



# Miraculous Hills Subdivision

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • FEB 2021

**This is the story of an extraordinary housing project that was imagined and made real by some of Metro Manila's poorest citizens - the women, men and children who earn their living by collecting, sorting and selling recyclable waste. They were living in squatter settlements around the mountainous Payatas garbage dump, where they faced the constant threat of eviction. Against great odds, they saved together, formed a homeowners association, bought a piece of inexpensive, undeveloped land in a neighboring city and are gradually developing it and building new houses and new lives for themselves there.**

- Project      Miraculous Hills Subdivision
- Location    Rodriguez, Metro Manila, Philippines
- Size          315 households
- Finished    Still ongoing in 2021
- Type          Relocation of a group of waste-pickers from squatter settlements to land they purchased collectively, where they planned a new subdivision and are building their own self-help houses, in phases.

## CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

### The scavengers of Payatas

Metro Manila, which comprises 16 cities and has a population of about 15 million, is the Philippines' capital and megacity. For nearly half a century, most of the city's garbage was trucked to the mountainous garbage dump in Barangay Payatas, in Metro Manila's northwest corner. In the 1970s, Marcos used the same area as a relocation site for people evicted from other parts of the city, and when he was deposed in 1986, the area swelled with new squatters. Payatas is now one of Manila's largest and most densely-packed squatter settlements, covering some three thousand hectares of land.

Until it was finally closed in 2019, the garbage dump was something of a dark angel in the settlement. The disease, pollution and physical danger that the dump brought made Payatas one of the most hazardous places in Manila to live. But for the 30,000 women, men and children who survived by gathering, sorting and selling its recyclable waste, the dump was an economic blessing. In 1993, those families organized themselves into the Payatas Scavenger's Association, and with support from a Vincentian parish priest, Norberto Carcellar (or "Father Bebot" as he was affectionately known), began working on many fronts to create collective, holistic solutions to problems they faced, and to build more secure, safe and healthy lives, jobs and communities.

They began running a daily saving program, which quickly grew to include hundreds of savings groups, with over 7,000 members, including a special savings scheme for the children who work on the dump. Loans from their collective savings funds were small, but they allowed the scavengers to address daily household needs, and to finance small recycling and vending businesses, boost their incomes, break their reliance on money-lenders and develop the collective financial and organizational capacity they would need later on, for their own housing projects. The savings program had several off-shoot programs, like a center for working children (with showers, first-aid and free meals) and a day-care center run by mothers who work on the garbage dump.

The savings program in Payatas quickly spread to other cities around Metro Manila and around the country, through exchanges, gatherings and savings orientations - with support from Father Bebot and the network of Vincentian parishes around the Philippines. In 1995, these far-flung savings groups decided to join together and launched the Homeless People's Federation Philippines, whose first national assembly was held in Payatas a few years later. There are now federation-linked savings groups in 20 cities around the country.

In a 1997 exchange trip to India organized by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Father Bebot brought a team of women and men from Payatas to visit Mahila Milan savings collectives in Mumbai, India, where they saw with their own eyes how much could be accomplished by extremely poor women who live in slums on the city's sidewalks. One of the ideas the Payatas scavengers brought back was that savings could be much more than a convenient source of small loans, but a central element in a process of building a people's organization to tackle many problems - particularly the need for secure land and housing.

All the waste-pickers in Payatas were squatting on someone else's land, and the threat of eviction was constant. So when they got back from India, the Scavengers Association launched a special land and housing savings scheme, determined to purchase some land for themselves and end the vicious cycle of eviction and relocation. After formally registering themselves as the *Ang Payatas Scavengers' Home Owners' Association, Inc.*, they set up a special land acquisition team to begin looking for potential housing sites around Payatas.

### The new housing project:

In 1998, the land acquisition team found a beautiful hillside site in the neighboring city of Rodriguez, as a possible location for their new community. The 3-hectare site, in Barangay San Isidro, was 17 kilometers east of Payatas, and in an area which was still fairly undeveloped - and therefore more affordable. After determining that the owner was willing to sell, they managed to bargain her down to an unheard-of 150 pesos per square meter, or 4.5 million pesos (US\$ 105,000) for the whole lot. The owner wanted to be paid in cash, though, and that was a problem for the scavengers association, which by then had only 450,000 pesos (US\$ 10,500) in savings. Help was on hand, though. First, another federation-linked homeowners association in the city of Iloilo, Kabalaka, offered a loan of 150,000 pesos (US\$ 3,500) from their own housing savings. Then another priest, Father Anton, arranged for a 3.9 million peso (US\$ 90,700) loan from Caritas. When the purchase was finally complete, the scavengers association decided to name their new housing subdivision *Miraculous Hills*. With help from a local engineer, the people developed a subdivision plan, to submit to the local government in order to get permission to develop their new site. But before any project approvals could be given, a terrible thing happened.

### Garbage slide tragedy:

On the morning of July 10, 2000, after a night of heavy rain, part of the garbage dump collapsed, burying hundreds of scavengers who were living and working near the dump. Despite rescue efforts, the death toll climbed to 250, and included dozens of members of the Scavengers Association. Besides the loss of life, many families lost materials they had been collecting to use for the construction of their new houses in Miraculous Hills. For a short while, the tragedy put Payatas in the center of a storm of sympathy, assistance and media attention. But when the storm withdrew, the community was hit with the news that 2,000 families were to be evicted from their homes in the “danger zone” encircling the dump.

The intrepid Scavengers Association, however, lost no time in taking steps to help those whose lives had been turned upside-down by the garbage slide. They set up twelve feeding centers where 3,000 children got free meals each day; they worked with survivors of trash-slide victims to get member savings to next of kin; they supported families staying in evacuation centers with food, cooking fuel and loans; they set up new savings groups among families evicted from the “danger zone”; and they opened up a dialogue about long-term solutions to the Payatas tragedy with the local and national government. In August 2000, they presented their ideas in a model house exhibition at Payatas.

