

Manilla rights-based “quick response team”

Confronting state abuses and protecting livelihoods of the urban poor

Executive Summary

Since August 2021, the University of Melbourne’s Informal Urbanism (InfUr-) Research Hub, Save San Roque Alliance (SSR) and Metro Manila Vendors’ Alliance (MMVA) have implemented an advocacy and research project dubbed “Civic Space, Livelihoods and Post-pandemic Recovery in Manila.” The project amplifies the fundamental relationship between civic space and economic livelihoods during the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to strengthen and expand the partnership of grassroots organizations with civil society groups and government allies to prevent human rights abuses against the urban poor who engage in legitimate livelihoods and resist forced eviction in Metro Manila, Philippines during the pandemic. A key aspect of the project implementation is the formation of a Quick Response Team (QRT) to document and address political harassment, clearing operations against informal workers, and eviction of informal housing units. This Team is composed of grassroots leaders, nongovernmental (NGO) representatives, and government officials who champion the fundamental rights of the urban poor.

The succeeding pages explain the key aspects of the project implementation, with an emphasis on the QRT as the focus of the case study:

- Broader economic and socio-political context in which this project is situated
- Primary project objectives
- The QRT formation, its composition, activities, and preliminary gains
- Some quotes from urban poor and informal workers
- Next steps and future plans

Project description

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and contributed to deepening socioeconomic inequities. The enforcement of lockdown policies, mobility restrictions, and other COVID-19 control measures has adversely affected a staggering 1.6 billion informal workers across the globe.

In Metro Manila, a substantial proportion of the urban poor population lives in informal settlements, earning their livelihoods from precarious daily waged activities such as street vending, domestic help, and informal transport operation. The COVID-19 shutdown has deprived these communities of their livelihoods while containing them in living conditions where spatial distancing is impossible. Beyond the fundamental health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has manifested in acute challenges linked with food and livelihood insecurity as well as shrinking space for asserting civil and political rights.

In the Philippines, the government has framed the pandemic as a security issue more than a public health problem, resorting to violent policing of the urban poor. In early April 2020, 21 residents of San Roque, an urban poor settlement with about 30,000 inhabitants and where this project is being implemented, were detained for voicing discontent and seeking aid to tackle their own hunger. Within the same month, 19 street vendors, who are members of MMVA, went out and sold vegetables to alleviate hunger, and were also jailed for violating lockdown restrictions.

Instances of local officials imprisoning quarantine violators in dog cages and coffins have surfaced from many villages. This heavy-handed approach occurs within a broader political environment known as “Dutertismo,” which captures President Rodrigo Duterte’s deployment of the coercive power of the state to intimidate dissenters, critics, and noncooperative individuals. In San Roque, uniformed police have intimidated volunteer groups and community leaders involved in COVID-19 crisis interventions.

Objectives

The adverse impacts of the pandemic and government measures have prompted the University of Melbourne’s InfUr- Research Hub, SSR, and MMVA to implement an advocacy and research project dubbed “Civic Space, Livelihoods and Post-pandemic Recovery in Manila.” The project seeks to amplify the fundamental relationship between civic space and economic livelihoods of the urban poor. It commenced in August 2021 and has now undertaken advocacy, documentation, and training activities involving urban poor residents, street vendors, informal transport workers, civic groups, and government agencies.

A key aspect of the project implementation is the formation of a Quick Response Team (QRT) against political harassment and forced eviction. This Team is composed of urban poor leaders, nongovernment organization (NGO) representatives, and government officials from the following institutions: Commission on Human Rights (CHR), Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor (PCUP), MMVA, SSR, Kariton Coalition, CharisMaria, and Urban Forum.

The QRT has three crucial roles in the project implementation:

1. Introduce urban poor leaders to government agencies and civil libertarians who can prevent large-scale demolitions, forced targeted demolitions, harassment and arbitrary arrests of grassroots leaders who protest the curtailment of human rights;
2. Offer practical political and legal advice regarding illegal demolitions, deliberate degradation of living conditions (e.g. fencing, cutting off basic utilities such as water and electricity, etc.), and militarization and abuse of state authority against residents in informal settlements and informal workers;
3. Engage in a series of dialogues to identify concrete policy proposals to protect and promote the civil, political, economic, and sociocultural rights of the urban poor.

A quote from a vendor leader:

“We don’t rely on the government; we do our best to improve our living conditions. We just need a vending space; is it hard for them [government] to provide it? We are poor, but if we continue our collective struggle, we can achieve our dream of having a better life.”

