

Philippines: From Barricades to Community Housing Plans, San Roque Still Standing

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After a decade of resistance to home evictions and demolitions, the Philippine community of San Roque has kept up its barriers against authorities and corporate developers. Residents have also added alternative housing plans to their defensive strategy, but will they hold?

On the morning of 23 September 2010, a 500-person demolition crew and 300 police officers armed with rifles, batons, truncheons, stun guns and tear gas surrounded the Metro Manila slum known as San Roque. Their mission was to clear out thousands of residents and demolish their homes so that the Philippine government could “[develop](#)” the land into a new Central Business District with high-end hotels, luxury condominiums and a golf course.

The residents of San Roque, however, had other plans. Thousands gathered at the entrance to the neighbourhood facing EDSA, the country’s busiest highway, and erected improvised barricades made from barbed wire, wooden poles and iron sheets normally used for roofing. Local activist leaders stood at the front of the crowd making speeches and chanting: “Fight demolitions! Housing is a right!”

“Some threw rocks and bottles to keep the demolition team away,” recalls Ilang-Ilang Quijano, a filmmaker who has documented the conflict between the San Roque residents and the authorities.

“To some, this might seem like ‘unnecessary violence’, but for me, it was more violent seeing the demolition team tear down homes with people still inside, including children,” she tells *New Naratif*.

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The authorities charged the barriers. The conflict see-sawed for hours before the locals gained the upper hand, hurling debris to drive the heavily armed assailants back. Eventually, the residents broke through the police lines and spilled out onto EDSA, paralysing traffic throughout the capital.

At 3 p.m., then-president Benigno Aquino III issued a moratorium on the demolitions—a temporary and partial victory for the residents. A hundred homes had already been destroyed, and 11 people were injured, five of them police. Slum-dwellers across the Philippines cheered on the victory of San Roque. Still, harsher days lay ahead.

Over the next 10 years, San Roque would brave two more police incursions bent on flattening their ramshackle homes and displacing thousands of families. Each time, the community’s makeshift barricades would hold up just long enough to forestall a total demolition, eventually forcing the government and its business partners to shift to subtler, more insidious tactics. But just as the people of San Roque met violence with violence, they are now mounting a renewed offensive on the battlefield of law and policy.

A Vicious Cycle

Situated in the heart of Quezon City, between two of Metro Manila's busiest highways, San Roque stands out as an unusually intact informal settlement besieged by billboards, skyscrapers and shopping malls. The state-owned plot was originally occupied in the mid-1980s by 25 families who built homes, opened small businesses and planted gardens atop what was previously a grassy field.

The community peaked at around [20,000 people](#)—mainly landless tenant farmers who migrated from remote rural areas to find better opportunities in the city. But it was only a matter of time before real estate developers tried to get their hands on the 29-hectare property at the heart of the Philippines' congested capital.

In 2009, Quezon City Hall announced [plans](#) to develop a new Central Business District (CBD) in San Roque with a PHP 22 billion (US\$458 million) investment from a [joint venture](#) between Ayala Land—a property developer owned by a clan of Filipino oligarchs that rose during the Spanish colonial period—and the National Housing Authority (NHA), the government agency that owns the land.

Mass displacements like the one facing San Roque are one part of a vicious cycle of displacement by capital.

According to Quezon City's [Land Use Plan](#), the CBD would “create a globally competitive destination for information communication technology outsourcing and health and wellness tourism”. The developers declared the San Roque slum as a “non-performing asset”, despite the fact that it houses thousands of people who live in the city and who serve as an essential source of labour.

“Quezon City has been aggressively promoting itself as the richest and most business-friendly city in the country, which has been transferred onto its transforming built environments,” says Andre Ortega, a professor of geography at Syracuse University. “Pockets of new commercial districts have been built, with public lands being converted into commercial complexes.”

As part of the redevelopment plan, the NHA offered new housing to displaced residents, but it would be outside the capital and only available to homeowners—not renters.

Ricky Indicio, a former pastor who owns a vegetable stand in San Roque's cramped community market, has become one of the most vocal opponents of relocation. As leader of the San Roque Vendors Association, he spends most afternoons delivering speeches through a sound system rigged to the roof of his makeshift plywood home, lamenting the perils that await his neighbours should they be relocated.