Most of those who had planned to relocate to Miraculous Hills relied on their work on the dump for their income. But because of the garbage slide and subsequent evictions, many had no choice but to move out to the new land right away. The good news was that the disaster prompted the local government to speed up the building permits process and to help provide an electricity connection and some deep wells, which would allow people to stay there while the houses were being built. In 2001, the first 28 row houses were built to accommodate survivors of the garbage slide in Payatas. Gradually, other members built houses on the site - some with help from community architects and some on their own. By 2021, though, there were still only 70 families staying in Miraculous Hills, and many empty lots.

### Why have so few members of the home owners association moved to the new land?

One reason is that the families haven't been able to afford to construct their new houses yet, especially as they repaid their land loans. The lack of safe drinking water and electricity connections also remains an obstacle. Another problem is that Miraculous Hills is quite far from Payatas and work opportunities in the city center. To get from Miraculous Hills to Payatas - a trip of 17.3 kilometers - takes at least an hour and requires one tricycle ride (40 pesos) and one jeepney ride (16 pesos). The round trip costs 112 pesos (US\$ 2.60), which is about a quarter of what a scavenger or construction laborer makes in a day. Because the area around Miraculous Hills is still relatively undeveloped, there are few opportunities to get work nearby. All these issues have been so serious that most of the original members have been unable to occupy their lots, and some have had to sell them back to the homeowners association.

## SUPPORT GROUPS AND PARTNERS IN THE PROJECT

**NOTE:** In many parts of the world, “Inc.” after a name means that the organization is a for-profit business or a corporation. But in the Philippines, registering with the Securities and Exchange Commission and getting an “Inc.” after your name is the only way for community organizations, homeowners associations, NGOs and other non-profit entities to obtain the formal status that allows them to legally open bank accounts, receive funds, own land and interact with the formal system in various ways.

**Homeless People’s Federation Philippines, Inc. (HPFPI)** is a national network of urban poor communities that was established in 1995 within the communities of scavengers who live around the Payatas garbage dump. The federation is now active in 20 cities and uses community-managed savings as the core strategy of a community-led development process which includes land acquisition, community upgrading, house construction, disaster management and partnership with government.

**Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives, Inc. (PACSI)** is the Homeless People's Federation's NGO support partner, based in Quezon City.

**Technical Assistance Movement for People and Environment, Inc. (TAMPEI)**, set up in 2010, is the federation's technical support partner of community architects and engineers. TAMPEI uses participatory mapping, planning and design techniques to help communities develop their housing and upgrading projects.

**Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation, Inc. (VMSDFI)**, under the leadership of the late Father Norberto Carcellar, has been a close supporter of the Payatas Scavengers Association and later the Homeless People's federation in the Philippines.

**Community-Led Infrastructure Finance Facility (CLIFF)** is a UK based agency which supports the development of self-reliant housing projects in slum areas in Asia and Africa, with various kinds of financing assistance. Cliff partnered with PACSII to provide housing loans to construct 19 of the houses in Miraculous Hills, as well as some of the infrastructure improvements.

**Caritas Manila** is a non-profit organization that serves as the lead social service and development ministry of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Caritas provided loans to help purchase the Miraculous Hills land and to develop some of the basic infrastructure.

**Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)** is a regional coalition of community organizations, NGOs and housing professionals around Asia supporting community-led housing. ACHR has partnered with the Homeless People's Federation and other groups to strengthen the processes of people-driven housing in the Philippines, through the exchange of knowledge and experiences, both within the country and with other countries in the Asia region.

**Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) Program (2009-2015)** was a 5-year program of ACHR that supported a process of citywide and community-driven slum upgrading in 215 Asian cities, in 19 Asian countries. The HPFPI used a small project grant from ACCA to build a paved walkway in Miraculous Hills.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

### Land tenure:

The land at Miraculous Hills is owned collectively by the members of the Ang Payatas Scavengers Home Owners Association, Inc. To buy land together, as a community, people needed to have a legal status which their informal savings groups didn't give them. In the Philippines, a group of people who already have land or are in the process of buying it can get that legal status by registering themselves as a Home Owners Association (HOA) with the government's Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board. Once a group becomes a registered HOA, they have to follow certain government rules and procedures, like submitting regular financial reports and electing a president, a vice president, a treasurer and officers to head committees on finance, environment, land and housing, education, grievance, peace and order, social, livelihood, and youth. All members of the Payatas Scavengers Homeowners Association, Inc. are entitled to a lot in the community. There is scope for the land to be broken up into individual plots, with separate land title for each plot, once the land loan is repaid. But most residents are happy with the collective land ownership by their HOA, which has some clear advantages (like lower taxes, keeping the lots affordable, and keeping market forces at bay) and is now considering a resolution to ensure the communal ownership will continue into the next generation.

### Government support:

After the garbage slide tragedy in 2000, when the plight of the Payatas scavengers was still very much in the public eye, the country's then-president, Joseph Estrada, provided a grant of 3 million pesos (US\$ 69,767) from the Presidential Social Fund, for developing some basic services at Miraculous Hills. The garbage slide also helped loosen the bureaucratic stiffness of the local government, which waived some of the development and building permits and allowed the scavengers to start building their new houses right away. The mayor of Rodriguez at that time, Cecilio Hernandez, had close ties to Barangay San Isidro, where the Miraculous Hills project was being built, and he became an important ally, until he left office in 2019. When the CLIFF-financed houses were being planned, for example, Mayor Hernandez waived the requirement for building and development permits, which often delay projects for years. The community has maintained close ties with the barangay administration, and has collaborated with barangay authorities to channel government aid and information to those most in need during the Covid-19 crisis.

