

RH
RADICALHOUSINGJOURNAL

Global South Conversations on COVID-19 and housing struggles

Coping with fears: Urban struggles in the Greater Manila amid COVID-19 and beyond

Michael Beltran in conversation with

Hung Ying Chen

Ana Vilenica

Radical Housing Journal

Michael Beltran is a
Manila-based activist
and journalist.

Hung-Ying Chen and
Ana Vilenica are part of the
Radical Housing Journal.

Contact:
maykelbeltran@gmail.com

Abstract

In this conversation, the Manila-based housing activist Michael Beltran discusses with our editors (Hung-Ying and Ana) how political oppressions intensified during the pandemic and melded with the ongoing eviction, food, and public health crises. Michael shares with us how the pandemic changed ways of grassroots organizing and enabled the government to seize political opportunities to increase political crackdown and expand infrastructural projects. Michael also shares how people develop their voices and communal alternatives amid compounded crises of eviction, food, public health, and democracy.

Keywords

Manila, COVID-19, housing struggles, political repression

RHJ: How has the pandemic affected the local housing struggles in Manila?

Michael: I think it has shifted a lot. Early on, around last year in April, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), issued an order to request all city governments to suspend all eviction related activities given the Philippines was under a state of emergency. At the beginning of the pandemic, the President declared that the Philippines would enter into this state of emergency until September 2021. That meant that from April 2020 until September 2021, there should not be any eviction-related activities. But despite that, the government has been breaking their own rules. There have been quite a

few eviction cases. In January 2021, a city in Metropolitan Manila called Paranyak evicted close to 100 people from their homes. They put them in temporary shelters for a weekend and then evicted them from the temporary shelters, leaving them homeless. COVID has sort of nominally affected the housing crisis in the sense that the government purports or projects itself as wanting to be in the interest of the people, but actually it's still business as usual. And I think that's true for a lot of places.

RHJ: Is it a developer who mobilised eviction or the government, the city government itself, who mobilised the eviction? What type of evictions have occurred during this period? Are there any tenants' struggles emerging during this period?

Michael: It differs. A lot of them are city government motivated. The one I mentioned, Paranyak, which was last month, happened because of the city government. Today, I went to a protest at the office of the city government. The community people in Tondo, Manila, were asking the mayor to support them. Because the congressman in Tondo is trying to evict the people. They were asking the mayor to support them against the eviction propelled by the congressman. Regarding the tenants, we actually don't have a lot of big apartment complexes like the U.S. or the other parts of the West where people organize tenants' unions. It's really a more community thing. I am one of the eight tenants in the rental housing. We don't even say hi to each other. Every room is subdivided. We don't have our own thing. This makes tenant organizing highly difficult.

RHJ: Following today's protest, was there any kind of negotiation opening up between the city government and the community? Are there other legal measures or tools they can use?

Michael: The result (of the protest) was not ideal. Because the city government didn't want to get involved. So we have to look at other avenues and other means to stop eviction. Legal measures often take a very long time, much longer than eviction processes. If you're having a case eviction, even if you win, the eviction already happened. So we might return to the city hall. But I think it's important for us, and I think the most important is to generate what we call **making the local gain nationally significant**. So it is a struggle of the people of Pando, but we try to highlight it as a national question. When it is seen as a national question, it becomes both a question of national policies and of city governance.

RHJ: Indeed, I remember that along with the development of COVID-19 in the Philippines, the crackdown on activists also intensified. Is there any kind of organisational change? For example, in the protests that you've been to, how do people manage to organize protests amid the heightened risks?

Michael: Actually, arguably, it's safer in protests. Because people know, so it's when you go home that it will become scarier. Like, for example, one of my best friends—actually, you can google her name, Amanda, of Chinese descent—who used to be my classmate when I was very small. We both became activists. She was arrested recently. And she was still under arrest in December, still in jail with her baby. Both she and her baby are in jail. It's become a pattern under COVID. I've known a lot of people who have either been

murdered or been arrested. I think it's mainly because of the lockdown, activists are more vulnerable. Because they're staying at home and it's easier to find them. And, strangely, a lot of these arrests and a lot of these raids by the authorities happened at 3am. So there has been a period, up until now, a lot of us still wake up at 3am. Just to look around and check if there is going to be a raid on your door or anything like that. So yeah, it gets difficult sometimes. Also, in street protests, the police are using the pandemic as a reason to disperse or break them up. They say, oh, you violate the rule of social distancing. You should not protest, etc. And in terms of arrests and other violent measures by the police, it becomes more difficult when you are alone, as opposed to when you're together.

RHJ: That is really tough. This links to our next question. Have the patterns of political oppression and social inequality changed? If yes, in what ways?