“Hindi kami umaasa sa gobyerno; nagsisikap kami para magkaroon ng maayos na buhay. Pwesto lang kailangan namin, mahirap ba ibigay? Kahit mahirap kami, kung patuloy na lumalaban at sama samang kumilos makakamit ang aming mga hangarin na maayos na pamumuhay.”



Figure 2: Kariton, a common device used for street livelihoods

[Source: <https://www.inhacast.com/2021/01/21/the-sunday-bam/cover-story/governor-steps-and-the-visions/72994/>]

How our actions helped protect civic (and livelihood) space + results of actions

Before presenting some results of activities undertaken in this project, it is important to note that the internal quick response teams of both the SSR and MMVA had separately assisted in facilitating the release of detained vendors and San Roque residents in April 2020. As mentioned above, state forces apprehended 21 San Roque residents and 19 MMVA vendors on separate occasions, citing COVID-19 lockdown rules as a legal basis. SSR helped assemble a team of legal practitioners and raised funds to bail out the arrested residents. For its part, MMVA contacted an activist lawyer and coordinated with the Mayor of Quezon City to facilitate the release of their members. The formation of the project's multi-sectoral QRT built on and sustained these initial gains.

Street Clearing Operations

Between August and October 2021, 25 pedicab units and 12 karitons (which is a small cart, commonly used to carry work materials, see Figure 2) were impounded by the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) without citing any clear violations. To address this series of forceful and arbitrary clearing operations, the QRT wrote an open letter to the MMDA. It also launched a media and online information drive on the impacts of MMDA's clearing operations on pedicab drivers and kariton owners in Quezon City.

After over a week, the Team sent another formal letter to the MMDA (copying the Commission on Human Rights and Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor), demanding a dialogue between the MMDA and pedicab/kariton owners to discuss the following:

1. Legal remedies the aggrieved citizens could pursue to easily retrieve the confiscated pedicabs and karitons;
2. Specific practices the aggrieved citizens and their associations can adopt to prevent another forceful and arbitrary confiscation of pedicabs and karitons;
3. Concrete measures and agreement between the MMDA and pedicab drivers to allow the latter to use certain street spaces as workplaces (e.g. terminals for picking up and dropping off passengers), especially during this pandemic period.

Achievements

A dialogue took place on Nov. 4, 2021 where the QRT was represented by a public advocacy and human rights lawyer, a volunteer from SSR, and two leaders of pedicab drivers. The meeting was successful in terms of generating key agreements that led to the following:

- Recovery of two pedicab units owned by the leaders who took part in the dialogue (see Figure 1 on page 5);
- Clarification of the legal process on how to retrieve confiscated pedicab and kariton units;
- A moratorium on clearing operations until the end December 2021;
- Encouragement by the MMDA for the pedicab drivers to create a system for maintaining informal transport terminals;
- Agreement from MMDA representatives to welcome and cooperate with a possible CHR investigation on the human rights abuses committed by MMDA employees during the violent clearing operations;

To help consolidate the ranks of pedcab drivers and kariton owners, the QRT agreed to conduct a series of training and human rights education with these informal workers in collaboration with the Commission on Human Rights.

Low COVID-19 vaccination rate among the urban poor

It was crucial to address this issue as a COVID-19 vaccine has become a ‘ticket’ to getting consent from the local government to engage in livelihood activities, because street-level bureaucrats look for a ‘vaccine certificate’ of informal vendors before they could allow them to return to the streets. The MMVA coordinated with the Quezon City Mayor’s Office to facilitate a separate “vaccine lane” for the vendors.

Achievements

This initiative resulted in the inoculation of about 2,000 street vendors and urban poor residents. The vaccination drive was made possible due to the longstanding relationship between the MMVA and Quezon City mayor. This partnership was also instrumental for the release of 19 MMVA vendors who were arrested by the police last year. MMVA Coordinator Ms. Flora Santos contacted Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte, who then assisted in the immediate release of the detained street hawkers.

