



TYPHOON OF LOVE

The Philippines

Introduction

The Philippines is made up of more than 7,400 islands in the western Pacific Ocean and has a population in excess of 100 million people. Situated in the area of the Pacific known as the Ring of Fire, and close to the equator, it is prone to earthquakes, volcanic activity and typhoons.

The Philippines is rich in biodiversity, with the tropical rainforests in the mountains and the abundant coastline harbouring many species not found elsewhere. The climate is hot and humid.

Political history

In 1521, the archipelago was claimed for Spain by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, though colonisation only began after the first Spanish explorers arrived in 1565. Under Spain's control, the islands became one unified state. Before that, they were a collection of independent island and city states, trading with one another and nearby nations such as China, India, and Japan. The islands had a rich and diverse culture, with many different languages and religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Islam arrived in 1300 and slowly spread. Christianity was introduced under the Spanish.

For 300 years, the islands were mostly controlled by the Spanish. By the late 19th century, the desire for independence was growing in strength. The Philippines finally won independence in 1945, becoming one of the founding members of the UN.

Democracy was fragile until 1986, with the Marcos dictatorship, in particular, marking a dark period in the country's history. However, since the 1986 snap election, which led to the People Power revolution and the accession of Corazon Aquino as president, the Philippines has enjoyed a period of political stability.



Economy

The Philippines is a country in economic transition from agriculture to services and manufacturing. Some 30% of the country's workforce still works in farming (compared to 1.3% in the UK). Political stability has allowed the economy to grow and the Philippines is now ranked at 33 in the world according to GDP. Its major exports include electronic products, transport equipment, copper, coconut oil and fruit.

Despite this success, the economy is still heavily reliant on money sent home by Filipinos living overseas, whose contribution is larger than foreign investment in the country. Growth has also been uneven, with the capital, Metro Manila, growing strongly, but rural areas less so. Poverty is severe in regions that are rural, disaster prone, and affected by conflict.

Urbanisation

In countries the world over, industrialisation leads to urbanisation, as rural people are drawn into towns and cities hoping for higher wages and a better life. This has been the experience in the Philippines too.

There are 12.8 million living in Metro Manila and the population density of the capital city of Manila itself is 46,000 per km² (compared to 2,500 in Cardiff). Even though wages are often higher in the city, poverty and poor living conditions are a real problem in these urban areas, where thousands of people are squeezed into unplanned slums with very few basic services.

Filomena's story: fighting forcible slum clearance

Filomena Cinco is a married mother living with her family in Estero de San Miguel, one of the slums in Manila. She moved to Manila when she was a young woman, and met her husband, Raul, who had been born there. Together they made their life in Estero de San Miguel, in challenging circumstances.

Filomena and Raul haven't just faced poverty and poor living conditions, but also the government's longstanding policy of clearing slum areas and forcibly removing their residents from the city. According to Christian Aid's partner, Urban Poor Associates (UPA), at one point, around 100,000 people were being evacuated from their homes every year. While the government provided alternative homes, these new communities were far from the city and workplaces, with little in the way of essential services. Slum clearance may be a worthy goal, but forcible eviction to areas well outside the city is hardly the answer for residents and it is not what they want.

With very little understanding of their rights, the law and community action, residents struggled to fight eviction, despite their determination to oppose it. This is where UPA proved crucial: helping to prepare the community to take action and training people to stand up for their rights.

Rights to land

Filomena was elected as the Barangay Captain for her area – similar to the chair of a community council – in 2010. She led the fight against forcible slum clearance. 'It has been a continuous struggle,' she says, adding, however, that 'the community is strong because our relationships are strong.'

The lack of basic services in the slums made life very difficult. Residents had neither water nor electricity, and though they were able to pay, the authorities were not



Inside Filomena's new home



Filomena at the front door of her new home

willing to extend these services to them as they didn't have title deeds to the land they lived on. Working as an association, Filomena and her neighbours campaigned for five years to have their rights to the land recognised legally. The power company then agreed to supply them.

Having secured the right to stay, the residents' next step was to press the government for better services within their slum. The main focus was the building of new homes. The first of these have now been constructed and the first 21 families have already moved in. More are to be built over the coming months.

Filomena was one of the first residents to receive a new house. She is proud of her home, which is a far cry from the terrible conditions she was used to. On seeing the house for the first time, her grandson kissed the walls and floor and said: 'It's so nice – no more fleas, no more cockroaches!' Filomena says: 'It made my eyes fill with tears.'

Part-funded by Christian Aid, UPA's work with this community has been essential. It has educated poor people about their housing rights and helped community members to organise themselves to resist forcible eviction, in non-violent ways. UPA also carries out research into the eviction programme and advocates on behalf of affected communities. And it employs a media expert to inform the public about how policy affects the poorest people.

Jeorgie Tenolefe: creating employment opportunities

The community of Baseco grew up on land reclaimed from the port area of Manila Bay. Like other slums in Manila, Baseco attracts people from remote rural regions hoping for a better life in the city. However, residents' lack of education led to high unemployment.

In 2001, with the help of UPA, residents set up a social enterprise organisation called Kabalik. At the time, the authorities wanted to clean up the Pasig River and the slum was due to be cleared. UPA organised a meeting between residents and authorities, which prompted local man Jeorgie Tenolefe to consider his prospects. 'I attended the meeting, and after going home, thought about what would be the future for me and my family and how I could make a difference and help,' he explains. As a result, Jeorgie became president of the organisation.

A crucial aspect of Kabalik's work has been ensuring people gain the legal right to stay on the land they inhabit and then petitioning the government for new housing. As a result of this work, some 3,000 families are now living in decent homes and a further 3,000-4,000 families have their own toilets. This is a major step forward, although far more needs to be done.

Preventing flooding

Typhoons cause high winds and waves along the coastline, making Manila's slums vulnerable to flooding. Baseco's residents have been replanting mangrove forests which protect the coast, as well as providing habitat for wildlife.

Kabalikat helps people develop their own gardens and the community now grows a range of vegetables such as pechay (pak choi), malunggay (a tree with edible roots, seeds and leaves) and aubergines.

To help lift local people out of poverty, Kabalik has supported the establishment of a company to produce Habi bags. Habi means woven in the local language and the bags are made out of printed materials rejected by factories. The bags sell well on market stalls, and the weavers aspire to reach a wider market and secure a more sustainable flow of income.

The Habi weavers have designed and made a communion table runner that the churches in Wales can sell as part of the appeal.



Jeorgie (second left) and colleagues displaying some of the Habi products





Prayer

Lord God, we pray for the Philippines. We thank you for the opportunity to learn more about this beautiful country and its people. Through our partnership with Christian Aid, we pray for inspiration as we raise funds towards the various projects there. We ask your blessing on Filomena and Jeorgie as they continue to press for justice on behalf of their communities.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.



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