“We've been brought to several of the offered resettlement sites. All of them are the same,” Indicio says. “It's not that the houses are small—we are used to living in small spaces. But there is no water, no electricity, some don't even have doors. The quality of the cement is questionable, and, more importantly, they are usually in the middle of nowhere. How are we supposed to live somewhere detached from civilisation?”

Throughout the years, Ayala Land has offered sums ranging from PHP 30,000 (US\$620) to PHP 100,000 (US\$2,080) to each family in San Roque to voluntarily tear down their homes and vacate the area. Other families have abandoned their plots after [receiving threats](#) from private security hired by the corporation, urban poor advocates say. The locals call this strategy “self-demolition”—an attempt to pick off residents one at a time.

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the ground for a moment, but the adrenaline was too intense.

Most San Roque residents have resisted these buyouts, according to the urban poor advocacy group Kadamay. The few families who have accepted them have not even received half of what they were promised.

Vincent Eugenio, a researcher at the independent think tank Urban Forum, says cash offers from property developers are less of a helping hand and more of a diversionary tactic.

“The provision of financial assistance is sometimes interpreted as a substitute or an alternative to the provision of actual relocation and other services,” Eugenio says. “In most cases, it is carried out by proponents not as a built-in component of a more sustainable relocation plan but as an attempt to forestall early opposition to the project and disrupt community organising.”

Ortega, the geography professor, says the Central Business District and its methods of displacement illustrate precisely what is wrong with the Philippines’ “neoliberal articulation of contemporary urban development”, which puts profit before people.

Mass displacements like the one facing San Roque are one part of a vicious cycle of displacement by capital. In this cycle, land monopolies in the countryside force tenant farmers out of rural areas and into urban peripheries to live in makeshift settlements. When these properties are noticed and assigned greater economic value by technocrats and real estate developers, they become targets for demolition. People’s homes are then demolished, and the displaced are brought to public housing sites in remote areas chosen by the state. At these sites, the displaced are charged amortisation by the NHA. When they cannot pay, they are tossed into the streets.

The motivation for each displacement in the cycle is that there is a profit to be made by removing the poor from their homes.

Memories of a Barricade

Years of legal battles followed the 2010 clash, but demolition operations resumed in January 2014. Seven hundred heavily armed police tore down 500 homes, leaving their inhabitants homeless. A 65-year-old man named Resty Torres [died](#) from an asthma attack after inhaling tear gas, and Mary Rose Reyes had a miscarriage of twins. Eleven activists and two minors were arrested and beaten. Another 11 children sustained minor injuries and scratches, and 167 children became ill from the gas attack.

“It was the first time I was electrocuted. The police carried stun guns. It made me fall to the ground for a moment, but the adrenaline was too intense,” recalls Estrelieta “Inday” Bagasbas, 66, a longtime leader of Kadamay.

In 2015, the residents learned that the business district triumvirate—City Hall, the NHA and Ayala Land—had made a deal with Bloomberry Resorts to add a resort and casino to the development plan. The casino, known as Solaire North, is now slated to go up on the EDSA side of San Roque, where the barricades were first set up.

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In June 2019, around 700 families who lived along the EDSA were targeted for eviction to make way for the casino’s construction. On the day of the planned eviction, residents managed to swiftly construct a barricade, limiting the number of houses ultimately torn down.

Outright evictions have since become rare. Instead, Bloomberry has sought to play good cop, showering residents with gifts and hosting raffle programmes to sanitise its efforts to displace hundreds of urban poor.

With the developers turning away from direct confrontations that threaten to tarnish the image of the Central Business District, residents and activists have had to devise new methods of resistance.

“We will always use barricades as a tactic of last resort and of mobilising the residents,” Inday says. “But we had to create newer and broader forms of struggle. We started to look at other arenas where we can get our message across.”

The Community Development Plan

San Roque is not the first community in the Philippines to successfully fend off the cops, but its struggle against evictions has been one of the most protracted and most visible, inspiring many of the [1.5 million informal settler families](#) facing eviction throughout the Philippines.

In the two years following San Roque’s first mounting of barricades against the police, informal settlers clashed with authorities at [BIR Road](#) in Quezon City, [Silverio Compound](#) in [Paranaque City](#), Corazon de Jesus village in San Juan City, the [Guatemala Compound](#) in Makati City, and two other areas coincidentally also named San Roque in the cities of [Tarlac](#) and [Navotas](#).

