



**From the  
Ashes:**  
Harnessing the  
Self-Capacity of the  
Urban Poor To  
Own Their Land

by Jojo Cortez, SPEED



Children play in the open playground at their new home in Sinsuat, 7 kilometers away from the center of Cotabato City.

Nestled between two rivers and fronting the Moro Gulf sits the highly urbanizing city of Cotabato in the southern island of Mindanao. According to the 2007 census, the city has a population of 259,153 living in its 37 barangays, 15 of which are rural and 22 are urban.

Residing along the city's river banks and other private and public lands, however, are informal settlers numbering around 40,627 or 18 percent of the total populace. They come from some regions in the Visayas like Siquijor, Cebu and Iloilo. Around 30 percent are Moros displaced by the incessant conflicts in places like Buldon, Barira and Datu Piang in Maguindanao province. The rising number of urban poor in Cotabato City was further demonstrated when the People's Palace and Mega Square Complex were built, with 3,000 individuals losing their homes. Evacuees further swelled in the city after the bombing of Camp Abubakar during the Estrada Administration. Many of these refugees didn't want to go back to their homeland because of fear, choosing instead to live along river banks and sidewalks.

## Shanties and Screams

According to Daisy Puro, Huyong-Huyong Homeowners Association treasurer, "Even if we do not have our own home-lot, with the help of our settled relatives here, we were able to put up our own small shanties." The families live in shanties so cramped that kitchens, comfort rooms and pig pens are right next to each other.

Mely Moabon, Purok Upper Bitara Homeowners Association President, said, "We live in houses where walls are the only gap from the others, we could even hear the crying of the wife when couples fight in the middle of the night."



**Daisy Purol relaxes after lunch at her new home in Sinsuat, 7 kilometers away from the center of Cotabato City.**

Jaime Magpalik, a 53-year-old urban poor resident, said that their daily life in the community starts by rising at dawn and doing household chores, drinking coffee before getting to work, while jobless ones chat over a cup of coffee. Many of the men are drivers, some are bakers, laborers, butchers, and store helpers; the women wash clothes for a living, while others are vendors selling native delicacies, hair accessories and other merchandise, Magpalik reports. Angelita Belago, Sariling Sikap Homeowners association president complained that "one of the things we irritatingly bear is waking up in the middle of the night hearing those running teenagers escaping from the apprehending barangay peacekeepers and policemen." Their offenses are drug pushing and using, she said. "You see, in this kind of community drugs are sold like candy and popcorn."

The situation may be miserable but as the adage goes, "beggars can't be choosers." The residents have no choice, they can only make the most of what they have and be thankful. As people keep coming into Cotabato, negative perceptions set in. The urban poor are derided as an eyesore, according to people like Oscar Tan Abing, President of Groceries Association of Cotabato City.

## K! driving force

It was under those conditions that Solidarity for Peace, Empowerment, and Equity-Led Development (SPEED) formed a core group of urban poor organizers in February 2005. The urgency of organizing came from the fact that the urban poor sector is actually multi-sectoral, but with common aspirations. They are the youth, women, and transport sector that need empowerment and better livelihood.

Unfortunately, the core group of organizers did not succeed. Many informal settlers have been victimized by unscrupulous urban poor organizations with promises of owning a house-and-lot. In the twinkling of an eye, these alleged swindlers disappeared with the victims' payments.

## BAKAL enters the picture

In July 2006, SPEED, Inc. and the Institute for Politics and Governance (IPG) teamed up for the Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran (BAKAL) project. When the BAKAL project was implemented, the youth, women, urban poor, and transport organizations with members totaling almost 3,000 were reactivated and organized. SPEED helped form an urban poor federation composed of 11 organizations from 11 barangays in Cotabato City, with seven hundred eighty-two (782) members. The federation was formally launched on February 17, 2008, during the first General Assembly of urban poor held in Cotabato City High School. In this assembly, leaders ratified and approved their Constitution and By-Laws and Kagkakalimwa came into being. Kagkakalimwa is a Maguindanaon word meaning, "To help each other." Following SPEED's slogan—"Helping people help themselves"—the urban poor federation enticed members to reach for their dreams, including the acquisition of their own home-lot by motivating their willingness and capacity to pay.