## PROJECT FINANCING

### Project costs and who paid for what:

#### 1. Land costs:

The people collectively bought the 3-hectare land in Rodriguez in cash, from a private landowner, for 4.5 million pesos (US\$ 140,625), which was financed by:



- **Member savings:** 450,000 pesos (US\$ 10,465)
- **Loan from Kabalaka HOA:** 150,000 pesos (US\$ 3,488), at no interest. Repaid in full by 1999.
- **Loan from Caritas Manila:** 3.9 million pesos (US\$ 90,698), at 9% annual interest. The land loan repayments worked out to about 300 pesos (US\$ 7) per month per member. After the garbage slide tragedy in 2000, Caritas waived the interest on the loan. By Feb 2020, the loan was repaid in full. As a guarantee, they kept the title until all debts to Caritas were paid off.
- **Selling lots to outsiders:** When the savings and loans weren't quite enough, the members opened up 40 of the lots to sell to anyone who could pay in cash. That allowed them to complete the payment.

## 2. House construction costs:

- **Phase 1 (28 rowhouses)** The two-story rowhouses cost about 85,700 pesos (US\$ 1,995) each x 28 houses = 2.09 million pesos (US\$ 55,815). This was financed by a group loan from VMSDFI for 2.4 million pesos (US\$ ), given at 1.5% interest, repayable in 11 years.
- **Phase 2 (19 houses)** These two-story houses cost about 110,000 pesos (US\$ 2,558) each x 19 houses = 1.9 million pesos (US\$ 48,605), which was partly financed by a 1.9 million peso (US\$ 44,186) loan from CLIFF, at 9%, repayable in 11 years. The CLIFF loan repayments worked out to 1,200 pesos (US\$ 28) per month per family, and those repayments revolved through the Homeless People's Federation's national fund, to other housing projects. The CLIFF loan covered only the cost of building materials. Each family provided the construction labor and pitched in additional funds from their own savings of about 10,000 pesos (US\$ 233) per family, to complete their houses.

## 3. Infrastructure costs:

- **Site development and subdivision plan:** 100,000 pesos (US\$ 2,326) loan from Caritas (which is still being repaid) + 3 million pesos (US\$ 69,767) as a grant from the Presidential Social Fund.
- **Roads, drainage and retaining walls:** 1.3 million pesos (US\$ 30,233) as a loan from CLIFF + 1.9 million pesos (US\$ 44,186) as a loan from the Homeless People's Federation.
- **Rainwater harvesting system:** 232,200 pesos (US\$ 5,400) paid for by a grant from UN-ESCAP, as part of the "Eco Settlement" planning project it implemented with Miraculous Hills in 2011
- **Paved walkway:** The community built a paved walkway that connects 40 of the houses, financed by a loan of 100,000 pesos (US\$ 2,326) from ACHR's ACCA program, through the Homeless People's Federation. Each of the 40 households contributes 2,950 pesos (US\$ 69) to repaying the loan, which revolves within the Homeless People's Federation's national fund.

# DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

## Subdivision plan:

The development of the subdivision plan for the new hillside land is a story in itself. One of the requirements to get permission to build on a site is the approval of a subdivision plan by the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB). As soon as the purchase of the new land was complete, the group hired a local engineer to survey the land and draft the layout plan. This first plan followed the natural contours of the hilly site, to reduce costly cutting and filling of land, and included 240 house lots. But when it came out that the first engineer didn't have a license, they had to start all over again. A second engineer, who was properly licensed, was then hired by Caritas to redraft the plan, with smaller and more numerous lots, to make room for more members and reduce the per-family land loan repayments. But this second plan also had problems. During an "Eco-Settlement" planning program at Miraculous Hills in 2010, the second subdivision plan (with 325 lots now) underwent a "Geohazard Site Assessment", which determined that ten of the lots were on hazardous terrain and couldn't be built on. The federation hired a third engineer to redraft the plan, but then he died before finishing the job, and the fourth engineer turned out to be another without a proper license.

The current subdivision plan, with 315 lots, has not yet been submitted to HLURB, so the project does not yet technically have permission to build. At the same time, there have been problems of neighbors trying to encroach on the undeveloped edges of the Miraculous Hills site. To contest these encroachments, the people need to produce a recent land survey by a licensed geodetic engineer, which means more trouble and expense. These problems remain unresolved. The people at Miraculous Hills are not the only ones experiencing such technical problems with the community planning process. Other communities in the Homeless People's Federation have also seen their housing projects delayed by years - even decades - because of similar problems. That's partly why the federation set up TAMPEI in 2010, to fill the constant need by communities for technical assistance.

### House design and construction process:

By January 2021, 70 houses had been built in Miraculous Hills, designed and built in three phases:

#### **PHASE 1: 28 rowhouses (2001 - 2003)**

These first houses were built by survivors of the garbage slide tragedy who had lost everything and were also facing eviction, so it was important they be as low-cost and as quick to build as possible. With help from a local engineer, the Scavengers Association developed a simple two-story row-"core house" model, with shared walls and interconnecting tie beams that allowed the houses to be built on a sloping site. One inspiration for the row house design was the Mahila Milan rowhouse designs they had seen in Mumbai. Since the people would be building and paying for the houses themselves, with minimal technical assistance, they opted for the simplest and least expensive building materials and techniques: reinforced concrete frames, hollow block walls, galvanized iron roofing sheets and walls left unfinished for members to plaster later. Many scavenger families had been collecting recycled building materials (like timber, windows, doors, blocks and roofing sheets) salvaged from the dumpsite, for use in their new houses, but many of those stocks were buried in the garbage slide.

Noli Pacquiao, one of the original members of the Scavengers Home Owners Association and its current president, supervised the construction of these first 28 rowhouses. He assigned a team of foremen from the community, with some construction experience, to look after the construction, with one foreman assigned to four houses. The people bought all the materials together, in bulk, to save money, and all the construction labor was provided by the members themselves. No engineers or contractors were involved in this proudly 100% community-driven housing project.