These clashes varied in their effectiveness, prompting anti-eviction activists to ask themselves new questions: How could they take the fight to the state? How could they cross the bridge from defending a community to claiming it?

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In 2013, a group of academics, architects and other sympathetic professionals formed the Save San Roque Alliance to begin answering these questions. Its flagship action has been the crafting of the Community Development Plan (CDP)—an alternative development strategy for San Roque that does not rely on displacement.

“The idea came from the desire of the community to stay put,” says John Marvi Atienza, an architect and Save San Roque’s lead convener. “Because the government lacks a decent shelter program for the poor, the CDP is a counterproposal for mass-oriented, affordable and on-site housing.”

Save San Roque held a series of consultations with the residents of San Roque to ascertain their views on what form the slum’s development should take. Equipped with these views, Save San Roque formulated a plan to develop decent housing that prioritises “on-site development” instead of relocation.

The term comes from an often-ignored clause in the Philippines’ [Urban Development and Housing Act](#), which states: “Where on-site development is found more practicable and advantageous to the beneficiaries, the priorities mentioned in this section [evictions] shall not apply. The local government units shall give budgetary priority to on-site development of government lands.”

In other words, residents of a site targeted for redevelopment should primarily be housed at that same location and must only be evicted when this is impossible.

The CDP posits that the business district can coexist with San Roque’s current residents if the

government ceases demolitions and provides low-cost mass housing and basic social services such as education and healthcare in the same area.

In December 2019, Atienza and other community leaders showcased designs to the office of Quezon City mayor Joy Belmonte. The plan proposes medium-rise buildings with 120 units each, marketplaces, health centres and schools all in one place without infringing on any intended commercial endeavours.

Save San Roque has yet to receive a definitive response from the mayor, who has only pledged to look into whether the NHA and Ayala Land are in compliance with the Housing Act, and to find a “[win-win situation](#)” to the quandary.

Jojo Conejero, the acting assistant head of Quezon City’s Housing, Community Development and Resettlement Department, tells *New Naratif* that should the NHA apply for a renewal of its Certificate of Compliance, a document required for large-scale demolition operations, the agency would have to address the CDP. Conejero adds that his office will make sure San Roque’s residents are heard before any certificate is issued.

Still, consideration of the CDP is a far cry from implementing it, and in the meantime, the NHA and its business partners are free to continue pressuring San Roque residents into “self-demolitions”.

“[The CDP] is not a miracle solution to homelessness and housing, but we are looking at a change in mindset that puts social services like housing at a premium,” says Atienza.

Other activists point out that while on-site development represents the ideal alternative to evictions and demolitions, it may not suit every community facing these threats.

“Other communities would like nothing more than to pursue this, but in reality, on-site can be tricky,” says Carmen Cullado, head of the Quezon City Urban Poor Coordinating Council, an advocacy group.

“First off, not all communities still have the space for it. Some areas have already been cornered by too much new infrastructure—there’s barely a ‘site’ to speak of,” she says. “The CDP can and should be flexible.”

Against the Odds

Private interests continue to gnaw at the edges of San Roque. Construction on the Solaire North casino began in 2019. Where homes used to be, only concrete and plywood ruins remain, surrounded by fences and illuminated by floodlights. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, negotiations between the community and the authorities have been at a standstill.

With the future of the Community Development Plan uncertain, a growing number of residents have accepted the offer of relocation and taken jobs building the casino. This further complicates the struggle to stay put. If the CDP is enacted, those construction workers would lose their jobs.

The family of Reylin Adral faces this paradox. Her home was torn down in August 2020. Sitting in a temporary shelter made of corrugated iron roofing sheets, she recalls the time a guard employed by Ayala Land slapped her 8-year-old son while he was playing outside. She says she would have every reason to oppose the development and see the CDP come to fruition, if not for the pandemic. Now, however, she has no choice but to move to the relocation site outside Manila with her children while her husband stays in San Roque to work.

“Better to accept the relocation and the cash incentive than my husband losing his job and us losing a home,” she tells *New Naratif*.

Save San Roque’s Atienza, however, believes the CDP has a chance of succeeding if other informal settlements push for it. This would effectively cancel the demolition plans.

“It would be amazing if more communities popularised the CDP to register the plight of the urban poor,” he says. “It shows how neoliberal doctrines are not the solution. It shows that the people can decide for themselves.”

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