income?” And it is only a fair question how the government can expect things from relocated communities not provide the opportunity to fulfill those expectations.

When asked about measures of accountability within the UDHA, UPA points to a particular section, “Any person who violates the provision of this act (UDHA) shall be imprisoned to penalty not more than 6 years of imprisonment or fine not less than Php5, 000.00 but not more than Php100, 000.00 to the description of the court.” UPA recognizes there are forms of legal accountability within the UDHA, but questions whether or not people are actually enforcing the law. And even the NHA acknowledges, “Although the law is in effect, it is really true that some local governments are not following what is in the law. The typical example is the census of families living within their respective localities. The local government should be in charge of taking care of their informal settlers, that is the law. I think there are some, maybe following but most I would say are not following the law and not taking care of the informal settlers.” As it was explained, the NHA facilitates the relocation, but it is the responsibility of local government units to really follow through on the details of UDHA. It is in the follow through that many are finding problems.

“There is no punishment for those who do not implement the UDHA that is why we have this UDHA amendment to punish those government officials, especially local government units who are not implementing the UDHA,” says UPA. There seems to be agreement coming from the NHA, when asked about government officials going to jail or being fined. But even the NHA laments the reality of the inequality being practiced, “Well that’s true because it should be the other way around. Those who are less powerful according to the law should be the ones extended amenities and services but they are the one who will be going to jail if they violate the law.”

“What’s wrong with this law is that they did not prioritize jobs when doing relocation. We are talking about humane housing. If they are only thinking about the housing itself, but not about the everyday needs of every family, the housing project is useless,” says UPA. And similar sentiments have been echoed in other relocated communities. It’s been reported some communities have sought outside intervention (the United Nations) to put pressure on the Philippines government to follow the UDHD to completeness. But according to UPA, “Nothing came of it. They just wrote back to the government stating that Philippines is not following the proper process regarding demolition. It didn’t put any pressure in the government.”

There is little accountability within the government both local and federal, which has widespread repercussions for those subject to demolition and/or relocation. But the NHA seemed earnest in their desire to do right by the people even if the implementation and the results have no always born the results they have aspire to. Very few relocations have been just, but there seem to be indications that the NHA are taking steps to better live up to the UDHA.

Reason for relocation or demolition: *In this case the current location is deemed unsafe for residence by the government citing is a potential flood zone. There is also a competing agenda held by the PPA who desire to clear out settlers out of the area. But it is important to keep in mind that the reason for relocation will affect the government’s willingness to find a compromise.*

According to the Philippine Port Authority, Isla is a danger area. But according to residents, they have not been affected by flooding or storms, whereas other nearby communities has been greatly impacted. The community believes, “Even fire is not an issue here with the exception of last May, but that wasn’t an accident that was intentional.” The community is awaiting a response to a petition filed which asks for proof as to why Isla is a danger area. According to residents, “If it’s really not we will look for a place where we can live safely.”

But while UPA agrees flooding and storms are not a problem in Isla, “The waves accompanied by strong winds area a concern, but not a real threat because of the break water. The waves are causing high tides, but the solid wave does not affect them. Only the strong winds affect them since they have light roofs.” On the other hand unlike residents, UPA will admit that fire is one potential problem for the community, “If you will look at the area, it seems that the Isla and Parola are both fire zone areas since the houses are too close and the firemen cannot enter the area during fire incidents. But the advantage of Parola is that, they are near the road.”

But despite the opinions of residents, according to the NHA, “Presidential priority is given to families in danger zones…waterways, creeks and esteros… So it is the recommendation of the government that priority of clearing should be conducted within the danger zone near or within or adjacent the water ways.” With a presidential order already having been issued, it seems likely that a relocationwill occur.

While danger because of its location may be the official reasons given by the PPA for the thereat of demolition, UPA believes it is the North Harbor Modernization Project that is the real reason. The general understanding is that the North Harbor Modernization Project aims to remove all informal settlements in the area and prepare it for commercial uses. But many feel that ‘danger’ is an excuse to achieve this end. But while the North Harbor Project might be real reason, UPA is unable to figure out the endgame, “As of right now, there is still no real plan for the area. What I cannot understand is if they knew that they would use this place, why did they let the people live there and let them grow in numbers. In the first place they are the one who sent the people from railroad to Isla.” And while no specific plan has yet been publicized, the NHA shares, “Well we have the memorandum of agreement already signed. The first families that will be affected will be funded by the PPA. They have already signed over funds for us to relocate informal settles under our agreement, unless they will amend our agreement.” Despite having no particular plan for the area, the PPA seems serious about clearing the area as this memorandum of agreement seems to indicate.

Available Options: *In-city relocation is a difficult process because land costs are so high in Metro Manila. It is for that reason most relocations are happening on the outskirts of Metro Manila. But in this case there is a potential relocation site on the other site of the Pier and even in a relatively nearby city.*

There is property on the other side of Pier 18 according to UPA that is owned by the NHA. The argument is that the NHA should not own land that is for commercial use, they being mandated to provide housing for the urban poor. UPA explains, “That area is expensive because according to the NHA, it is based on the Presidential decree during Marcos regime, that the site along Manila Bay, Pier 18 is port purposes. When you say Port purposes, it is business, for commercial purposes.”

It was not always this way, but during Marcos’ Administration, there was something called land swapping. Some areas that were designated for housing were traded between economic and housing sectors of the government which is why the NHA now owns some commercial property. Because it is designed for commercial uses, the cost of overhaul would be high, but residents insist, “The NHA wants their pockets to be filled of money; if the people themselves choose an area, they will receive no money or but if they choose an industrial place that has high costs, they will make a lot of money.” In its own defense, the NHA offers, “It was an area given by the government to fund and develop Tondo in Dagat-Dagatan Project. Meaning, the development in that area will help cross-subsidize the amortization payment of families of Tondo in dagat-dagatan.” The NHA intends to remove the current informal settlers who reside on this property, “There are investors who are interested, they have talked, they have submitted their letter of intent, they want to develop the property, and remove the squatters and fund the relocation of the squatters and lease the properties.” While the property may seem ideal for the residents of Isla, the NHA has other plans for this particular property and will use it to subsidize other relocations.

Residents admit, “There’s land being offered to us by Vice – Mayor Isko Moreno, it is located on Marikina,” but it is seen as low on their list of desirable places since it would take them out of the immediate vicinity of the Pier and Divisoria. “The families that are affected in Isla Puting Bato by the PPA, their first option is to go to Cavite so the government provide resettlement although we are offering Bulacan and Laguna as well,” offers the NHA. On the other hand, UPA has identified a number of areas that border the community of Parola a nearby community. These areas are all privately owned, and Isla would need to work out some sort of agreement or purchasing option from the private owners. But it is one alternative solution being offered.

One thing that must be considered the environmental consideration of Isla itself. Being on the jetty itself means it potentially could be at risk of flooding but empirical reports from both UPA and Isla residents say otherwise.

Agency cooperation: *The governmental branch responsible for low income housing needs to be responsive and cooperative in meeting the needs of the community and compromising with the wants of the community. At the same time, the PPA must also be amenable to what is being openly discussed in order for members of Isla to get what they desire. There are many actors on this stage, which also includes community members, the work of UPA as well as local government units. For a just result, all agencies must be willing to come to the table and work together to facilitate a fair relocation scheme for Isla Puting Bato.*

The National Housing Authority is bound by the UDHA to secure a fair, just and legal relocation for informal settlers. While the NHA recognizes the jurisdiction of the Philippine Port Authority, as UPA reports, “They cannot decide because PPA is the one who owns the Isla”. Even Mayor Lim of Manila in discussion with UPA admits the city’s lack of jurisdiction, according the UPA “If the PPA makes a decision, they cannot do anything.” According to NHA reports, Isla falls under the control off the a PPA as the Port area was officially PPA land. And when further question as to the disposition of the PPA on this matter, the NHA replies, “Why then are they already giving funds for NHA to relocate people out of the Pier area? To clear the squatters. It is no problem with the NHA if the property is given to the families, but I think they (PPA) will not give in.” But despite the ultimate decision on whether on-site relocation will happen resting with the PPA, the procedures and provisions are still the responsibility of the NHA.

The NHA is not wholly trusted by the residents of Isla Puting Bato. The NHA is believed to be after money first before the good of Isla. But despite this UPA has a more even keeled?? view on the NHA, “Our relationship with them is good and bad. They believe that we hinder their projects. But really, it depends on the person.” But seemingly contentious relationship between UPA and the NHA may simply be two organizations trying to do their best from two different points of view, “We don’t want these families to suffer,” says the NHA, “They are Filipinos like us and nothing should prevent them from being treated humanely.”

But UPA does recognize there are some shortcomings in the manner in which the NHA functions, “They relocate people anywhere because they earn commissions from it. However, what we are fighting for is that prioritization of people above commissions. When you say relocation, you are relocating families and communities. When you say communities, it is a package. And when you say relocation it is not just about housing itself. The NHA only considers the housing itself but not the ‘hanapbuhay’ of the people.” The government seems to intend good for informal settlers, “We will look for land for you that is the intention of the government. Because we do not want to drastically move these people.” But despite the intentions of the NHA, certain aspects of the relocation seem to fall short, and it may not be at the hands of the NHA itself, “That’s the problem. We are the NHA, we are unable to provide and we don’t have the budget for all of these problems. Our mandate is to provide only resettlements; perhaps other government sectors should help us out instead of relocation only being purely NHA budget. We need comprehensive development, we need coordination, and we need the support of the receiving local government unit.” It would seem that the lack of budget and overall control of the NHA to make decisions within in local context hinders its ability to truly guarantee a fair and local relocation, rather they can but offer a fair and just housing scheme, which may not be the same as a fair just relocation scheme.