Within six months after the federation was formed, however, Kagkakalimwa officials still found it hard to implement the organization's policies since there were still members who doubted the federation's credibility. Only a few members were giving their monthly dues and lot equity-funds savings, fearing they would just be swindled again.

In spite of the skepticism, SPEED's BAKAL project continued its support for the federation with capability-building interventions: consciousness-raising seminars, financial management and leadership trainings, and many other educational activities for the benefit of officers and members.

Eventually, the member organizations were convinced that their welfare was being cultivated and protected. They started becoming active in the federation. Through BAKAL, Kagkakalimwa's officers and members accepted the importance of participatory approaches to decision-making. They realized that advocating good governance starts with good governance within the organization itself. Thus, Kagkakalimwa ensured that any decision arrived at had the support of all the members, from the Homeowners Executive Committee to the Federation level. In their efforts to solidify the federation, members learned the essence of unity. "We became aware of our duties and responsibilities as members of our community-based organizations," Said Richard V. Cenas, Kagkakalimwa federation President.

## Consciousness and Clout

As the BAKAL project moved on, the federation realized that at the barangay level, participatory governance was not extensively practiced. There was no transparency among its constituents, no

general assembly and no consultation process, especially among the rural barangays of Cotabato City. Spurred by the need to take action, the Kagkakalimwa officers and member organizations registered with the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board, after which they sought accreditation with the City Development Council and the Local Housing Board. Thus, the federation acquired decision-making clout, which emboldened the membership to engage the city government in the concerns of the urban poor.

Moreover, knowing their collective aspirations for decent housing, the members started saving for their lot-equity fund and paying their monthly dues regularly. Kagkakalimwa's Executive committee and eleven (11) Council of Leaders deliberated and unanimously decided that monthly dues will be allocated for the different programs of the federation.<sup>1</sup> Through this allocation, the federation was even able to set up its Damayan Fund (Mortuary Aid and Hospital Assistance).

## Collective Action in **Securing Housing for All**



The burned down lot of Purok Pagkakaisa in Barangay Rosary Heights 13, Cotabato City.

Purok Pagkakaisa in Barangay Rosary Heights 13 had already been allegedly burned down on purpose, making communities aware of the dangers they faced.

With the risk of arson hanging over their heads, federation members formed Civilian Volunteer Organization (CVO) teams, divided the members into seven groups and scheduled them every

## The new community built in Sinsuat ,Cotabato City.



night to secure the community from possible arsonists. When Huyong-Huyong burned down last October 2, 2008, the place was secured with a perimeter fence and matching security guards the following day. Enraged residents were ready to sacrifice their lives in fighting against the injustice they suffered. It was then that the Kagkalinwa Executive Committee hastened its decision to procure land for its members' relocation. Soon a dialogue was convened among the city government officials, Presidential Commission on Urban Poor (PCUP), the Archbishop of Cotabato, SPEED, Kagkalinwa Executive Committee and officers of Huyong-Huyong Homeowners Association. It was at this meeting that they settled issues and agreed that the community would clear out by January 2, 2009.

Previously, an offer had been made to relocate the residents within the city, but they rejected the proposed relocation site. According to them, Kalanganan Dos is beset with too many problems: First, the low-lying area is prone to floods; second, it sits on the periphery of territory claimed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, hence, raising security concerns; and third, there were at least five competing claims of land ownership by different individuals.

Sometime in November 2008, however, the group learned of a property located at Tenorio, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao, from Arnel Pulpul, who happens to live on the said area. Pulpul's mother, a Huyong-Huyong resident, inspected the area and recommended it to the Huyong-Huyong Homeowners Association Officers.