#### **PHASE 2: 19 individual houses (2012 - 2013)**

A second batch of 19 houses was designed and built later on, when loans from the CLIFF Program were made available to the federation. By 2010, the federation's technical partner organization, TAMPEI, had been set up, and a team of young community architects and engineers worked with those 19 families to analyze and clear their individual lots, and then organized a series of participatory housing design workshops. The families were invited to draw their dream houses, and then go through a process of translating those ideas into a realistic house design, which could fit on their lot and be built with the limited materials the CLIFF loan would provide. Although everyone finally agreed to a two-story house design, the model was adjusted slightly, to respond to different family needs and topographical conditions on the lots, which were all different. Like the first set of rowhouses, these were all designed to be as cheap as possible, using simple, inexpensive and locally-available building materials.

Because the funds from the CLIFF loan were in hand, the project the construction proceeded quickly. All 19 houses were built in a little over a month - not including digging for the foundations. Three community architects provided technical support throughout the project. A committee was set up to oversee the construction process and manage the procurement, storing and allotting of building materials. Members surveyed different suppliers in the area to find the best deals on various construction materials, which they collectively purchased in bulk, often at wholesale prices. A *bodegera* (warehouse attendant) took inventory every day of the materials being brought in and out of the storage shed on the site. This community-led management process was patterned after another of the federation's housing projects, at Kabalaka, in the city of Iloilo. Because a condition of the CLIFF loan was that it be used only for materials, the families had to provide all the labor to build their new houses, and the building was overseen by a team of foremen from the community.

#### **PHASE 3: Self-built houses (2005 - 2021)**

The other 23 houses on the site have been built by members on their own plots, using their own savings and whatever loans they have been able to muster individually. But several of them have built the same two-story house model, and several have been assisted in their housing planning by the community architects at TAMPEI.

### **COMMUNITY PROCESS**

It became clear early on that many of the Miraculous Hills members would have difficulty surviving at the new community - even those who had already built houses there. The earning possibilities in the new area were too few, the commute to Payatas was too long and costly, and the burden of their land and housing loan repayments was too heavy, compared to their very low daily earnings.

Of the 200 Scavengers Association members who originally joined the housing savings scheme, 50 decided to become part of the Miraculous Hills relocation project. Those 50 "pioneer" families are still members of

the home owners association, but only five are actually staying on the new site. The rest are still living in squatter settlements in Payatas, and many are having difficulties repaying their share of the land loan, which entitles them to their lot in the project. In January 2021, the home owners association carried out an inventory of all 315 lots, to understand the overall situation and to discuss the status of members who are having trouble paying for or occupying their lots. The inventory revealed that of the total 315 lots in Miraculous Hills, 70 were actually occupied, another 80 were owned by "pioneer" or new members but not yet occupied, and 165 lots were still available to be sold to new members. The community leaders are very keen to get more families living on the site - not just to populate their community but to take advantage of a policy of the Meralco Electric Company which will bear the cost of bringing municipal electricity to the project only when 75% of the lots are occupied.

With the understanding that some existing members of the community might decide to sell their lots and leave the project, and other open lots have to be sold to new members, the home owners association has worked out procedures for this buying and selling of lots in Miraculous Hills. When an existing member wants to leave, the home owners association (HOA) buys back the lot at the same rate as when the land was originally purchased in 1998, at 150 pesos (US\$ 3.50) per square meter. Then, when the HOA sells the lot to a new member family, they sell it at a slightly higher rate. That margin then goes back to the HOA's common fund for various site development, common infrastructure and community projects, managed by HOA leadership. Until 2003, the HOA sold lots to new members at 350 pesos (US\$ 8) per m<sup>2</sup>, and then until 2005 at 500 pesos (US\$ 12) per m<sup>2</sup>. The current selling rate is 600 pesos (US\$ 14) per m<sup>2</sup>, which works out to about 30,000 pesos (US\$ 698) for a 50m<sup>2</sup> lot. Once the community has municipal electricity, they plan to raise the selling rate to 1,000 pesos (US\$ 23) per m<sup>2</sup>, or 50,000 pesos (US\$ 1,163) for a lot. That 1,000 peso/m<sup>2</sup> rate may sound high, compared to the original land price, but it is about a third of the market rate for lots in neighboring subdivisions and is still affordable to most urban poor families. All new members who buy lots must meet the community's criteria: they should be landless, should be living in dangerous or high-risk areas, and should be ready to join the community savings program and take active part in community activities.

#### Project timeline:

- **1970s:** garbage dump at Payatas opens, squatters flock there, also Marcos evictees
- **1991:** Fr. Bebot comes to Payatas Parish, VMSDFI starts work with dump site communities
- **1993:** Payatas Scavengers Association is established, savings starts
- **1995:** Ang Payatas Scavengers Home Owners Association is officially registered
- **1997:** Payatas scavengers join exchange trip to India
- **1998:** Begin search for land; find and purchase new land at Rodriguez; make subdivision plan
- **2000:** Garbage slide tragedy at Payatas, on July 10;  
Security of tenure campaign launched in Payatas in November, with model house exhibit
- **2001:** Construction of first 28 row houses on new land begins
- **2010:** House design workshop for next 19 CLIFF houses
- **2011:** Eco-Settlement planning workshop in Miraculous Hills
- **2012:** Construction of the next 19 houses starts and finishes quickly
- **2019:** Payatas garbage dump is closed, scavengers find new work
- **2021:** 70 families are living on the site so far; 245 lots remain empty

## IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT

#### Successes:

The Philippines is a country whose housing problems of the urban poor should be solved in no time at all. In all of Asia, this must surely be the country with the most progressive social housing policies, the richest array of housing boards, coordinating councils, task forces and presidential committees, the most resolutions, proclamations, acts and codes. It has a constitution which protects against evictions and guarantees the right of every citizen to affordable, decent secure housing and basic services. It has one of the oldest community land and housing finance programs, and one of the most active cultures of NGOs and activists and church-based charities and voluntary organizations, besides having a great overlapping array of people's organizations, community networks, federations and coalitions. Add to this that the Philippines has a population of smart, capable, well-educated, multi-lingual people, and a big, fertile and gorgeous country whose environment is abundant in every imaginable way.