Isla Puting Bato with the help of UPA has decided to put together a more united front before proposing to the NHA or the PPA. UPA believes that, “Achieving smaller tasks like securing water and electricity will create a better case for the acquisition of land rights. That is why before we present to the NHA or PPA we will continue to work on smaller tasks, like saving and completing other tasks on the People’s Plan.” It is through the small tasks, that UPA believes they can legitimize their case and thus put further pressure on the government to grant the people right to the land. And UPA may be correct when it comes to relocation and on-site relocation. According to the NHA, “The best that we can accord to these families will come through active involvement of the residents. It helps once they have been organized and they have representatives before the government there are instances that they have won or succeeded.” But because of the disposition of the PPA, such activity may not be able to secure on-site relocation, which means the community will have to actively pursue a just relocation elsewhere.

Officially, “Isla Puting Bato is considered a danger zone,” residents say regarding the PPA’s official stance on the area. But despite this official stance, there has neither been an official no nor an official yes as to whether the residents of Isla can remain on-site as far as the residents know. But the NHA reports they have already signed a memorandum of agreement, receiving funds specifically to start clearing out informal settlers out of the Pier area, which includes the area of Isla.

UPA on their meetings with the PPA, “We did but the Assistant Manager who talked to us is now dead. But at the time he gave us a positive reaction. He said that they are open to discussions about the issue of the housing project in Isla.” When asked if things have progressed since then, the community worker shares, “The follow-up failed due to the changes in administration but another problem is that the new GM of PPA does not want to face us. That is why last 2010 we had a mobilization of the whole North Harbor because the issue was about the North Harbor Modernization. “While no official ‘no’ has been issued, UPA does not feel encouraged by their previous interactions with the PPA. There is even mistrust among Isla residents in regards to the Philippine Port Authority. With the fire in May that affect thousands, many were not allowed back into the community, and residents view this as an intentional step to keep people out of the area, slowly removing the people from the water break until the community can be easily demolished. It is for that reason that UPA and Isla are seeking to establish their case as a community before approaching the PPA again to ask for cooperation for an on-site relocation.

UPA which has been working with informal settlers for years has a good grasp on what it takes for a community to gain enough leverage to be granted land rights. According to UPA, “It depends because like what happened in Estero, they (the government) was not able to do anything because the people there were all demanding for an on-site relocation. This will happen to Isla also if there will be demands and pressure. They cannot do anything but to approve it. They cannot just say that they conducted a test in a certain place.” When asked about specifics and how Estero was able to make a case against the NHA, UPA replies, “Like in Estero, they said that Estero is not appropriate to live in but UPA and the people initiated a soil testing, land survey and housing design. This will be done in other places that they said that is not possible to build houses in so we can challenge them and keep them accountable.” There is the recognition verbally and silently that the government has not always proven itself trustworthy. And many believe there are hidden agendas from government officials and agencies. UPA desires to challenge these agendas by confronting the government and NHA step by step.

UPA believes that the leverage in relocation comes in the form of a united front. “Last 2001, Baseco and Parola got their land rights. Parola was approved because they have solid and united residents. They kept on putting pressure and demands on the local government that they do not want to be relocated and they asked for land rights. That is one of our strategies that we can use and debate with them. Actually, Baseco was a garbage dumping area and if we will take a look, it has a weak foundation unlike if you conduct a soil testing in Isla, they would find out that it has a pure cement foundation.” The initial decision of the NHA was beaten by a united community, which means that despite initial notices from the NHA, there is the potential to sway them in the case of Isla. “The biggest thing to do is to put pressure in them is to highly organize the people,” says UPA. Seemingly this has been the most effective strategy in gaining land rights.

Even the NHA admits that at times various government agencies have ceded land to informal settlers, even the PPA, “Originally Parola and Baseco were occupied by informal settlers, but they were cleared by the government (PPA). After the Marcos administration, when the administration came after the Marshall Law and up to EDSA Revolution, these properties were again invaded by informal settlers. The government eventually proclaimed the land for them.” While Parola and Baseco may give hope to residents of Isla, the NHA seems sure that the PPA will not be proclaiming any land, as agreements have already been made and signed.

Locational access to services: *Not all relocation sites have access to utilities such as water, electricity and waste disposal. Even for some areas that do have access, that access is not always consistent.*

Currently not all services are available in Isla Puting Bato. But for many residents, that is acceptable if they have ‘hanapbuhay.’ One woman offers, “We live here because there are fewer expenses since the work place is near and we can just walk from here to there. And the main reason why we live here is because of our jobs. “

This is all despite the fact that for years there were no basic services within Isla. “We decided to transfer here where we are near at the work place though the water and electricity cost a lot,” voices one lady, “because here, there are no basic services being offered.” Services are important, but in the eyes of residents, jobs have historically trumped services.

It was in 1991 when Mayor Lim began a water project, but after the press opportunity, “The water stopped flowing,” expresses one man. “We did not know the reason why it was like that. They did not even tell us the reason.”

It was only in 1996 through the Depressed Area Electrification Program, that Isla was first able to get meters for their electricity. One woman shares about her arrival in 1989 saying, “When I came here, all the electric connection were illegal, I’m just paying 250-300pesos when I connected on illegal electricity and after 3 days I will pay again because the MERALCO harvested the illegal wires. So through DAET on year 1996, we started to have our own legal electricity connection and as well as the rest of purok 2.”

But not all puroks have legal access to electricity. In the past some were opposed to electrification because the illegal connections were a business opportunity. But with the understanding that unity will help the community’s case before the NHA, there is a large desire to see the rest of the community receive legal connections as well as meters. The leaders simply state, “We want the electrification. Since we have the water and we can just ask the barangay to fix the drainage.”

The community has expressed the sentiment that while any relocation that has full provisions according to the UDHA, if they had to choose one over the other, an area with jobs has and will trump an area with only services. Residents believe that if they at least have jobs but not basic services, with employment they can begin to purchase their own basic services.

Locational access to employment: *The number one reason people leave relocation sites and return to slums is that the relocation sites are not within proximity of employment opportunities.*

No names were named but the leaders recount the experiences of their neighbors, “They came back here to Isla because here in Isla, they have their living. They will just wake up early, go to Divisoria and buy something to sell and that’s it, they will be able to earn and save money unlike in Montalban where they do not have even food.”

“The most important for us is the employment,” the leaders conclude, “If the government will be able to give us employment plus the basic services that we need maybe we will agree on the relocation but what they are doing is that they will just give us a house – still unfinished – and there are no basic services in the relocation areas nor even a job.” The leaders have reiterated multiples times that while services are important, that without jobs any relocation is unfair and would only push them to return back to the area.

That’s really the problem,” the NHA agrees, “Once a family is relocated. The typical example is a bread winner who is working in a factory, the factory being near the manila or within manila. If they are located in Laguna or in Bulacan what happen to their employment? So that’s the reason that the government also includes employment opportunities for these families in the resettlement site.” And a quick inspection around the NHA office would reveal there is a department specifically tasked with employment opportunities for those to be relocated.

But this in contrast to what UPA believes, “The NHA thinks just about housing but not sources of income.” But housing UPA clarifies is not the only responsibility of the NHA, but also jobs. Without jobs people are unable to sustain themselves in most relocation sites. And historically this is the number one reason people leave relocation sites and return to the heart of metro manila. But according to the NHA such failures maybe shouldn’t be placed at the feet of the NHA, “We try to coordinate with the other local government to facilitate with our livelihood programs; that’s part of our responsibility but we cannot really give the full support.” And as the NHA indicates, the local funds and lack of overarching control over local government agencies means they are unable to guarantee things like jobs in relocation areas. Local governments are obligated under UDHA but often fall short of fulfilling their obligations; jobs being one of the most important of these obligations.

Resident support: *Residents of Isla Puting Bato need to be able to balance needs versus wants and what is reasonable with the restrictions in regards to government cooperation and available funding. Furthermore issues of leverage and unity play into the overall support of the community in any relocation scheme. One thing to consider is the reputation of relocation areas which will impact how residents view or feel about relocation.*

“The residents that were relocated before are very picky. They demanded a relocation site and the government gave them different choices but still they did not like it. So eventually the government gave them an ultimatum, pick one of the options presented or be forcefully demolished,” recounts one leader. But now the leaders say, things are different, with an organized community, Isla is more than willing to work with the government. But it is necessary for the government to fully provide all provisions listed in UDHA including access to areas of employment.

Another leader expresses to me, “They are just being pushed to compromise with us because they want to decide where we will live.” But echoed among the gathered leaders is the desire to be active participants in the process and in the decision regarding location of their resettlement. “We are asking, where do you want to go, are you planning to go somewhere. We will look for land for you, that is the intention of the government,” says the NHA. But resources and options are limited and eventually it is true, communities need to make a decision.

The biggest concern in this relocation is ‘hanapbuhay.’ It comes down to access to employment, from there everything else flows according to the residents themselves. But UPA has shed some light on the problem with most NHA relocation problems, “The NHA does not consider the livelihood of residents but only extends their attention the building of houses. But the building of a house is only part of relocation.” Again, the community worker shares, “For example, If a person has an income of 400 pesos per day and he is consuming of about 200pesos on fare, there would only be 200pesos left for his family less the expenses for their food, health and education of his daughter and son. It is not enough. Especially the number of the average family member is 5.” And this doesn’t even begin to take into the cost of relocation itself, like the repayment of to the government for their new lots and homes.

If forced to relocate due to a ‘no’ from the PPA, sites like the one on Pier 18 are unlikely options. Despite it being, large enough to accommodate all the residents of Isla, its proximity to the Pier and Divisoria, the cost of the land is in the millions of pesos, which beyond Isla’s ability to pay.