The Tenorio land in Sinsuat, Maguindanao is uninhabited agricultural land seven kilometers away from the city. Owned by Mr. Alim Panda, the area covers 7,000 square meters (sq. m.) and costs

P750,000. Together with the PCUP, Kagkakilimwa's Executive Committee gave assistance so that the Huyong-Huyong Homeowners Association could buy the land. The money that residents received as disturbance compensation of P5,000 for each family from the city government was consolidated with their own lot-equity fund and savings. These savings enabled them to purchase the land. According to Daisy, Purok Huyong-Huyongs Homeowners Association treasurer, "Had it not been for the solidarity of the group, this piece of land that we own today would not materialize."

On this land, each member will have a 67 sq.m of land to own. On January 3, 2009, the Huyong-Huyong settlers finally transferred to their new homes in Sinsuat.

## K! makes dreams real

The Huyong-Huyong case, however, is not isolated. The federation is home to ten (10) more organized affiliates of homeless settlers. Jocelyn Sugabo, Purok Sibuyan Homeowners Association President, expressed concern: "What if what happened to Huyong-Huyong will also happen to my own organization?" The federation members and leaders shared her sentiment. They decided to purchase another available neighboring land in Tenorio, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao. The property is said to be 9.4 hectares worth Pp3.5 million. It is seven kilometers away from the city and is more than enough to accommodate 600 members and their families. Again with the help of the PCUP and SPEED, the Kagkakilimwa Executive Committee negotiated with the lot owner named Mr. Manolo Yu. On November 5, 2008 the deal was closed and the federation was given three months to pay for the property.



The Executive Committee and the Council of Leaders met and came to a decision that the 600 members would pay P7,000 for a 100-sq.m lot, plus P150 registration fee. The members must also pay their monthly dues regularly. Kagkakilimwa made it a policy that prospective owners must religiously follow these rules in order to lay claim to their property.

Currently, the Kagkakilimwa Community of Workers Association has been able to raise P3.5 million to purchase the said property. SPEED is also busy helping yet another people's organization, the Pag-Asa Homeowners' Association in its efforts to buy a 10,000-hectare lot within the city for the 85 families of its members.

## Looking **forward**

As for the 73 members of Huyong-Huyong Homeowners Association, they are now getting used to their new environment. As Mr. Romeo Pableo, Huyong-Huyong Homeowners Associations President said, "We are back to basic. No light, no water. It is hard but we need to try harder." The federation thus faces huge challenges at the moment: water and electrical facilities, health and sanitation, a waste management program, and most importantly, livelihood opportunities. But, as the members agree, it is also a test of how their unity, which BAKAL helped form, can inspire members to do their share and live a brighter and productive life ahead.



**Rudy Pangasian in his new home in Sinsuat, Cotabato City.**

In the future, the federation is planning to put up a water-service cooperative for the entire community and for the neighboring communities down the area. Kagkakilimwa also plans to tap

government agencies concerned for livelihood opportunities, to help jobless members of the community.

As Daisy Purol affirms, "As long as we are residing in our own home-lot, we will never be called squatters again for the rest of our lives". Jaime Caban, member of Huyong-Huyong Home Owners Association, adds, "One of the important things that we learned from BAKAL is to be aware of our rights, not just as citizens of our country but as human beings. A lot of urban people are victims of human-rights violations these days, which include facing daily risk from eviction, demolition, and arson. But BAKAL made us aware of our human rights."

The Kagkalamimwa foundation truly demonstrates that with proper intervention and support, urban-poor residents can learn to help themselves. They embody the truth, "In unity there is strength."

1 10% Educational Fund (Trainings and Seminars), 15% Organizational Fund, 20% Saving for Cooperative Formation, 30% Mortuary & Hospitalization Assistance, 15% Capital outlay, 10% Political Action Activities