Yet despite this abundance of problem-solving mechanisms, slums are everywhere, and conditions in them are as crowded, miserable, dangerous and insecure as anywhere in Asia. Evictions happen all over the place. Land negotiations and applications for loans or permissions languish in bureaucracy for decades,

and even when poor communities do manage to buy land, people continue to live for generations on it in bad housing without basic infrastructure. The Philippines has land, it has resources, it has finance - but somehow, those things seldom match up with the real needs.

The housing project at Miraculous Hills - for all its problems - is an important breakthrough. Not only for the dumpsite scavengers of Payatas who made the project happen, but for the whole country, for it demonstrates how much even the poorest and most vulnerable people can do themselves, when they join forces and when the problem-solving energy of their drive for a better life is given a little support. Through their savings program, and using the spirit of *bayanihan* (the Filipino tradition of community unity and mutual support), they were able to provide secure, permanent housing for those who lost their homes during the trash slide as well as for many more who were living in danger zones around the Miraculous Hills area.

### Problems:

In many other Asian countries now, poor communities can access free or almost-free public land for their self-help housing projects (as in India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Myanmar) and free or heavily subsidized infrastructure (as in India, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia). But most community-led housing projects and programs in the Philippines require that communities pay for everything themselves: the land, the houses, the site development and the infrastructure. Even in government relocation projects and loan programs, everything is managed on a cost-return basis. It's a very heavy burden for society's poorest working citizens.

The troubles the community at Miraculous Hills has experienced must be seen in this context, in which almost all the project costs have been borne by the people themselves: buying the land, developing it, building their houses and bringing in infrastructure. This has placed enormous financial and organizational pressure on a group of people whose earnings are still very low and irregular, and who must work all the time to survive. It's no surprise, then, that the new community has faced problems: internal problems of divisions, disputes and miscommunication between members, which have eroded the collective spirit, and external problems with their relationship with the Homeless People's Federation, with other support organizations and with the government agencies the homeowners association must report to regularly.

### Impacts:

Twenty years ago, Miraculous Hills was the only housing project in an area that was still mostly undeveloped and jungle-covered hills. Since then, many new housing subdivisions have sprung up around the community, and some of these new neighbors have looked down their noses at a community built by former garbage dump waste-pickers. But as they have continued to improve their hilltop site in many ways, and as the trees they planted have matured, Miraculous Hills has started looking more like a botanical garden than a housing colony, and is now the envy of its middle-class neighbors.

The community continues to take active part in the local development process outside its own boundaries. Representatives from the community sit on the barangay-level Development Council, which meets monthly to discuss all sorts of issues in the barangay. And until 2014, representatives from the community also sat on the city-level Local Housing Board, where they lobbied for a more participatory housing resettlement process when a number of families were to be displaced by a dam project along the Marikina River.

Livelihood continues to be a challenge, though, especially since the Payatas dump closed in 2019, and the community continues to look for ways to support themselves without having to travel far away. A religious organization, the Assisi Foundation, initiated a livelihood project in Miraculous Hills which provided residents with seed money to grow vegetables, produce compost and raise pigs and "45-day" chickens. The pig-raising had to be stopped after neighbors complained about the noise and smell, but the vegetable gardens are thriving. The community has set up a workshop to manufacture concrete earth blocks and sells them to housing subdivisions being built nearby. Some residents have set up *sari-sari* stores in front of their houses and sell basic provisions to neighbors in the community, while others are anticipating job prospects in two shopping malls being planned nearby.

## COMMUNITY STORIES

**Ms. Maylene Roca** joined the Miraculous Hills project in 2010. After joining the savings group and buying a lot, she was one of the 19 families who built their new house in the second phase. With the 100,000 peso (US\$ 2,326) materials loan she got from CLIFF, she was able to finish only the foundation, the concrete frame and some of the walls of her new house. But by using her savings and taking out another loan from a cooperative, she was able to buy additional materials and complete her new house. "I always dreamed of having my own land and being able to construct my own two-story house," Maylene says. "I really wanted



this, and I was ready to work very hard for this - not only for my own future, but for my children and my grandchildren." She does not see her family moving out of the community anytime in the future. "In this community we have found forever."

**Mr. Noli Pacquiao** is one of the five "pioneer" members now living in Miraculous Hills. He was part of the original group of scavengers who worked with Father Bebot to start the savings program in Payatas. He went on the early exposure trips to India, Thailand and Cambodia, where he learned how urban poor communities in other places solved their problems of poverty and land and housing insecurity. On those trips, Noli saw how even very poor communities could come together to formulate their own initiatives as a group. Noli also recognized the importance of making space for women in the community to be on the front lines of finding solutions for the community problems. Noli helped lead the construction of the first 28 row-houses in Miraculous Hills, and moved into one of them with his family. Later, when he got a good government job in Quezon City, he left the community temporarily to earn, but family members continued to live in his house. When Noli returned in 2019, he was asked to lead the homeowners association. Noli observed some big changes in the community since he had left. Everyone was minding their own business and the spirit of *bayanihan* (cooperation and mutual help) had diminished. He also found that the community's important relationships with the Homeless People's Federation and with other allies had deteriorated, and he has worked to help revive them. With Noli back, the Miraculous Hills community is once again full of plans for future development projects.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

*This case study was written by Aianah Santos in January 2021, and edited by Ericka Lynne Nava at PACSII. The case study brings together stories gathered from these members of the Miraculous Hills housing project: Amielou S. Esmejarda, Analiza P. Serrano, Gelanie P. Esmejarda, Gina Gadian, Hanika R. Delos Reyes, Hannaliza R. Delos Reyes, Lilia R. Japson, Lovina Siega, Loyeta R. Delos Reyes, Marife L. Gagarin, Maylene D. Roca, Michaela L. Lorenzo, Noli N. Pacquiao, Romelbert B. Parajes, RoseMarielina P. Palamos, Ruby P. Haddad, Vicleta L. Villocero and Yedda L. Gagarin.*