UPA believes the most effective way to pressure the government into granting Isla land rights is through uniting as a community and together pressuring the government. Our strategy is organizing,” explains one UPA worker, “it helps to slow down the demolition process and at the same time the people living in the community become organized and learn them on how to communicate with the government regarding their rights here in the city since there is a law – UDHA- which is the basis why urban poor communities are fighting for their housing rights in.” And such approaches to relocation have taken hold within Isla. “To make our living a better one, we have to coordinate with different agencies and different people; it is not just a simple negotiation. If we will be united, we will win against them. We just need 500 families and in that we can form a powerful team for us to get our land rights. “

 “After that experience (Montalban), the people decided to go back to Isla Puting Bato even though they signed the papers saying they agreed on the relocation terms,” shares one man. The UDHA states that anyone who signs relocations papers and returns to an informal settlement is no longer eligible for relocation again and may even be prosecuted if they seek relocation again, which would qualify them as professional squatters. “According to those people,” he clarifies, “they had a hard time living there compared to Isla because they only have houses but the other basic services such as electrification and especially employment are not being offered to them.”

“A more difficult life was also experienced at Baras – another relocation area- ,” another leader adds, “because it is mountains and there is really no employment. The place is so hot and when people go down the mountain, their skin color was turning darker. If they had a choice, Montalban is still a better relocation area than Baras. Because when you enter Baras you can see it written near the entrance, ‘Murang Palibing’ in English Cheap Burial.”

Relocations are seen as an exile away from livelihood. It is commonly viewed as government program that is ineffective and unfair. Until the reputation of relocation sites improve, most informal settlers will remain opposed to the idea. Even for those who have been previously relocated, it is not uncommon for them to return back to the city.

“The families of these informal settlers have the chance to select the relocation. The typical example with the PPA are the families that are affected in Isla Puting Bato. The first option is to go to Cavite so the government can provide resettlement although we are offering Bulacan and Laguna as well,” says the NHA. It seems the NHA wants to do right by the people and offer residents as many options as possible, but the reality is, options are limited. And as if defending their own track record, the NHA says, “If you will take a look at past examples, there are successful resettlements and there are also times that were not successful.” Sadly, with various agendas and strictures of law, people can’t always get what they want. But the NHA pleads, “We tried but we cannot get enough support from those agencies. We need cooperation, we need budget, and we need someone to help us out so we can do big projects.” And this would seem is where things often fall apart. The local interagency support has lead to a poor reputation for relocation. That poor reputation has deeply permeated the mindset of Isla residents. With such a reputation the support of residents is hard to stir up.

## Analysis

The 8 variables that have been discussed throughout this paper have been integral to understanding the nature of relocation for Isla Puting Bato. A focus group discussion with community members, an interview with UPA and an interview with the NHA have revealed key facts that culminate in a very complex situation for Isla. It is necessary to look further into these variables to understand how the three aforementioned parties can function in a practical manner to facilitate a just relocation scheme for Isla.

Each variable is broken down factoring in crucial data collected through interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD) that work together to paint a whole picture rather than the isolated perspectives of each of the participating parties.

A Just Scheme

A just scheme will meet the criteria provided in both Filipino and internal legislation. The criteria are specifically covered in the Urban Development Housing Act as well as the Universal Declaration of Human rights. The rights of all to adequate housing is defined by the following dimensions of adequacy: Legal security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; location; habitability; affordability; accessibility; and cultural adequacy. If these criteria are not met then the relocation is insufficient as it does not address the entirety of one’s right to housing. Furthermore, each person’s right to employment is also an integral factor in this situation. Employment being key to an adequate standard of living, any housing scheme that does not provide employment opportunities is unjust. It is because these relocations are not by choice but are forced resettlements, it is the responsibility of the government to protect informal settler’s rights to employment by either providing employment opportunities or by resettling communities within range of employment opportunities.

Measurements

First and foremost this study looks into the just nature of the relocation scheme. A human rights lens is being applied to this situation using the international legislation as proposed by the United Nations as a standard by which to measure. The reason for this being, that as a joint international body the United Nations has created a standard by which much of the world, including the Philippines, has deemed fair and just.

Beyond a human rights standard, taken into account are various factors. These factors include an understanding that there a number of limitations which mean that compromise must be made somewhere. As a researcher and outsider I am unable to fully know every facet of this situation, despite the research and time invested in the understanding of this situation. Also taken into consideration is a reality based off facts and empirical evidence not an emotional bias or disposition towards any one actor in this scheme. Each actor can only work within their available resources and options.

Needs of the community

The Philippines government has already written into law (UDHA) a series of rights for informal settlers, the governments’ obligation to informal settlers and statutes discussing the processes that will protect said rights and fulfill said obligations. The government has prioritized potable water, access to primary roads and transportation facilities, power and electricity and an adequate power distribution system, and sewerage facilities and efficient and adequate waste disposal. Followed by health, education, communication, recreation, security, relief and welfare services which are given priority implementation. And the last is a location near areas where employments areas are accessible if feasible.

Much of this comes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights(art. 25.1) of which the Philippines was included in the Commission which drafted the aforementioned international legislation. The right to an adequate standard of living is also covered in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (art. 11.1). It was the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights who adopted General comment No. 4 which identifies seven criteria for adequacy (mentioned previously). Implied in this list and explicitly stated within section one of General Comment No. 4, and adequate standard of living includes “adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions." The harsh reality is that in a capitalist world, money and income generation is necessary for that acquisition of food and clothing as well as the payment of bills and purchase of other goods. So while the international community contends that access to food and clothing are a right of all people (which is true), they are really saying that all people have the right to employment, so as to actually be able to purchase food and clothing. “While the NHA argues they provide not just housing as per legislation on both national and international levels, but also employment and services, others have contending opinions. The most important for us is the employment. If the government will be able to give us an employment plus the basic services that we need maybe we will agree on the relocation but what they are doing is that they will just give us a house – still unfinished – and there are no basic services in the relocation areas that they are offering,” offers one community leader. Urban Poor Associates believes, “When you say relocation, you are relocating families and communities. When you say communities, it is a package. And when you say relocation it is not just about housing itself. The NHA thinks just about housing but not sources of income.” This is not completely true as the NHA has a department solely dedicated to employment opportunities, but even the NHA admits their inability to comprehensively follow through due to lack of government cohesion. All this seems to point to a government that is incapable of truly providing a just relocation scheme since it cannot guarantee all of the rights outline above.

The alternative to relocation is for the community to granted rights to the land (on-site). And this is the desire of community residents, to remain where they are, obtain rights to the land, and build the area into a proper place of residence. But if on-site is not an option for whatever reason, residents appear more than willing to relocate if they can secure for themselves a quality relocation schema. There are four options, Cavite, Bulacan, Laguna, and any site within Tondo UPA can find. But with most residents being employed at the Pier or at Divisoria, any relocation that would take the residents of Isla outside of Manila would likely threaten their livelihood, one of their foundational rights.

How then can the government proceed with a just and fair relocation scheme?

The government has begun to take into account input from informal settlers as evidenced by the open discussion being held about MRBs which were once proposed as rental units, but now being considered for long term purchase. But ultimately when the NHA is under pressure or deadline to relocate a community, time or political agenda takes precedence over the opinions of informal squatters. While participation is encouraged by the UDHA, in no way is it guaranteed. So long as the NHA can provide a relocation scheme that provides all the rights listed previously, they are within their mandate to relocate any group of informal settlers anywhere the NHA pleases. And residents themselves are fine with such a situation, “If the NHA could provide us with all the services listed in UDHA, it would not matter where we lived.”

The dilemma is centered around the simple fact that empirically, off-site has been less than successful, yet offsite is the most common option offered by the NHA. This is explained by UPA, “We advocate in-city or on-site. We do not want off-site because based on our experience from the people who were relocated off-site, they keep on returning to the city due to employment. If they are earning a minimum wage but living outside the city, they will lose a lot from the transportation fare plus the food for their family. They like to stay in Manila because here, they do not have to pay for a fare since most of their jobs are walking distance. There is an advantage if they are here, they can save a lot and use it for the health and education of their families.” From many conversations with those who have themselves been relocated, they report similar problems, either a lack of employment and stark poverty within relocation sites, or they lament the high daily cost to travel to Manila each day for work.

There really is little guarantee of anything in a relocation scheme within the Philippines. The sole branch of government tasked with housing for informal settlers admits to tied hands when it comes to fully being able to provide comprehensive relocation schemes. The rights that the Philippines helped created on an international level and further reiterated in their own national legislation sets a high standard that empirically has sounded better on paper than it appears in practice.

The argument of the people is that income or ‘hanapbuhay’ is the lifeblood of the people. With ‘hanapbuhay’ they could provide for themselves food, clothing, housing and even a number of the services that the UDHA outlines as being the responsibility of the government. With a track record that shows the NHA incapable of always providing for the most highly prioritized services for informal settlers, they have an abysmal record of providing for the one thing that residents themselves prioritize most highly, jobs.

And when the government is unable to provide fully in their relocations schemes, it begs the question why relocate a community that has already begun to provide these services and secure these rights for themselves?

Political Environment

For a long time now there has been a contentious relationship between the urban poor and the government. Many informal settlers find themselves victims of demolition either initiated by the government or private land owners.

In the case of Isla this is seen when it comes to the fire that took place last May. The residents suggest that the fire helps the agenda of the PPA: getting people off of the water break. To residents, the connection is clear, “The fire incident was intentional,” says one resident... But government officials point to unsafe living conditions which make such fire a hazard informal settlements throughout the Philippines.