Michael: One other indicator for housing has been the budgetary priorities of the administration for 2021. The major and prior part of the budget spending is neither on public health, nor on stimulating the economy or providing financial aid; but on the infrastructure. I should say, infrastructure debt servicing and military and law enforcement. And infrastructure is the biggest. Now one third of the entire country's budget is geared towards infrastructure. Which is a little bit weird. Because people are getting sick, but they choose to spend on the expansion of buildings instead. And when that happened...ironically, they're spending on infrastructure, roads, buildings, transport etc, but they're spending less and less on housing, in particular public housing. That means, for us, infrastructure usually leads to eviction. Because these infrastructure projects, like big roads, highways, and other transport infrastructure, often cut through communities aggressively and make way for real estate development. Their justification is that it is because the Philippines has horrible traffic, which is true. Even during the COVID, traffic is horrible. But it is not a reason to evict people.

During the global pandemic, the officials of our national health insurance (Philhealth) stole 15 million pesos from the Health Insurance Fund. And they were not even put in jail. Because of that they're spending less on health. And tests are still expensive. If I'm not mistaken, we are the only country in Southeast Asia who has not vaccinated any of our medical health workers or frontline health workers. We are very, very behind. But like I said, the restrictions are still easing up primarily because of economic reasons.

RHJ: Do people know what kind of preparation they are aiming for? Is that for domestic purposes or for national defense?

Michael: Definitely the domestic one. I think one of the most often cited reasons for the increased military spending is this: There's a new military Task Force. It's called the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict. It's a long, long name (laugh). But in 2021, this task force received 19 billion pesos. In comparison, the budget or the allotment of funds of resources for vaccine acquisition is only two billion pesos. So even just one task force for the military is already seven billion more than the vaccine. Just for context, the term communists in Taiwan and the Philippines is very different. Just to be clear, in the Philippines, it's not illegal to be a communist. In fact, for a long time...

RHJ: There's a long and strong tradition of the communist struggles in the Philippines.

Michael: Yeah. I would say it's unique to maybe Chinese or Soviet etc. We have our own context with it. That's a different and very long story. But anyway, the problem with the task force is that to them, anybody is a communist. Anybody who says anything bad about the government is already a communist. And if you are a communist, you will go to jail, or they can kill you during the confrontation. So they raised the budget. They have this new law, it's similar...It's almost like very, very, very similar to the law in Hong Kong, the National Security Act. We have our own, that is called the Anti-Terror Law.

So you're either communist or a terrorist. And anyone labelled as a communist or terrorist can be jailed. For example, my friend, Amanda, a Chinese Filipino. She was arrested while she was breastfeeding. The police claimed that they found grenades in her house, and therefore she's a communist. And we said, how could she have grenades if she's breastfeeding her son? Let's think, why would you put your child beside grenades? That's ridiculous. No. And then, of course, it's proof that she's a communist, therefore, she should be in jail. Even in the United Nations there are two Special Rapporteurs from the Philippines, they were also being called evil communists. This is almost an arrest warrant for them. So even an actress in the Philippines who recently just campaigned for women's rights attracted the condemnation of the government. They say, 'Oh! you are a communist, maybe you should go to jail'.

RHJ: So basically all kinds of advocacy work would be labelled.

Michael: Exactly.

RHJ: Do you find there's any kind of change of dynamics or new forms of community organising that emerge in this period?

Michael: Yeah, I think so. Especially last year. Because the transportation last year was generally very difficult. Early on, during the lockdown, there was no train or bus. So people [activists] had to embed themselves in communities. For example, the organisers who used to pay visits to the communities now have to stay there for a few days then leave. Then come back again for a few days. A lot of people do that and I admire them for it. Because that's really difficult. That was not the case for me. Because I work for an umbrella type of organization responsible for communication, so I need to stay in places where I can access the internet. During the entire lockdown they [campaign organizers] stay outside in a different home. So that's one thing. And then the other thing is, basically what we are focusing on is a strike of our economic means. Like I said, the Philippines has been hit with the worst recession in history. That means food prices are super high. For the unaffordability of food, we've been doing community gardens and community kitchens. I think that because food prices are high, people cannot access the markets but turn to community gardens and community kitchens. Of course, everybody has to eat. It's a basic need. And so that also becomes an important part of our campaigns.

RHJ: Can the community garden and community-based initiatives become a solution at this tough time?

Michael: I would say that the community gardens and the community kitchens have become a very big part of Kadamay's work ever since the time of pandemic. We do want to promote being self-reliant, but at the same time, we always say that being self-reliant does not mean that the government escapes accountability. It is the government's responsibility to provide housing, education and all things that we still lack and they are still problems. These should have been the focus for spending during the pandemic. However, instead of focussing on these basic social infrastructure, the government prioritizes their spendings on infrastructure, military or police. The campaign is not so much about having new organisations come up. It's more that we have reached out to different kinds of organisations recently, neighbourhood associations, unfamiliar neighbourhoods, and lots of food initiatives, similar to the ideas of Food Banks, which we did not have any connection with before.