*Please follow these links to more materials about the Payatas Scavengers' housing project in Rodriguez, and about the work of the Homeless People's Federation in the Philippines:*

<https://essc.org.ph/content/view/331/44/>

[https://essc.org.ph/content/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/escap-essc-environmental\\_risk\\_assessment\\_report.pdf](https://essc.org.ph/content/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/escap-essc-environmental_risk_assessment_report.pdf)

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep01275.9>

<https://www.environmentandurbanization.org/community-driven-disaster-intervention-experiences-homeless-peoples-federation-philippines>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/095624780101300206>

[http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file\\_13112019111257.pdf](http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file_13112019111257.pdf)

[http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file\\_13112019094546.pdf](http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file_13112019094546.pdf)

*For more information about this project and other housing projects supported by the Philippines Homeless People's Federation, please contact:*

Homeless People's Federation Philippines, Inc.  
(Contact person) Ms. Theresa Carampatana (HPFPI National President)  
234-A Tandang Sora Avenue, Quezon City, Philippines 1116

- e-mail (1): [homeless.pilipinas@gmail.com](mailto:homeless.pilipinas@gmail.com)
- e-mail (2): [pacsii.ph@gmail.com](mailto:pacsii.ph@gmail.com)
- e-mail (3): [pacsii.secretariat@gmail.com](mailto:pacsii.secretariat@gmail.com)
- website: [www.pacsii.org](http://www.pacsii.org)



## PHOTOS



*Until it closed in 2019, the trucks bearing the garbage of 20 million people arrived every minute in the garbage dump in Payatas.*



*Thousands of poor families live in the sprawling squatter settlements around the dump - some dangerously close to dump, like these houses.*



*The dump brought disease, toxins, pollution and danger to the area, but for tens of thousands of scavengers, it was a reliable livelihood.*



*The recyclable paper, plastic, glass, metal and other things the dump yielded could all be collected, cleaned and sold.*

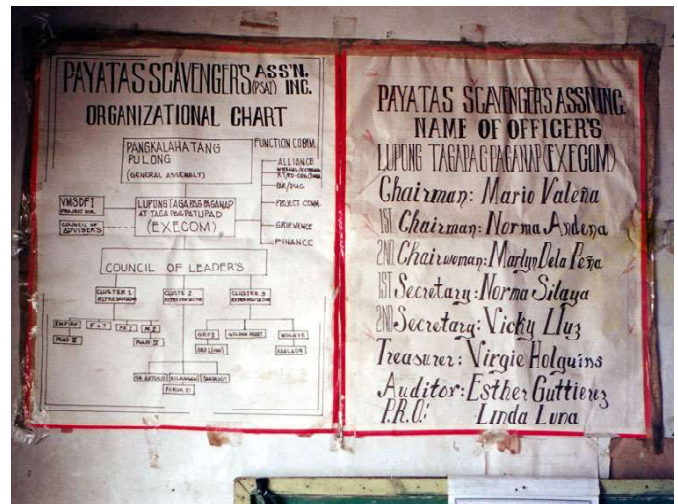


*Here is a make-shift house made of recycled materials, belonging to a family of scavengers, with an area for sorting waste out in front.*



*Most of the squatter settlements in Barangay Payatas are on privately-owned land, and very few have basic services or infrastructure.*





The first savings office of the Payatas Scavengers Association, built just a stone's throw from the garbage dump.



A lot of children work as scavengers on the dump - you can see the metal hooks they all carry to pick through the garbage. Some live with their families and others are on their own.



At the Scavengers Association's Children's Center, where the mothers are preparing a big pot of fortifying "chamorado" for the kids who work on the dumpsite.



That's Father Bebot, giving mass at the Vincentian chapel in Payatas, with murals about the life of scavengers painted on the walls.



A photo from the first national assembly of the Homeless People's Federation Philippines, in Payatas in 1998.





*The Payatas scavengers made their first exchange visit to the Mahila Milan savings collectives on the footpaths of Mumbai, in 1997.*



*In Mumbai, the Payatas team saw these rowhouses being designed and built by Mahila Milan members who were as poor as the scavengers - but could do it with savings.*



*These photos are from a visit in 2000, shortly after the Payatas Scavengers Home Owners Association had purchased the beautiful 3-hectare land in Rodriguez, before the site development and construction had started.*



*That's Lucy Jerusalem (in white), who was the president of the Scavengers Association, and one of the first 28 families to move to the new land. Sadly, Lucy died in 2013.*







On the morning of July 10, 2000, part of the Payatas dump collapsed, burying hundreds of scavengers who were living and working nearby.



After the garbage slide, the government drew a circle around the entire dumpsite and announced that everyone living inside that "danger zone" - about 2,000 poor families - was to be evicted.



A few months after the garbage slide, the Payatas Scavengers Association showcased their ideas for a more secure future in a model house exhibition and national dialogue on housing in Payatas.



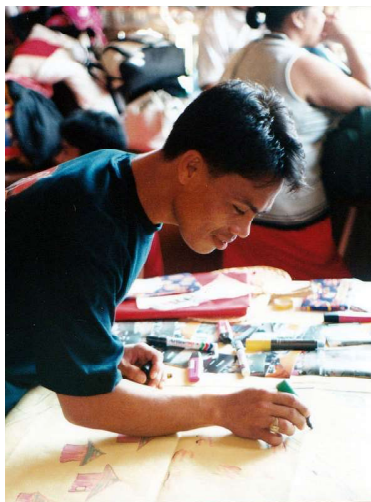
One of the guests was Lenie Vasquez de Jesus, who was then heading the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council (HUDCC).