The distrust of government has led to residents questioning every move the government makes when it comes to their own relocation scheme. And they should; with the aim of securing a fair situation, not because of skepticism. While the government has not always been one that has earned the trust of the people, (Marcos is the first to come to mind) the government has made strides to do its best for the people, “Our president gave us (the NHA) funds for the relocation of these families amounting to 5 Billion pesos. That’s a lot of money; the president has already given us 20 Billion pesos for the project to be spent before the end of his term.” The skepticism in which residents of Isla approach the government and relocation has the potential to be more problematic than helpful. “The PPA is using strategies against us so that little by little we will be moved away from here. The last fire incident, they told us that they were just helping us but what we saw is that when only few of us are left there will likely be a massive demolition,” residents say. But perhaps the reality is that many urban poor communities, informal settlements especially are prone to fire, and are often unsafe when it comes to natural disasters. For many informal settlers the only land they have access to is dangerous, fragile, polluted or unwanted. Furthermore the high density of houses, narrow alleys which impede firefighters from entering communities, poorly wired electrical systems and the use of open fire means fire is a high risk within slum communities (UN Habitat, 2003). This is more proven than any accusation leveled against the PPA or NHA for starting a fire. Energy better spent would be in working with the NHA to secure the optimal relocation scheme possible. And that is the intent of the UPA: organize the community before they make any proposal to the NHA. But inherent in this plan is an adversarial approach to the relationship. UPA believes that they can ultimately get what they want by organizing the community then pressuring the government. There are perhaps two things that need to be considered: what does the community want? And are there legitimate reasons for relocating the community of Isla?

UPA by their own admission, fight strictly for what the community desires which is on-site relocation. But there seems to be little consideration as a third-party view of the situation in which an organization that works closely with informal settlers might say to the community, “No, though you want this, it’s not the best situation for you.” Sometimes the communities that are granted land rights have remained slum communities, Baseco and Parola being two examples. Which is an argument for allowing the government start fresh in a new area. That is not to say that informal settlers shouldn’t be listened to, but sometimes, their desires are not the wise choice. That call cannot as of yet be made, but it is something to consider, whether UPA is blindly siding with the residents of Isla or not.

But this only leads to another issue for residents and UPA to address. While the NHA is more than willing to work with the residents of Isla (at least they say as much), the real decision falls with the PPA. And it is clear the PPA already has designs on the area, having already signed a memorandum of agreement with the NHA to begin clearing informal settlers. The residents of Isla and UPA should be looking to secure a just relocation, with the likelihood of obtaining rights to the water break slim.

The NHA says, “It’s not the fault of NHA if the developer does not complete the provision of power and water. Because we will not pay him if he does not provide those things. Once a family will occupy the housing land they will immediately be provided the power and water before they will sign the documents for NHA.” It would seem that holding onto payment until the job is done would be a secure measure, but reality seems to say otherwise. According to many informal settlers, many relocation areas do not have all the basic services and there are instances of developers disappearing with money intended for things like the electrical bills.

Legal accountability is detailed in the UDHA. But for as many cases of unjust relocation one hears, one seldom hears about governments held responsible for their failings in the relocation projects. And even the NHA admits as much, “Although the law is in effect, it is really true that some local governments are not following what is in the law. The typical example is the census of families living within their respective localities. The local government should be in charge of taking care of their informal settlers, that is the law. I think there are some maybe following the law but most I would say are not following the law and not taking care of the informal settlers.” And therein lies the problem. There is a lack of accountability. After the NHA completes the building of a new community, much of the responsibility falls to developers and local governments. But it is after the handoff that many of the problems occur.

With no accountability, relocation will remain an unjust process. In this UPA may have the right of it. Community organizing can allow a community to bring pressure on the government, to keep the government accountable, where historically that has not been the case. If accountability cannot be had through conventional means i.e. legal recourse, then maybe it is important for informal settlers themselves to hold the government accountable. A more organized community would facilitate a more targeted relocation program producing a more successful and fair result (UN Habitat, 2003).

Reasons for Relocation/Demolition

There are two clear things to consider: the presidential decree and the agenda of the PPA. While the NHA has at times compromised with some communities when it has come to relocating informal settlers out of the declared danger zones, with two issues for a single community overcome, it seems less likely Isla will get what it desires: on-site relocation.

The presidential decree concerning waterways around Metro Manila is about the safety for this residing in the area more than anything. It is also important to recognize that there to some degree is a political climate which is concerned with the welfare of informal settlers, though many informal settlers themselves don’t see it that way. “You can no longer prevent floods; it is accepted that this region is prone to flooding since Manila is below sea level,” explains the NHA. And it would seem if safety is a concern, then residents should not take it likely despite not having experienced dangerous weather driven disasters as of yet. Even UN Habitat which usually argues against relocation mentions an exception: “Relocation or involuntary resettlement of slum dwellers should, as far as possible, be avoided, except in cases where slums are located on physically hazardous or polluted land.”

On the other hand, slum relocation is often development driven as is the case with the PPA (UN Habitat 2003). The PPA intends to clear the Port area and make use of the area for further development and commercial purposes. But often development driven relocation is at the expense of the poor as is the case with Isla. “Eviction and relocation of slum and squatter settlements' has often accompanied the urban (re)development process in many developing countries of Asia. Such evictions usually occur in the inner-city areas where land use undergoes a number of dynamic changes in response to market conditions.,” says Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe. And that is the case with the North Harbor modernization project that intends to clean the pier area and clear it for port use. There are too many competing interests in the area, commercial development, port development and informal settlers. But it is common for developers and governments to pressure informal settlers through forced demolition to vacate the area because the area is economically attractive. Very little seems to oppose this as often there are economic driven policies which facilitate these developments and push informal settlers off the prized properties (Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe, 2004). And so it would seem with the current cost of land in Metro Manila according to the NHA sitting at about 12,000 pesos/squared meter. The land within the Pier area is highly prized as opposed to the vast swaths of land that surround Metro Manila which are being used as relocation sites. With the area being a prime location for commercial development and it having important functions as the primary port of the Philippines the land in the area is at a premium. While no specific plan has been officially laid out, what is being weighed here is residency for thousands versus investments that could bring in millions of dollars, and long term port expansion could bring in billions in the coming decades.

It comes down to long term versus short term. And in this case long term and economic promise seems to have won out, and it may be the right choice for the Philippines even if it is the wrong choice for the residents of Isla. But even if the Philippines is making the right decision, that choice brings them to another crossroad in which they have to decide on a relocation scheme for Isla, which could either be a fair and fruitful situation or one that could egregiously harm the rights of the community members. Not all relocation is problematic as the work of Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe shows, but if not done correctly it has the potential for great harm.

With the NHA all but certain that the PPA is unwilling to consider giving over rights of the land to the residents of Isla, the issue may no longer be why Isla is being forced to relocate, but how to best proceed with relocation.

Available options

The preferred but unlikely option of Isla residents is on-site relocation. But with that being a slim likelihood, it is important for residents to be considering relocation to other sites. There are three being proffered by the NHA and one by a local government unit. Important to the success of relocation is a site near the original community, basic infrastructure and ample employment opportunities (Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe, 2004). Furthermore, livelihood programs need to be planned and implemented by strong implementing agency in order to increase the chance of success of a relocation (UN Habitat, 2003).

While maps may portray the available options as being close to the location of Isla, traffic actually makes a short distance a long trip. The best option offered may actually be just an election time utterance rather than an actual promise. The vice mayor of Marikina verbally said that the city would allow for informal settlers to settle within the city limits. This would be ideal because it is still within Metro Manila. But unfortunately this is more an election time promise than an actual plan. Marikina according to UPA has historically had a MCF or Marikina citizen’s first approach to resettlement.

In many cases, a lack of infrastructure can force people to spend more time in non-productive activities (Kiber, 2011). Without proper roads the relocation areas, time is wasted moving from place to place. When water is hard to come by, carrying water back to one’s house is time consuming. And so it may with any relocation scheme in which the NHA and local government does not comply with the UDHA. The wasted time could better be used towards earning income which could be further invested within the household. If the final relocation is outside of Metro Manila, the wasted time compounded with increased commute times could impact the family unit. Members of Isla remarked that commute time was one reason many had moved to the Pier area as to be closer to work which would increase the amount of time available to spend with family.

But as the research of Kiber, Viratkapan et al, and UN Habitat all conclude, employment opportunities are paramount in a successful relocation. And that will most likely be the deciding factor for Isla residents. It is important for residents to conduct thorough research into the employment opportunities available with each proposed relocation site. If the local governments in Bulacan, Cavite and Laguna show promise and good faith in developing the proposed areas specifically around employment, then those areas may prove more desirable to community members.

Agency Cooperation

In this instance of potential relocation, it is as if the right hand doesn’t know what the left is doing. UPA and the residents of Isla operate under the assumption that they can still win rights to the land which is under the jurisdiction of the PPA. The PPA has already has already signed a MOA with the NHA to begin relocating informal settlers out of the area. The PPA wants to expand the port area which is in direct contention with the desires of the Isla community. This lack of coordination and communication maybe a hindrance to the overall success of both parties. If the PPA really is immovable on this topic, then it removes them from play as an active agent in this situation which leaves Isla, UPA, the NHA and the local governments.

But these communication hurdles may be less important than the unenviable position the NHA finds itself in. It is mandated to provide housing for informal settlers, and is bound by legislation (UDHA) to make good a long list of provisions, but its limited power and budget may be the key as to why relocation has often failed in the Philippines. A weak implementing authority has been recognized as one of the key factors that contributes to a failed relocation. When implementing agencies are unclear and uncommitted in their projects, when they lack organizational skill, the common result is a failed relocation (Kiber, 2011).

