

Living on Water: The SANAGMANA Challenge

An urban planner examines the viability of housing on stilts as a resettlement option for an urban poor community in Navotas

BY ELOISA M. PILAPIL



Informal settlers in Navotas face a long journey in their quest for acquiring their own piece of land within the city.

The Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Maralita ng Navotas (SANAGMANA) is a federation of a community of informal settlers who live in the coastal and flood-prone municipality of Navotas located along Manila Bay. SANAGMANA is comprised of four subgroups: Sitio Mandaragat, Kapit-Bisig San Nazareno R-10, Sipac Almacen, and Little Samar.

A number of SANAGMANA households, especially those coming from Sitio Mandaragat, were relocated to Towerville, Bulacan in 2004 because their housing sites were affected by the ongoing CAMANAVA (Caloocan, Malabon, Navotas and Valenzuela) Area Flood Control and Drainage System Improvement project, the construction of a polder dike and road widening projects of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH). But some communities refused to relocate to Bulacan and instead looked for an alternative site within Navotas. In 2005, with the help of Community Organizing in the Philippines Enterprise (COPE), the Urban Poor Ministry (UPM), a Catholic church-based organization, technical professionals from TAO-Pilipinas, Planning Resources and Operations Systems (PROS), AMH Engineers, and SEASTEMS (an environmental impact assessment group), they sought the attention of the Housing and Urban Development Council (HUDCC) about their plight.



ON TROUBLED WATERS. The CAMANAVA Area Flood Control project threatens to displace the informal settlers living along the Navotas River.

Housing on Stilts

The technical professionals involved in the project proposed housing on stilts (HOS) on water as a possible solution. HOS is an alternative scheme of housing the urban poor or informal settlers (such as the members of SANAGMANA) who live along coastal areas, riverbanks and waterways particularly within cities. Although these areas are considered danger zones, mitigating measures and proper planning intervention can ensure the safety of HOS settlements.

HOS on water is envisioned as a relocation site integrated with marine-based livelihood on unproductive fish farms, coasts and areas prone to flooding. It is designed as a planned community equipped with the features of land-based communities, such as composting and wastewater treatment, paths, and open spaces. In the case of the planned HOS for SANAGMANA, maintaining the present flow of water from the site—which is a fishpond—to Manila Bay is a prime consideration.

What specific problems and prospects confront SANAGMANA in realizing this housing dream? There are many problems but also bright prospects, as well. Below are two of the more significant problems.

Problems

First, the existing government framework does not consider the development of settlements on water as an option. Existing government measures to relocate informal settlers especially in cities are replete with problems and failures, particularly on the provision of security of tenure. What more with such a scheme such as HOS on water, where policies and laws related to housing and settlements on marshy lands, riverbanks or seashores are few, unclear, if not non-existent. A pilot experiment on the current HOS initiative can convince policymakers of the



Geodetic engineers and SANAGMANA officers survey their planned resettlement area, a one-hectare reclaimed marine fishpond in Tanza, Navotas.

value of incorporating housing on water into Philippine policies and laws. Without a policy framework, housing on water will remain illegal, and we will lose an important opportunity to provide a more sustainable solution to problems confronting our water-based or coastal communities.

Second is the problem of funding. Based on the SANAGMANA socio-economic profile, the reported incomes of the households indicate that 28.5% (National Statistical Coordination Board standard) are below the poverty threshold. If the IBON (an independent research think tank) facts and figures on daily cost of living were followed, a much larger 78% fall below the poverty threshold. Households also reported no savings with high expense for extras. These reflect their poverty status. Therefore the affordability of the proposed housing scheme is crucial. With the present government schemes for housing the poor, SANAGMANA will not stand a chance at housing, much less an HOS on water scheme. SANAGMANA can avail of a Community Mortgage Program (CMP) from the government to get financial assistance. But CMP at present is a facility extended only for housing on land. A

strong community organization assisted by non-government organizations and the private sector would be important in harnessing community efforts to successfully avail of the CMP.

Prospects

HOS as a housing scheme for SANAGMANA is a challenge both to the community organization and those planning the HOS. While the technology is available, the priority of the urban poor is clearly their social needs. Can they afford it? What schemes are there to help them in the problem of affordability? How do we address the problem of security of tenure? The importance of professional planning intervention is beyond doubt. It can become a meaningful tool in systematizing knowledge for the urban poor's understanding of the housing process. Key to this is a multi-disciplinary team of planners familiar with community organizing and imbued with commitment and patience in building consensus. Accommodating populations in a sensitive environment such as coastal areas is a radical option. But with proper planning, adequate social preparation, the support and cooperation of government, local government, non-

government organizations, the church and the private sector, this choice is possible. ■

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Update on the SANAGMANA HOS Project

The HOS pilot project was originally planned over a four-hectare marine fishpond in Bgy. Tanza, Navotas. But this did not push through because the landowner demanded for a lump sum payment, which was not an affordable option for the beneficiaries. Also, the promised P30M support from the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) was not released.

But SANAGMANA has moved on with its own self-help housing project on a smaller piece of land (one hectare) near the original site. Since the site is a reclaimed marine fishpond, the use of stilts is still strongly recommended. TAO-Pilipinas, PROS, AMH Engineers, SEASTEMS and JAD Infinite Surveying are assisting SANAGMANA in the preparation of new technical documents.—Edra Belga