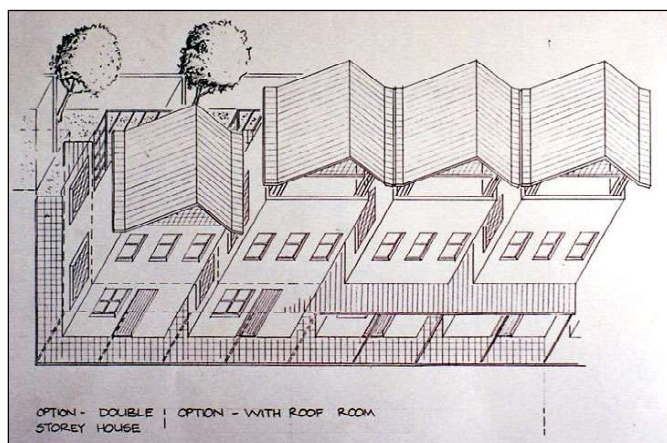
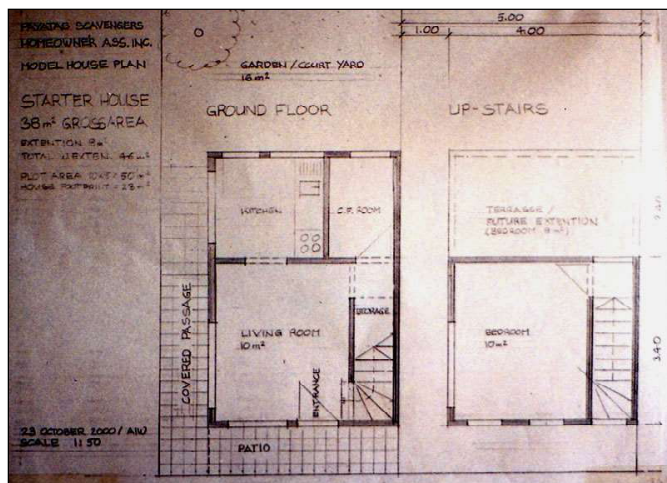
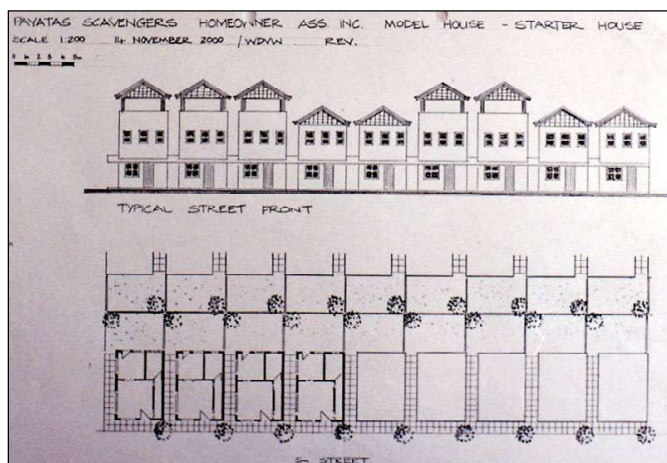
Later, the Philippines' president, Joseph Estrada, visited Payatas, where he pledged his support for the scavengers housing plans.



The garbage slide and "danger zone" evictions forced the Scavengers Association to speed up its plans to design and start building houses on the new land.



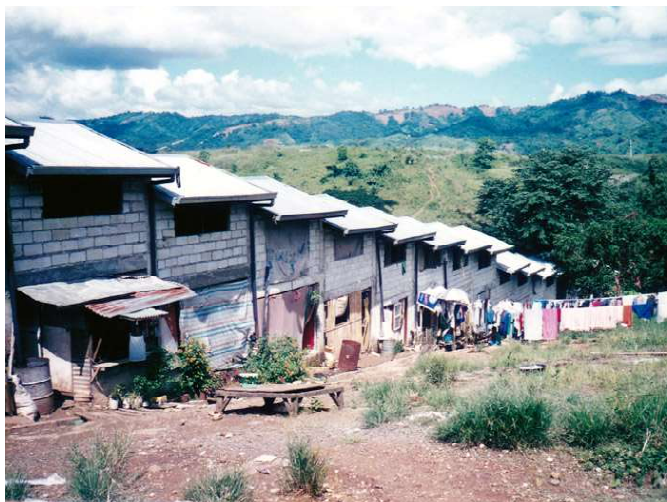
To build as much house for as little money as possible, the people settled on the idea of a basic row-house design, with shared walls.



COSTING FOR MODEL STARTER	
<b>DIMENSION:</b>	
Ground floor - $4.00 \times 5.80 = 23.20$	
Upper floor - $4.00 \times 3.40 = 13.60$	
Total of starter house = $36.80 \Rightarrow 37 \text{ Sq.m.}$	
Future Extension - $4.00 \times 2.2 = 8.8$	
Total of house with extension = 45.6	
<b>Costing / Materials</b>	
Concrete mix - $6.3 @ \text{P}700 = \text{P}4,838.40$	
(self made bricks)	
Hollow blocks - $1,177 @ \text{P} 27 = \text{P}3,178.00$	
Construction Timber	= $\text{P} 3,136.80$
Roof Corrugated	= $\text{P} 4,500.00$
Door internal & External (recycled)	= $\text{P} 3,500.00$
Windows (recycled)	= $\text{P} 1,800.00$
Bamboo screen	= $\text{P} 400.00$
Concrete Beams	
Concrete mix - $1.08 = \text{P}829.00$	
Steel (re-inforce) - $72.1 \text{ m} = \text{P}3,244.50$	
	= $\text{P} 4,073.50$
<b>Ladder</b>	
Mini Concrete floor Slabs = 124	
Concrete mix - $4.4 \text{ m}^3 = \text{P}3,428.00$	
Re-inforce Steel	= $\text{P} 2000$
Miscellaneous	= $\text{P} 3,448.00$
	= $\text{P} 2,000.00$
Stairs Case (Timber trats)	= $\text{P} 866.00$
Sub Total:	= $\text{P}31,740.70$
10% Allowance	= $\text{P} 3,174.00$
Total	= $\text{P} 34,914.70$
Skilled Labor	= $\text{P} 5,000.00$
Grand Total:	= $\text{P} 39,914.70$

Preliminary designs and costings for the 28 "core" row-houses that were built on the new land, in the first phase of housing construction.





