



TYPHOON OF LOVE

Upper Laguerta

In the Philippines, large numbers of people live in informal settlements in dangerous and often flood-prone areas of cities. Poverty and poor living conditions are a real problem in these areas, where thousands of people are squeezed into unplanned slums with very few basic services.

Coping after forced relocation: Artemio Duran, Upper Laguerta

Artemio Duran is president of his community in Upper Laguerta, on the outskirts of Cebu City, capital of Cebu province.

His community used to live in the city itself, but – unlike the slum communities of Baseco and Estero de San Miguel, which successfully opposed eviction (see Factsheet 1) – the community was cleared by the authorities and resettled in an upland area 7km from their former home 10 years ago. His old home might have been a slum with little in the way of basic services, but 72-year-old Artemio was close to his family and friends and, crucially, to his place of work. Its clearance eradicated the tight-knit community Artemio knew so well.

The new town was built on a hill, and with each new family that arrived, houses were built on higher and higher slopes. It is a 15-minute walk from the main road, along a dirt track, which is privately owned. For a number of years the residents of Upper Laguerta had no right to travel along the track, and had to scramble along the banks of a stream that flows down the hill.

The residents' first legal battle was to secure the right to use the track, a goal they achieved with the support of Christian Aid partner organisation, Fellowship for Organising Endeavours (FORGE), which helped them negotiate with the local authority and the owner of the land.



FORGE's work is similar to that of UPA (highlighted in Factsheet 1), helping citizens to engage with the political process and advising them on issues such as land tenure.

Lack of services

Other problems for Upper Laguerta residents included the lack of services. 'It was just a jungle,' says Artemio, describing the town's early days. 'We lived here like rats. We had to wash in the river. There was drinking water in a spring, but we had to walk a long way to carry it.'

Although the community was connected to mains water in 2010, the water is so expensive that few homes have a tap. It is actually cheaper to buy bottled water for drinking and washing: a gallon bottle costs 3.5 pesos (6p). The town was connected to mains electricity in 2014. Before that, people would connect illegally – a dangerous process that led to many people being electrocuted.

Unemployment

The lack of employment in the new settlement has also proved a significant challenge. Residents had to continue working in Cebu City. This involves a three-stage journey (via motorbike and two jeepneys) and travelling costs of 60 pesos (£1) per day – out of a wage of 150-300 pesos (£2.50-£5). While Upper Laguerta provides a better environment than the city slums, the lack of job opportunities means it is a much more expensive place to live.

Meanwhile, the community has had to deal with the regular landslides that have resulted from building on the steep slopes on the hill. Artemio explains that residents

have had disaster protection training, with FORGE's help, which has helped them greatly. 'We conduct landslide drills and disaster flooding training,' he explains. 'We have already demonstrated our effectiveness. On 8 May 2016 there was a fire which our emergency team managed to put out before the fire brigade arrived – we sounded the alarm, had a bucket relay. It has given us confidence that we can manage.'

Overcoming and preventing disasters in Mantuyong

At 1.35am on 12 March 2016, the residents of Mantuyong community woke to the sound of an alarm bell: fire was raging through their town. Some 500 homes were burned to the ground that night and more than 2,000 people were affected. Remarkably, no lives were lost, but the charred remains of what used to be a bustling town is now known as 'Ground Zero'.

Maria Elpe Balguero, known as Bebie, is a Mantuyong resident now living in a tent close to her former town. She is a member of the Women's Committee that provides leadership and support to the community, and with the help of FORGE, has helped residents rebuild their lives in temporary homes.

Bebie's life has not been easy. When she was six months pregnant, her husband died, leaving her as the sole carer of four children. As she was unable to provide for another child, her baby was adopted by a family member. These challenges have not stopped Bebie from forging a new life for herself, and her personal strength and determination have proved invaluable to her community.

Bebie was a member of the local Home Owners' Association, but the organisation could not get much done because the local council would not work with it, until FORGE intervened in negotiations. The council is now willing to partner with the association. 'FORGE helped us a lot,' says Bebie. 'They empower me.'

With FORGE's help, the Women and Children's Committee has set up a rice retail business, providing much-needed employment for local women. They produce *puso* (rice wrapped and boiled in a triangular casing made of woven coconut leaves), earning 4 pesos (6p) for every 100 they make.

However, living in tents remains a struggle. The government helped to resettle some 500 families temporarily on land surrounding a large conference centre. This is far from perfect: while electricity is available from 6pm-6am, it is very expensive, at 20 pesos (33p) a night, making it unaffordable for most people to heat their tents



Welsh Presbyterians Bethan and Cheryl with Bebie holding a copy of Merched y Wawr's magazine!



Local community president Artemio meets with his neighbours.

on cold nights. Days are very hot and many people who work night shifts choose to sleep in the open air rather than under canvas. In the rainy season life becomes very difficult indeed.

Disaster prevention

One crucial aspect of FORGE's work has been disaster reduction. Fire training is essential in communities where houses are close together and drills teach residents what to do when a fire breaks out. Before the devastating fire on 12 March, the community had successfully put out two other fires before serious damage was done. And although the third fire, which occurred at night, was devastating, drills did ensure people were led away to safety.

The training FORGE had provided to the community came to the fore in the aftermath of the fire, when they had to fight to access basic facilities.

The next stage for residents will be to see new homes built in their former town. Work has started, but it will be a long process, and ensuring their legal rights are recognised will be crucial.



The houses in Mantuyong village are close together, so fire can spread quickly.



Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for Christian Aid's partner, FORGE, and all the work it does for those who have been forcibly removed from the slums. We pray your blessing upon their training and advocacy work. Thank you that Artemio and Bebie have been exercising their gifts as community leaders because of FORGE's input.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.



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