As mentioned, one of the most crucial parts of a successful relocation is a strong implementing authority. And while the NHA is mandated to serve informal settlers and even answers directly to the office of the President, its role as a housing office may not carry with it the authority to fully carry out a fair relocation because it cannot guarantee or secure a just scheme. Because of the decentralized relocation process, the NHA hands over the wellbeing of relocating communities to the receiving local government (the government of the new relocation settlement.). Because the wellbeing of community members are passed on, the NHA is unable to make good on the promises made in the UDHA, and that point it is up to the receiving government. The president has signed over 50 million pesos to the NHA over the course of his term to be used for relocating informal settlers, which shows it maintains a large budget to begin this new wave of relocation in Tondo. But with each family being given land and units that amount to about 240,000 pesos, eventually that money runs out.

UPA accuses the NHA of only being concerned with housing, and with not giving enough attention to employment opportunities and even other services that everyone needs. That may be a fault better found with how the government addresses informal settlers as a whole than the NHA itself. Because the relocation process is split between the NHA and the receiving local government, the NHA has limited authority in many facets of the relocation process. And this may fall under weak implementing authority that Kiber mentions, not through the fault of the NHA itself, but because of the limited authority it’s been granted. With the process being decentralized from the start, at least according to research on the topic, it may be more likely to fail than to succeed. Such odds don’t bode well from a rights perspective. If relocation is being mandated by presidential decree but the rights of those being relocated can’t be guaranteed in the process, then simply put the process is flawed. The historical record of relocation suggests as much, and much of the blame can be laid on a decentralized relocation process.

But one of the key factors that could mitigate a weakly empowered NHA could be wide spectrum cooperation amongst all participating agencies. There is evidence that indicates that one way to increase the chances of success for relocation is to bring the government agencies and the informal settlers to the same table. Effective participation is not just simply being present, but means influencing decisions. Moreover participation will help keep parties accountable to each other and the process (Koenig 2002). And that may be crucial if Isla is to secure a just relocation scheme. With both the NHA and the receiving government being the two implementing agencies, one or both could easily lean on Isla for consultation but not actual participation. The lack of participation may impair the success of securing a fully rights protected relocation.

With a decentralized system, accountability will be vital in securing a successful relocation. With so many relocations having been unsuccessful by a number of measures and lacking many forms of accountability, it would seem the residents of Isla should begin to open discussion with participating agencies and push hard for participation rather than just consultation.

While legal recourse exists as a measure to keep the government accountable for failings during the relocation process, in practice no government unit is being held accountable to the law. UPA believes the key to getting what they want is community pressure on the government, that people power could be harnessed as a form of government accountability. In times past, that power has been used in direct conflict with land owners, where eventually one gives in to the other. But if that power is harnessed and employed in a participatory fashion during the relocation process it could prove itself to be a mechanism for accountability with local government units. The key emphasis is not on conflict, but in directing the course of the relocation through community organizing and people power. This could prove an empowering, rights securing form of relocation.

Access to Services

Access to basic services remain a cornerstone of human rights. Not all governments have made the distinction between access as in water and electrical being already established in a community prior to people being settled there, and access insofar as residents being able to purchase and ensure their own connection to a number of utilities. Be that as it may slums are most often defined by their lack of services according to UN Habitat a slum is ”A *contiguous settlement where the inhabitants are characterized as having inadequate housing and basic services. A slum is often not recognized and addressed by the public authorities as an integral or equal part of the city* (UN Habitat, 2003). *”*

From the testimony of Isla, residents are more inclined to choose a relocation site that has employment opportunities that lack basic services than a site that has services but less employment opportunities. The reason being employment is the well from which they can afford to purchase their own basic services if need be.

The perceived difficulty in obtaining basic services in the relocation area is a factor in why some choose not to take part in the relocation or to sell their homes within relocation areas (Wijayasinghe, 2010). But many residents indicate that they chose Isla as their area of residence despite lacking basic services because it offered something others didn’t, proximity to their areas of employment. While residents did say, “If the NHA could provide us with all the services listed in UDHA, it would not matter where we lived,” their actions and words seem to indicate that they understand the fully listed services to include employment opportunities, not just utilities and the like.

The issue is being approached by two different parties from opposite ends. The NHA takes a more traditional view in which basic services come first. On the other hand the residents believe basic services can come from and follow after employment opportunities. But both seem to miss the importance of both as being equal components in a rights protected relocation (UN Habitat, 2003). A fair relocation includes not just basic services but employment opportunities because both are equally important for adequate living of any community.

Access to Employment

Those who work in the informal sector often do so because there is a lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector. Because they can’t find work within the formal sector they create their own forms of employment in the informal sector (UN Habitat, 2003). Many of these newly created informal sector jobs are low paying and have low security. And so it is with those in Isla. The formal sector for many has not produced the right opportunities for the residents of Isla which is why many work in the informal sector finding employment in nearby Pier and Divisoria. This being the case, a relocation that would formalize to some degree the employment opportunities in the relocation area might not prove to be a good fit for those who found themselves part of the informal sector. Regardless, residents say they will be happy with any job that can provide a stable living for their families.

The biggest concern has been and will always be jobs. There would be little resistance to relocation if relocation had a history of fairness, provision of basic services and employment opportunities. While often services are secured, the one thing that seemingly remains out of reach has been employment opportunities. With multiple agendas in contention (primarily the usage of the water break), the residents who work locally would most likely lose their jobs or be forced to be spend much of their hard earned wages on public transportation costs that would be necessary if they were to maintain employment in the Pier area. “The competing interests of the parties involved often have often resulted in a poorly executed relocation. The most common of which is the relocation being unaffordable to the new residents, or out of reach of employment opportunities forcing residents back to slum accommodations,” says UN Habitat (UN Habitat, 2003). This may be the case for the residents of Isla, if their relocation follows in history’s steps and they cannot find employment in the relocation area, many may return to the Pier area and begin squatting once again. Because ‘hanapbuhay’ is the lifeblood from which all else flows, families will continue to make that their first priority and follow where employment opportunities lead them, which form most would still be the Pier area.

Displacement often increases unemployment and underemployment among informal settlers. It is difficult to create new jobs and investments and the difficulty often remains after a physical relocation has already taken place (Kabir, 2011). That is a concern of many residents, who all claim to know people living in relocation areas. The stories share a similar thread; the relocation area is far from areas of employment and offer few or no employment opportunities locally. The situation is grave enough that many are unable to afford food. With jobs being hard to create in these new areas as Kabir insists, the economic livelihood of those to be relocated hardly seems viable. It would take agency cooperation for this hurdle to be overcome but as all signs seem to indicate, the decentralization of the relocation process makes for weak implementation and little accountability, which would make success unlikely, or at best a challenge.

It is not uncommon for those who have been relocated to return back to squatting and most commonly it is because of employment. There are many places throughout Tondo in which many may take up new informal residence. Among those is the NHA property near Pier 18. That area while it is intended for commercial use with the hopes of subsidizing future relocation actually plays home to about 3,000 or so informal settlers. And this being NHA land, it is protected from the Pier improvements unlike the area in which Isla currently resides. With a precedent already set for winning rights to government land through community organizing and refusal to relocate (often communities being cleared only for informal settlers to return), some may see this property as an opportunity to gain land rights in the vicinity of the Pier if the PPA is unwilling to compromise on the water break. Suffice it to say, with that area already occupied by squatters, if that number were to increase and be organized, it might prove a formidable opposition to the plans of the NHA. But unlike PPA land, that area possesses a moderate chance of gaining land rights, since the NHA is mandated to address the housing informal settlers unlike the PPA.

Resident support

Community leaders take on roles of mediation and speaking as intermediaries between informal settlers and government agencies (Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe, 2004). In many ways they act as buffers and liaisons between the two. With UPA having already organized the residents of Isla, the community has taken strides towards greater community organizing and unity in hopes of creating a unified front to present to the NHA when they submit their petition for rights to the land. These community leaders have not yet opened lines of communication with the NHA which may hinder the community’s situation. While community leaders are spokespeople, without an open line of communication, they are operating blindly so to speak. UPA and the community seem to want to play things close to the chest, but that only benefits them if they have a good chance at gaining land rights. If that’s not the case, they are not utilizing their greatest asset, participation in the relocation process.

More and more the development community has begun to understand that people know what they need most. People themselves are the most familiar with their needs, wants, financial, and physical capabilities. And it is for this reason that active participation from community members is vital in any form of community development (Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe, 2004). And as one Isla residents reiterates clearly, it’ has always been about employment, “The most important for us is employment. If the government will be able to give us an employment plus the basic services that we need maybe we will agree on the relocation.“ But as of yet the community at the suggestion of UPA has not begun to open up the lines of communication, at least not specifically about Isla (though UPA is in contact with the NHA regarding other communities). “If we are united, we will win against them (NHA). I hope that those people who do not want to join us will not influence the others to not to join with us, because we just need 500 families and in that we can form a powerful team for us to get our land rights,” one community leader passionately shares. It is this confidence in their chances to attain land rights that has the community so set against compromise or discussion of relocation at this time. They operate from the viewpoint that they have a chance to gain land rights, while the NHA operates under a memorandum of agreement which from their perspective is a decisive ‘no’ on the behalf of the PPA as to whether land rights can be obtained. If the answer is indeed no, then the community is already behind in helping consult and negotiate their own relocation.

A positive attitude towards relocation can help the relocation succeed by helping to unify the community. Positive attitudes will affect the motivation of those being relocated. If some community members abandon the relocation effort it may impact the community’s overall disposition on relocation (Viratkapan, Perera, and Watanabe, 2004). Currently the attitude towards relocation as a whole is negative. This negativity towards relocation in part stems from a negative view of the government. “Today we have a firm organization and we have learned our rights and now the government treats us like an enemy since we are now thinking and not just simply doing what they want us to do.” This perceived antagonism from the government has colored the disposition of the community enough so that, community members seemingly on principle are skeptical of any offer from the government. But there is a chance that could change, if the community can feel positive about participation in the relocation process. If the community is engaged during the relocation process then they might feel more confident in the work being done by the NHA and the local government, which will positively impact the attitude of the community towards relocation.