Apart from the vaccination drive, the project’s resources also helped MMVA negotiate for the issuance of the Hawkers’ Holiday Moratorium Agreement by the Quezon City government (see Figure 3 on page 5). This “Christmas Moratorium” is an annual agreement that ensures there will be no clearing operations against street vendors between Nov. 5, 2021 and Jan. 15, 2022. The moratorium is guided by the following rules:

1. Endorsement of the vending activities by the concerned Barangay (village-level state body)
2. Strict observance of Health and Safety Protocol Guidelines under Alert Level 4 category
3. Strictly no “goodwill” (extortion) of any amount shall be collected from the vendors by government authorities
4. City Government shall only collect payment of required taxes and fees
5. Use of temporary stalls, tents, or carts
6. Maintenance of cleanliness and orderliness and sanitation of the vending site by the vendors/vendor groups or associations
7. Voluntary dismantling of vending materials at the end of the moratorium period

A statement from a female single parent who has been a pedicab driver pedicab for six years:

“Why is their (MMDA employees) clearing operation like that? They would forcefully pull you away while you’re sitting on the pedicab.

It is inhumane. ... I pleaded to them; I even cried because my child was sick when they were conducting a clearing operation. They’re getting more violent with their approach because they feel that the pedicab drivers/owners cannot do anything. They could just harass (the drivers) and forcefully take away their pedicabs.”

“Bakit ganun sila manghuli? Talagang paalisin ka sa inuupuan mo para makuha yung pedicab. Hindi naman yun makatao. ... Nakiusap ako, umiyak na ako kasi may sakit ang anak ko nung time na yun nang huli. Hanggang ngayon lalo silang tumitingkad ng huli kasi sa tingin nila parang walang magagawa yung mga taong nahuhulihan. Kaya kaya nilang harasin, ipamalibag nila pag ayaw pumayag ng mga tao... Halos araw-araw na po sila nanghuhuli... Sabi nga ng mga ibang pedicab drivers, kahit anong pakiusap naming wag kaming hulihin kasi naghahanap-buhay naman kami ng marangal. Hindi naman kami nagnanakaw.”



Figure 1: A driver retrieving his pedicab after a dialogue with MMDA officials

Eviction threat on informal settlers in San Roque

SSR has assisted community groups in the area in the series of dialogues with the Quezon City government about their proposed Community Development Plan (CDP). The plan is an on-site redevelopment strategy that will provide security to tenants and affordable housing units for the informal settlers in Quezon City. The formal dialogues are accompanied by protest actions to draw public attention to their decades-old problem and to emphasize the importance of civic space and collective political action in their campaign project supporting housing for poor people.

Achievements

This combined dialogue-protest strategy has so far been effective. The Quezon City government has committed to integrate the proposed San Roque CDP into the City's housing projects under "on-site" redevelopment or "in-city" relocation programs.

QRT Website

To ensure that key project outputs can be publicly shared, the QRT has put up a website that serves as an online repository of all relevant activities carried out by QRT members. The website also contains stories of urban poor informal workers on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on their living and working conditions.

The website is still a work in progress and can be viewed here:

tinigmaralita.com

In Filipino, "tinig maralita" means "voice(s) of the poor." More videos, photos, and documents will be added to the site in the coming weeks.

Next Steps/Future Plans

In the next few weeks, the following activities will be undertaken to sustain the gains from the project implementation:

1. Convene QRT meetings to identify post-pandemic recovery strategies that focus on to the importance of civic space as well as the unequal vulnerabilities and opportunities of the urban poor. The pro-poor recovery agenda will also be shared with local and national candidates for the 2022 elections in the country, making it a key electoral issue;
2. Facilitate a dialogue between pedicab drivers and barangay officials to come up with clear-cut guidelines to: a) prevent arbitrary and violent confiscation of pedicabs and kariton; b) retrieve confiscated transport units; c) develop a plan for erecting pedicab terminals;
3. Conduct a series of meetings and human rights education with pedicab drivers in San Roque. This will be in partnership with the Commission on Human Rights;
4. Monitor the implementation of the “Christmas Moratorium” and act on any possible violation based on the document issued by the Quezon City government after a series of consultations with the MMVA;
5. Respond to increasing police/military visibility in San Roque, which has also been a major concern for the residents, especially those who belong to organizations that have been previously “redtagged” (branded as belonging to Communist armed groups in the Philippines). In some cases, the uniformed personnel conduct feeding programs, put up community kitchens, and launch livelihood projects targeting the members of progressive community associations in the area. There have been instances as well when uniformed personnel were present during some of the community consultations and workshops, intimidating residents who attended some of the activities initiated as part of this project. The QRT has agreed to document these practices and explore potential actions in the coming weeks;
6. Examine the lessons from the collaboration between grassroots networks and government agencies, how it has been undertaken under pandemic conditions, under what conditions they can succeed in the post-pandemic context, and what might hinder their ability to scale.