*In 2002, when the first 28 row-houses were nearing completion, a team of community leaders from Thailand and Cambodia came to visit the new Miraculous Hills housing project, and could compare notes with the residents about all the fine points of a community-driven housing process.*



*Before the housing construction started, two essential buildings were built on the new land: a site office on the left, and a "sari-sare" store to supply hungry and thirsty workers on the right.*



*The women who welcomed the visitors raved about the clean environment, the new houses and no more fear of eviction - but worried about how to support themselves on the remote site.*



*The idea of the "core house" was that people could live there, and complete the finishes, doors and windows gradually.*



*With so much good land at their disposal, the new residents of Miraculous Hills wasted no time in planting fruit trees and vegetables.*





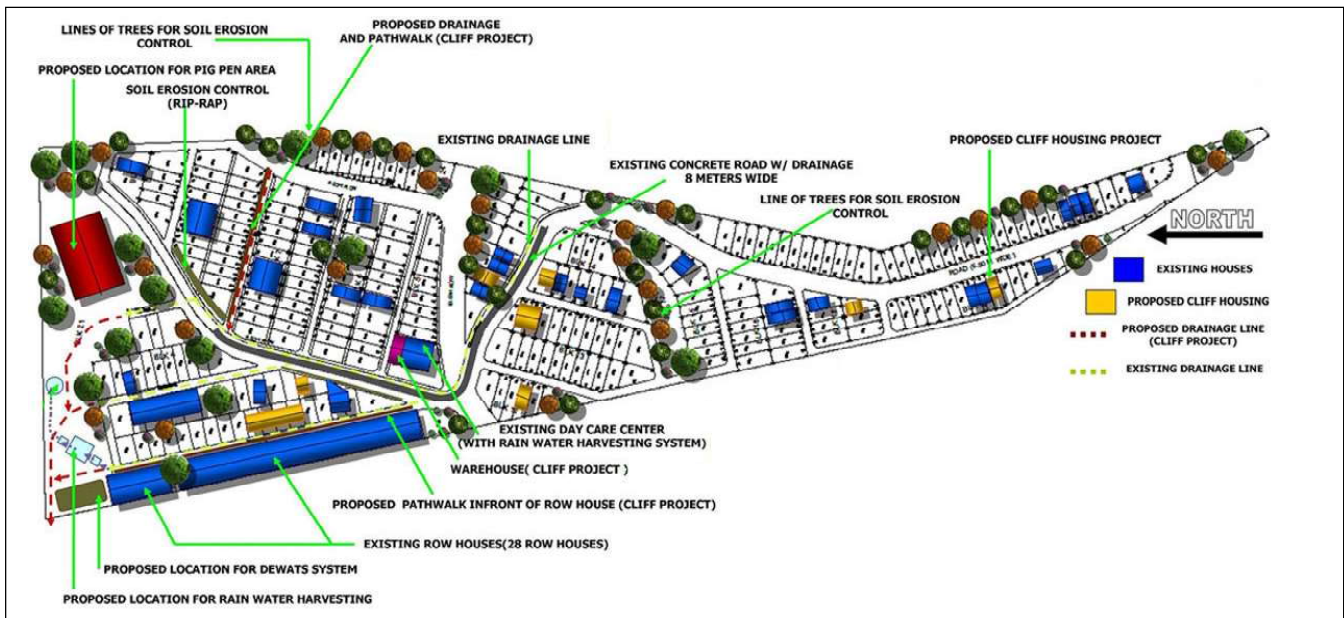
These photos come from the house design workshops that were organized in June 2010, to develop plans for the second phase of house construction. 19 families took part and later built houses, with loans from CLIFF. Drawing "dream houses" (left and below) and mapping social groups and features on the new subdivision plan (right).



Two house models the (mostly) women designed: a semi-detached model on the top (pink and green), and a row-house model below (all pink).

This is a photo taken during the "Eco-Settlement" workshop, to plan the future development of Miraculous Hills, in September 2011.





This is the fourth (and hopefully final) subdivision plan for the Miraculous Hills site, with 315 housing lots of about 50 square meters each, and lots of other community facilities and amenities.

Community members identify their lots on the subdivision plan, as they prepare to start building their phase-2 houses.



The subdivision plan changed so many times that it was necessary to hire surveyors again to mark out the plots for families ready to build.



Each family had to do the hard work of clearing the land at their new house lot and digging for the foundations. Some lots had steep slopes.







The community women bought all the building materials together, in bulk, and surveyed all the local suppliers to find the best deals. Then, storing and keeping track of materials on the site.



All the work on building the new houses was done by community members, with families providing all the labor and a few more skilled foremen overseeing the building process.



This drawing of one set of three row-houses was done by the community architects at TAMPEI, based on the people's designs.



These row-houses offer 48 square meters of living space, with a hall, kitchen and bathroom downstairs, and two bedrooms upstairs.



Here are the same three row-houses as they actually look on the site, when the construction was close to being finished.





Here is another house going up in the Phase-2 set - this one a detached house, but built to the same approximate plan as the row-houses.



That's Malene Roca, in front of her new house in Miraculous Hills, where she lives with her children and grandchildren. "In this community," she says, "we have found forever."



That's the house of Noli Pacquiao, who is one of the five original "pioneer" members of the Scavengers Association living on the site.



That's Noli taking a selfie in front of one of the communal garden patches, where the women are tending to their vegetables.



In this photo, some of the boys in the community are helping to dig trenches, as part of a project to upgrade the water supply system.