One woman simply says, “. This is the place where I started my family.” And the sentiment is echoed by other community members. Places like Isla despite its informal status are not just a physical residence. But they have significance on a personal level. This is home for many. This is where their families began, and they would like to continue on with their families.

Balanced Scheme

There are a number of issues that must be balanced within this scheme. The NHA appears to do its best to serve informal settlers and live up to its mandate. But the amount of limitations within the system of relocation makes that a difficult reality. The disposition of the PPA aside, the situation of Isla Puting Bato is precarious but requires a decidedly focused effort to secure for itself a just relocation scheme. Each of the factors discussed above illustrate the complexity of relocation and specifically the case for Isla.

Somewhere at least one of the parties involved will be forced to compromise somewhere. The limitations upon each party indicate that such compromise will be required for any relocation to occur, forced or otherwise. But for a just relocation, all parties will have to compromise in different ways to secure the best possible and most fair relocation scheme for residents of Isla.

Perhaps the PPA will consent to handing over rights of the land over to Isla residents, which helps secure the most important thing from the perspective of community members: jobs. But long term, this would have repercussion for Manila and the Philippines as a whole. While there is no specific plan as of yet for the Pier area, giving away such highly prized land could significantly impair future Port operations. This area is the largest port within the Philippines, so to use land that could be used for port expansion for housing would limit potential economic growth and the rate of import/export through the Port facilities.

On the other hand, if all is at seems and the PPA refuses to give the land to the residents of Isla. Simply put Isla will have to accept the situation at hand. Which means they do not get what they want. But that does not necessarily mean they can’t still achieve their other goals. There is still the option of securing land in the area through purchase of private property in Parola that would allow residents within proximity of their employment.

But if the Pier area turns up no viable options for relocation or settlement the only option would be out of city relocation. This would indeed be the biggest sacrifice for community members. They would have to give up their homes, and for many their jobs at the Pier because distance would make such jobs difficult to maintain. This is when the NHA would step in and heavily contribute during the relocation process. The key in this case is finding the right relocation area. Many relocations fail during the hand off to the receiving government. The best way to make sure this doesn’t happy is for residents to actively be involved in the process and to keep both the NHA and the receiving government accountable.

Recommendations

Recommendations are made given the information made available here. All factors that are taken into consideration have been deduced from the interviews and FGD which have painted a complex picture of the situation at hand.

Limitations

While the interviews and FGD have shed much light on the situation of Isla, I cannot claim that I fully know every facet of this complex situation, nor can I claim to understand ever nuance. There is a lot of information presented here, but there is undoubtedly further information that has not been brought to light. Any recommendation made should be considered against available evidence rather than followed blindly. Furthermore recommendations made are from an unbiased third party perspective. While I do not fully understand every facet of the situation, it is my hope that I can bring new ideas or perspectives to the table. And while recommendations are made from a careful analysis of the available information, it should not be assumed that the recommendations here the only course of action or even the preferred course of action.

On-site

The odds appear to be low that Isla will gain rights to the land. Despite the openness of the previous head of the PPA, the fact is, the current administration does not seem open to considering an agreement. This fact, compounded with the actions of the PPA indicate that the likelihood of land rights is slim. The signed memorandum of agreement and the exchange of funds for relocation of informal settlers in the area indicate that the PPA is not at a point where they will consider giving over the land to the Isla community.

There are two considerations here, the disposition of the PPA and the presidential decree to move informal settlers out of ‘danger areas.’ While some informal settlements that are located near or adjacent to waterways have been granted land rights, the decree and PPA’s actions make lands right highly unlikely. And it might be worth considering: that the water break is indeed a danger zone. While I in no way advocate out of city relocation, the water break itself may actually be a danger area as the government indicates. This should not be compared to other instances where the government has made decisions which seem inconsistent with their current stance on Isla. The Philippine government appears to have a history of inconsistency but that does not deny the possibility that Isla’s current location may in fact be a dangerous place to live for a number of reasons.

Available Options

Unfortunately the list of suitable sites is few. UPA is looking at areas around the Pier which can be purchased from private owners. This appears to be the best option for residents of Isla because in earnest, it makes the least amount of changes to the lives of those in Isla. As stated above it seems the land rights to the water break is unlikely. The most advantageous alternative is the sites that are being researched by UPA. The second best option which Marikina, is actually a non option. While the people of Isla believe the Mayor has offered land, UPA has clarified that it was an election time promise, but not one that has been substantiated.

While I in no way endorse this, should Isla not be granted rights to the water break, I foresee a segment of the community taking up informal residence elsewhere in the Tondo area for the same reason they want land rights: proximity to areas of employment. But an alternative is to at least for the time being find residence on a rental basis from the various land tenured communities in the area including Baseco and Parola among others. While this is not ideal it does address the immediate needs of the people. Furthermore it is not unheard of renters to eventually obtain land through purchase from original land owners in a tenured community.

Securing the Optimal Relocation

There are a number of factors that remain outside of the control of Isla and UPA. The best they can hope for is to mitigate negative factors. The most effective way to do so is to be in constant open communication with the agencies involved in this situation. First and foremost the PPA. Isla itself needs to hear word from the PPA so that it can begin to focus on relocation if indeed they will never gain access to the land.

The second line of communication needs to be with the NHA. It is crucial for Isla to be heavily involved not just passive observers in their own relocation. Their participation comes through meeting the NHA at the table and being active in communicating their needs and desires. If the community of Isla continues to wait decisions may occur concerning Isla but without the knowledge or even consent of community members.

The third agency is whatever local government they will be working with. The NHA indicates that many of the failings of relocation are at the hands of local governments. If this is the case, the biggest measure off accountability will come from the residents themselves. This means being willing to compromise when things are not important, but being steadfast and no giving up things that are necessary. This resolute stance which could turn into stubbornness over the right to the water break will be necessary to secure a just relocation scheme if and when the time comes.

Securing Justice

It is uncommon for every party to get everything they want when there are conflicting agendas and situational limitations. But Isla can secure a relocation scheme that is fair and just according to the UDHA and international legislation on rights to housing. The key will be keeping the local government accountable to the law. While there have been cases of united fronts against demolition and relocation, they has been noticeably less united opposition to unjust relocation. In such cases of united opposition, communities have been granted rights to the land. That is a significant achievement. Similar resolution and steadfast must be achieved if community residents hope to keep local governments accountable to their word and the law.

# Reflection and Application

## Personal Interaction with the Research

I came into this research with a heart for the community if Isla. But with my background in city planning, I take into deep consideration the long term effects of any local government decision I never expected myself to be soft of heart towards the NHA. But my interview with the NHA really opened my eyes to a number of issues I had only briefly considered previously.

From my initial windshield survey through Isla, a number of structural problems inherent in the community came to my attention. The amount of foundation work that would need to be done to rebuild the area would be costly, how to manage the sewage system, how to manage the garbage that flows in from the water etc. I was torn because the situation in its own way is dire. Yet in its own way, the people are happy. But when I looked on at the community I realized how big of an undertaking this would be. My greatest fear was that if the residents received land tenure, that perhaps like it’s neighbouring communities Parola and Baseco, Isla would continue on as a slum community.

Land tenure is not a cure all solution to urban poverty. It protects people’s right to housing which is a significant step forward. But as Parola and Baseco are clear examples of, land tenure doesn’t mean poverty has diminished, nor does it mean that the communities are no longer slums. Living in an urban poor community myself I am well aware of this fact. Initially I imagined finding an outcome which would please the residents of Isla. But as I learned about the complexity of the situation, what seemed to grow in importance was the big picture.

I started to realize that functioning within one paradigm such as the desire to gain land tenure greatly restricts one from really considering the big picture. From a city stand point the area is vital to the future of the city and even the Philippines. And just because people want the land, and deserve land of their own it doesn’t mean that location is suitable nor even a good option to consider. It is common to be lead by your heart when working with the urban poor, and that is not a shortcoming but often a strength. But I realized that if that is the only paradigm in which one is function, then your judgment is greatly impaired. It is easy to decry the government as a lying, cheating, defrauding institution, but from my interview I saw what I believe was a true desire to help informal settlers tied up government restrictions and conflicting agendas.

As of now I am still very much conflicted. The situation is complex and I may never fully understand the depth of relocation. I started with a heart for the community. That hasn’t changed, but more and more I am seeing systematic problems that maintain a study barrage of oppression or injustice upon those unable to stand for themselves. UPA does great work from a local level, but more than one the ground advocacy, relocation is equally a systematic problem and should be addressed as such.

## Significant Findings

The most significant finding may not be new in any case. It is little publicized, but what appears to be the biggest failure of the relocation is the decentralization of the process which diminishes the power of the NHA to adequately and unilaterally serve their mandate to house informal settlers. The NHA commonly takes the blame for failed relocations, but the decentralization of the process means that they are not solely responsible for failing of any relocation.

The NHA themselves lament this lack of unilateral power in the relocation process. And with this admission comes an admission of failure to some degree in providing for the people. An astonishing admission but one that reveals much about the system of relocation.

Another key finding is the depth of distrust in the government by the average informal settler. The distrust is deep enough that despite the obvious dangers of living on a water break, a presidential decree declaring all such waterways as danger areas is questioned for its validity and rationale. A history of governmental failings and corruption is good enough for cynicism. The distrust runs deeper than what some might deem obvious conclusions, such as the notion that the water break despite free of natural disaster in the last 20 years might in fact be a dangerous place to live.

A finding of significant notice was found through the FGD with the residents of Isla. Jobs are indeed important to all people, but how highly prioritized they are for the residents of Isla was something of a surprise. The United Nations as well as the Philippine government places no more priority on jobs than basic services or utilities. jobs are more important than any other right or service listed in legislation. It is clear the residents view jobs as the source from which all other things spring, including the basic services and utilities mentioned in legislation. There is an unspoken belief that with jobs, residents wouldn’t need to be depend on the government which has a track record of failures to provide basic services and utilities.

## Further Research

Finding the most just or perfect relocation scheme for Isla has not been conclusive. With so many various factors in play there are many factors that can’t be predicted. The biggest question that comes to mind is, at what point does the NHA or government agency decide to concede government land to informal settlers? What context, criteria or situation predicates such a decision? And who makes that decision? There is an inconsistent history of doling out land rights in some cases while forcing others into relocation areas with other communities.

Another area of questioning that remains unanswered revolves around the relocation areas themselves. How can relocation areas become viable living areas for relocated communities? That might possibly the biggest question surround relocation as relocation as whole is an increasing trend.

This research has shed some light into the complexity of relocation within the Philippines but it only scratches the surfaces. Further research should include a look into the governmental process of relocation. Moreover future areas of study should include case studies of the relationship between receiving governments and relocation sites.

## Self Evaluation

My main research question was a bear of a question. There are clear outlines detailed in legislation or a just relocation scheme. The means to carry it out from a governmental stance is another story. Which is where the importance of compromise comes into play. Interestingly enough with the importance residents put on jobs above all else, the requisites simultaneously become more difficult in some areas and more simple in others.

With residents stating that many services and utilities can be gained through access to employment, pointing to their current situation in which they’ve recently created a cheaper system of access to water, in one sense, the government has less to provide for as per the requests of the community. On the other hand, jobs has been one of , if not the biggest failures in relocation. The lack of job creation even lack of market which promotes the informal business sector has pushed many of the relocated to take up squatting again in Metro Manila.

Because there are so many factors that require compromise, a just scheme can be reached in more than one way. But it is fair to say that a just relocation scheme is not guaranteed through the relocation process. Considering the variables involved I am fairly satisfied with the level in which my main research was answered. But on a personal note, I am less than satisfied because of the systems which cannot guarantee a just relocation, only increase the odds of one.

I was fortunate to be partnered with UPA who are a fount of knowledge and wisdom concerning relocation and informal settlements. They provided me access and credibility within the community if Isla. Moreover their willingness to teach me and to aid me in my research was key to accomplishing many of my goals.

My second biggest success was securing my research assistants. Two dear friends of mine were accommodating in schedule, and were open enough to freely share their take on every part of the research and the process. They transcribed and translated the interviews and FGD in a timely manner and did so almost verbatim.

The most difficult issue was securing my interviews and FGD. While the FGD was nerve-racking it was easy to schedule a time with community leaders. The subsequent interviews with UPA and the NHA were often delayed and pushed back to another date due to conflicting schedules. With UPA it was a fluid work schedule of my supervisor in which at the drop of a hat, she might be required in any given community on behalf of UPA. The NHA on the other hand be a bureaucratic entity while easy to gain physical access to, scheduling wise it was more difficult. I was promised an interview with the department manager, and watched as the secretary pencilled our interview in on the calendar. When I arrived for my interview, I was told the manager was on vacation for a week. I was told the next in line would be in the office the following week. I returned the following week and was able to grab 20 minutes of his time, before he went to a meeting, and was promised the following week a Monday meeting. Friday I was texted that the Monday meeting had to be cancelled but he might be available Tuesday. Luckily Tuesday was workable for both of us and I was able to secure my last interview.

Having never done research of any sort like this it was an eye opening experience. The entire experience was an opportunity to learn and be challenged. I am far less intimidated by research now than I was at the start of this project. That being said, I feel there is still much to learn about participatory research.

## Personal Outcomes

I was at first daunted by the idea of participatory research. And while that feeling has diminished it is not yet gone. I feel as if I barely scratched the surface on the entire experience. But what this experiences has done for me has reaffirmed my desire to see structural change to systems that are directly impacting the poor.

For a long while now, I have known that I probably won’t be working on the grassroots levels. When I trace back obstacles that obstruct the movement of the urban poor I have always traced it back to government, to systems. It is for that reason that I aim to help redefine systems and structures that work with the poor, by first joining their ranks then becoming an agent of change.

Having seen the grassroots, and yet again traced the very dire issues to structural and systematic issues I am more convicted now than before.

# Appendices

## Addendum A: Project Plan

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Isla Puting Bato: A Case Study in Relocation |
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Isla Puting Bato: A Case Study in Relocation

Contact Information

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This is a partnership agreement between Brandon Wong and Urban Poor Associates. It is agreed Brandon Wong will undertake the following objectives and tasks pursuant to research related to the Thesis Project required by Azusa Pacific University.

# Title

Responsible Slum Relocation in Metro Manila

# Topic

Just Relocation for Isla Putting Bato

Slum relocation is a primary solution to the influx of informal settlers that reside in Metro Manila. With many leaving the province to look for employment in the city, slum communities have swelled. While the government stance is to prioritize on-site resettlement, off-site relocation, then out of city-relocation in that order, land scarcity has forced many of the relocated to locations on the fringes of Metro Manila.

Often these relocation sites are lacking in necessities including utilities, access to employment and access to services. This is in spite of very clear statutes outline in the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 which outlines the context of resettlement and relocation, including government responsibilities to the people such as the provision of utilities. Articles within UDHD hold the government responsible for the provision of ‘basic services.’

Governmental Provisions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Basic Services** | **Services given priority implementation** | **If feasible** |
| Potable water | Health | Location near areas where employment areas are accessible |
| Power and electricity and an adequate power distribution system | Education | -------------- |
| Sewerage facilities and efficient and adequate waste disposal | Communication | -------------- |
| Access to primary roads and transportation facilities | Recreation | -------------- |
| -------------- | Security | -------------- |
| -------------- | Relief | -------------- |
| -------------- | Welfare | -------------- |

(Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992)

There is currently no standard by which to deem a relocation just. This is due mainly to the fact that despite that information outline above, often relocation and resettlement happen and the rights of the resettled have not been secured and government has not followed through on its outline obligation. In the case of Isla Putting BAto which is classified as danger zone and residents are under threat of demolition, it is important to define a just relocation scheme as the future of their residence is decided.

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# Variables

Needs of community: The needs of the community are a cornerstone in gauging whether the relocation process has been just. If the needs of the community are not being addressed than there is a shortcoming somewhere in the process resulting in the failing of the government’s responsibility to provide for its people.

Expressed needs of the community: While there are a number of needs of any given community whether or not those needs are explicitly expressed greatly affects how many accommodations the government is willing to make.

Political environment: There is a political aspect that must be considered, especially as political environments change, so do the official government stance on low-income housing and helping the poor.

Reason for relocation or demolition: In this case the current location is deemed unsafe for residence by the government citing is a potential flood zone. But it is important to keep in mind that the reason for relocation will affect the government’s willingness to find a compromise.

Available land: In-city relocation is a difficult process because land costs are so high in Metro Manila. It is for that reason most relocations are happening on the outskirts of Metro Manila. But in this case there is a potential relocation site on the other site of the Pier. This can be used for pure housing or even mixed use or landsharing.

Environmental considerations: Environmental concerns may impact the ability to move onto a new property or will affect costs of relocation. The property in mind is NHA land that currently has commercial development on its premise. That commercial development may have contaminated the soil but that is something that will only be known with further testing.

National Housing Authority cooperation: The governmental branch responsible for low income housing needs to be responsive and cooperative in meeting the needs of the community and compromising with the wants of the community.

Cooperation of existing land-owner: In this case the current land on which the residents of Isla Putting Bato inhabit is the site in which residents desire to rebuild. But that may not be possible. But across the pier there is commercial building occupying NHA land. But with the NHA mandated not to turn a profit but provide housing for low-incomes families, a sound proposal needs to be put together to convince the NHA to cooperate in handing over that site.

Locational access to utilities: Not all relocation sites have access to utilities such as water, electricity and waste disposal. Even for some areas that do have access, that access is not always consistent.

Locational access to services: One failure of many relocation sites is not being within relative proximity to services like health centers and schools.

Locational access to employment: The number one reason people leave relocation sites and return to slums is that the relocation sites are not within proximity of employment opportunities.

Resident cooperation: Residents of Isla Puto Bato need to be able to balance needs versus wants and what is reasonable with the restrictions in regards to government cooperation and available funding.

Costs to residents: The NHA cannot afford to subsidize all the costs of relocation sites. So the balance between wants, needs and options available will have to be weighed against a reasonable repayment rate that the residents of Isla Puting Bato can pay back over time.

# Research Question

"What would a just relocation scheme for Isla Putting Bato look like?

There are a number of variables at play in any relocation. Within Metro Manila the primary actors are the community, the National Housing Authority and the local government. But there are factors beyond those factors which influence how each will make decisions. These factors work together and result in relocation or resettlement. But that relocation can look like many things, another slum, an underfunded projecte, a human rights debacle or a just relocation.

There are competing agendas which impact what the relocation looks like. Often the result is a relocation that does not fully provide for the needs of the residents. While relocation like this happens often and without organized opposition, it clearly fails to meet the statues upheld in United Nations legislation concerning the right to housing, let alone their own legislation regarding socialized housing for informal settlers.

# Community Relevance

The residents of Isla Puting Bato desire to rebuild after a fire that claimed 1,066 houses in May 2012. But the location on the water-break that protects pier is a location that officially has the government concerned for the safety of this community. While the residents desire to rebuild the current feeling is that the government is not on the same page. There has been no official no, but neither has there been an official yes. Residents have reported that while there has been no official ‘no,’ many have complained of the difficulty in getting rebuilding supplies into the area, suggesting it may be at the fault of the government who doesn’t want the area to be rebuilt. Following the fire that displaced 5,436 people, relocation occurred to the province of Bulacan which sits north of Metro Manila. The issue with this site eventually boiled down to job opportunities. Most residents of Isla Puting Bato work at the Pier or at the nearby shopping area Divisoria. To move that many people that far away from their place of work is not ideal. It is for that reason that many residents returned to the area despite having been relocated. UDHA attempts to house informal settlers near employment opportunities, but areas outside of Metro Manila offer few opportunities and is far from the current site of employment of most residents. And while the government has declared the area a danger zone, which would take precedence of proximity to employment opportunities, many have reported talks of a master plan for the Pier area which is a business interest that conflicts with the interests of residents of the area.

At the same time UPA has been made aware that there is NHA property, Pier 18 on the other side of the pier that is currently is being used for commercial use. The two avenues UPA are pursuing in partnership with community leaders from Isla Puting Bato 1)on-site relocation with the backing of the NHA or 2) be granted access to the NHA property across the pier. Because the mandate of the NHA is to help house low income families not turn a profit, UPA feels reasonably confident that putting together a development proposal for the NHA property could be a viable option for relocation for Isla Puting Bato residents.

Because many relocation sites have not turned out as expected or desired it is important to ensure that the rights and needs of the residents are being met. In seeking a just relocation for residents, this research could provide a tool in which to clearly outline the needs of the community to the NHA who is the agency responsible for relocation housing of the urban poor. Furthermore this can provide a record of accountability to the NHA who is responsible for providing fair and just relocation or resettlement to informal settlers.

# Population and Site

Isla Putting Bato is a community located in the water break just outside of the Pier on Manila Bay. The 2000 families are split into five areas (*puroks* 1-5) progressively numbered as one moves farther out onto the water break. This area is widely considered one of the poorest areas in all of the Philippines. Though not legal many have homes that are hanging out over the water, some built on wood beams some semi floating. Very little hard data is provided for this informal settlement at this time. Much of the data has been changed within this last year with a fire that damaged over 1,000 homes, which forced over 5,000 former residents to relocate. But it is common for the relocated to return to such informal settlements, so the actual numbers in Isla Putting Bato are not confirmed in any concrete form.

Information will be gathered through interviews with community residents and community leaders or Isla Puting Bato. UPA makes visits and has meeting with community leaders on site and that is where interviews will take place. The community is divided into five *puroks* that each have a set of leaders. There is also a leadership council over the entirety of the community. The overall council meets at General Assembly meetings. It is the overall council and the *purok* leaders that will be key informants as they are the chosen spokespeople of their community. It is important to see the *purok* leaders and overall leaders as separate entities as different sections of Isla Putting Bato may have conflicting interests that may not be full addressed with the overall council of leaders.

# Methods

1. Windshield survey: A site visit with UPA is the first step. A secondary windshield survey with a community insider which provides opportunity for questions. Hopefully a site visit to the NHA land.
2. Extended participant observation in community affairs which include UPA-community meetings, General Assembly meetings, *purok* council meetings, and meetings between the architects and community leaders. In fact having worked at an architecture firm, geotechnical engineering firm (soils testing), and being the son of a city planner, UPA has asked for my opinion on considerations regarding the future proposal.
3. Read any pertinent literature which includes similar case studies, UN documents, government documents, and other relevant readings that deal with slum relocation.
4. Interviews: The first interview is with UPA to define their capacity in which they can assist in this process. Secondly interviews with community leaders that can help assess the desires and needs of the community. A third interview with NHA to define the capacity NHA has to compromise in this situation. Further interviews are as necessary though there were most likely be a second or maybe a third round of interviews. And it is possible to random interviews with randomly selected residents.
5. Contacting local agencies with up-to-date statistics and demographics of the area.

# Research Guide and Assistant

I will be working with UPA community worker Tina Jurado who can assist in translation and facilitation. I have been to three meetings within the community and have been introduced to the leaders. I was given the opportunity to introduce myself and my work as well as my goal to help the community during this process. With Tine from UPA as a facilitator interview and FGD times have been scheduled. I intend to use semi-structured interviews to have a guided interaction that allows for flexibility.

I will be conducting one FGD with the overall leadership council and then individual intervies with on leader representative from each purok council. In this way I can get a feel for the group dynamics and goals, but also view the individual or different goals and agendas of each purok. A FGD will allow the leaders to build on each other’s responses, but I do believe that it will help solidify their understanding of their own situation by making them all think about important aspects of this process they previously might not have considered.

While Tina intends to be present for the FGD and interviews, she may be otherwise occupied. It is for that reason arrangement with community leaders have been made. Moreover, I have reached an agreement with two of my community members who are both college educated a proficient in English, enlisting their services for my data gathering. One will be with me during interviews and group discussions, recording, note taking and acting as a translator if necessary. The other will work with me to translate the recordings. I brought these two assistants with me to the last meeting I attended so that community leaders could be apprised of my work as well as to make both my assistants and the leaders comfortable in being fully informed of the situation.

Minimum wage within Metro Manila is 424 pesos a day. While this is minimum wage most Metro Manilans will agree that this is not nearly enough. For this reason an agreed upon wage will be 75 pesos/hour which is relatively high by local standards, but is also a fair wage. Travel expenses and food will not come out of their wages but out of my budget.

# Ethical Considerations

With UPA as my connection into the community I also am plugged directly into community leaders. I’m hoping to build trust with community informants. While friendship is hoped for the business of schedules makes that unlike. What is more likely is a mutual respect and camaraderie. After having shared my goals and methods with the leaders, they have made themselves open to participation in this process. Culturally many Filipinos tell outsiders the answers they believe you want to hear, so friendship would be a way to circumvent such a habit. Because this a representation of the community, specific names are not important with the possible exception of community leaders. But as of now I believe names need not be divulged which means the privacy of the informants will be kept.

But there have been instances that have been made known to me where people have gone explicably missing because they opposed the political and business interests of large entities. That being the case it will be important to keep confidential the identities of the informant. While I don’t think names are important to begin with for this research, it is important to keep their participation confidential for their own safety. That will be done so verbally which will include a promise on my part, uses of aliases in my own reports as well as a detailed explanation of my intent, methods and goals in doing my research in their community.

# Timetable

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Task | Begin | Complete | Completed? |
| Site Visit and Windshield Survey | 10/30/12 | 11/6/12 | Yes.  |
| Visit of NHA Property | 10/30/12 | 11/10/12 |  |
| Meet Community Leaders | 10/30/12 | 11/10/12 | Met leaders 3 times |
| Literature Review | 10/30/12 | 1/15/12 | Written, but there is more still to read |
| Interview Guide  | 12/9/12 | 1/15/12 | Yes.(Tentative) |
| Obtaining Consent | 1/05/12 | 1/20/12 | Yes. (Tentative) |
| Interview Community Leaders | 11/5/12 | 2/9/13 | FGD scheduled |
| Interview NHA | 11/5/12 | 2/25/13 | Currently pursuing connections. |
| Interview UPA | 10/30/12 | 2/16/13 |  |

# Budget

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Item | Cost |
| Transportation | 68 pesos/day/person |
| Supplies | 1500 pesos |
| Assistants | 75pesos/hour |

# Research Product

The intent is to provide a conclusive brief by which the community of Isla Puting Bato can present their needs, wants and available resources to make informed, realistic decisions regarding their future housing situation. This will in turn be used when dealing with the NHA.

This can serve as point of inspiration if their concerns have been heard for the community empowering them to take more active roles in the happenings surrounding their community. If their expressed needs aren’t met this can provide a detail record what was not met and offer proof the NHA has not been fulfilling their mandate. UPA can use this report as a gauge in what is reasonable or unreasonable when making proposals to the NHA for new in-city slum relocation sites.

This study will be accessible in a full print form, copies given to community leaders and to UPA. Furthermore an abridge form will be made available as well for those less focused on details.

The findings will be presented to UPA for future use. These findings will also be presented to community leaders as an assessment of their current progress to aid in progress towards a just relocation.

# Community Benefits

The goal is to provide a way for residents to weigh all the factors involved in an informed manner by being able to grasp the entirety of the picture which is to include their needs and wants versus the available resources. The community can learn from this experience to be proactive in the affairs of the community. Moreover if the proposal is successful the community will be empowered and more aware of the factors influencing their community. If the proposal is not accepted the community can have a clear detailed account of their demands and go back to the drawing board to find a more feasible proposal.

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Signature of Supervisor Date

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Name of Supervisor

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Signature of Researcher Date

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher

# Addendum A

## Isla Putting Interview Questions

1. What are some of the difficulties in living within Islang Putting Bato?
2. Could you describe the services and programs that are available in Isla? ( utilities, seminars etc.)
3. Are there services and programs that are needed but not present in Isla? Why are they necessary?
4. Please describe the resources and assets within Isla.
5. Could you give some examples of poor infrastructure in Isla?
6. In your opinion, what are the basic needs of Isla and your family to live soundly?
7. What are your biggest concerns in living in Isla and near the Pier?
8. What are the most important factors for your when deciding where to live?
9. What are the reasons you do not wish to relocate?
10. Is it difficult to make a living in Isla, why?
11. Why do you want on-site relocation?
12. Could you give some examples of how you would improve Isla?
13. Do you believe the NHA is open to compromising with the Isla community? Why or Why not?
14. What brought you to Isla?
15. Describe a typical day here in Isla.

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