RHJ: Also, it has been difficult for general people to access necessary PPEs, isn't it? How do people cope with these everyday challenges?

Michael: Yeah, I would say that social distancing in general, and in poor communities, is impossible. Nobody does it. Or we only try to do it when we see police. Because it is impossible to live in a way like that and be away from people... (bitter laugh). So to come back to your question, I would say eviction is still the main source of struggles. Especially with the priority of the administration to invest in infrastructure. Eviction is a natural consequence to that.

RHJ: There are a lot of people losing their job at this difficult time because of the lockdown and restrictions. From the organisational perspective, or in your personal observation, is there any kind of opportunities for people to get temporary jobs? Or how could community work possibly mitigate this livelihood risk?

Michael: I think there are a lot of people that lost their jobs and livelihoods. I don't know whether there are community initiatives that come up to address this issue. I think a lot of people are looking towards construction work because there's a boom of infrastructure projects. For example, market vendors are disappearing.

RHJ: Disappeared?

Michael: Yeah. There are no more pork street vendors. And then they say there might not even be chicken vendors anymore. The main reason is because the price inflation is so bad. It is so bad to a point that small vendors will not make a profit, even if they sell out all of their pork. The costs have been compounding because of the pandemic. Although the Parliament is reviewing a bill for a financial aid programme for small business and low-income families, it's too small to support the families. It is paid sometimes every month or every other month...and a lot of people haven't really received it. It is 8,000 pesos but we are calling the government to raise it to 10,000 pesos.¹ There were other types of workers who could get a little bit more. But there are other exceptions. There

¹ In the Bangon Pamilyang Pilipino (BPP) Assistance Program, each Filipino family is expected to receive one-time cash assistance equivalent to 10,000 pesos (appr. USD 208) per household or 1,500 pesos (approx.USD 31) per family member.

were some packages supporting Small and Medium businesses. Even so, it's been very difficult for people who work in the informal sector to receive such funds since they won't be able to demonstrate any payslips.

The government makes it so complicated that it's so hard for people to access. People cannot leave the house. In some areas they went door to door, they made surveys about what's your job, when I answered 'media', then automatically you were disqualified. I thought oh shit! I should have lied (laugh). Because they would at least give me one bag of rice. But I failed to lie, I did not get my bag of rice (laugh).

As you suggested, Duterte might seem 'smart' in a sense that they just disseminate tangible goods door-to-door, so people could feel the government is 'helping' by delivering some really tangible goods. But for the majority of urban poor families, a bag of rice simply isn't enough. I think a lot of politicians and government officials did not realize that when they imposed the lockdown. They closed all markets last year, except supermarkets. And they encouraged people to stock up on food. But of course, in urban poor communities, nobody has a refrigerator. How is one going to stock on food if one doesn't even have a fridge?

RHJ: At the administrative level, what would be the minimal administrative unit per community?

Michael: In the Philippines, we have a very domestic kind of unit called barangay. It's a very domestic concept. In Tagalog, it is the word for 'village'. There's village or town administration. Very small. And then a number of 'barangay' constitutes a district (purok). And then few districts compose one city.

RHJ: In each barangay or purok, are there any services like a food bank that could support the families through the rough process of stocking food?

Michael: It's very different. The barangay relies on taxes from their constituencies. There are poor constituencies who cannot always pay taxes. Thus these poorer barangays don't have much money. Then of course, these barangays receive funding from the national government. But that's not so big. The staff and organizations of some barangays in poor areas collapsed. During the pandemic, they were handling so many people with their little resources that they collapsed, as opposed to barangays in rich residential areas who are doing fine. It collapsed because people are underpaid, overworked, and they are very few, so they got very tired. Their immune systems are compromised, and then they get sick. And when they get sick, they cannot do anything anymore. So there are also inequalities between the local administrations. The worst case I've ever seen was a barangay outside of Manila. They wrote a letter to the national government, they said: 'We give up. We don't know what to do anymore. No one (the government) is helping us. So we give up'. They posted it on Facebook and later it went viral. This was last year.

RHJ: Could you imagine what it would look like a year from now? What do you think concerning housing justice struggles or community organizing in the near future?

Michael: It's strange this entire COVID period. Everybody is supposed to stay home, and not much is supposed to happen. But there's so many things that happen every day around the world. And of course, policy making is constantly changing. To answer your question, I don't know. I mean for the organizing to survive, I think primarily we have to deal with fear. We have to address the question of fear among people. Fear, not only about the virus, fear of going hungry, and then fear of the authorities. I think Myanmar [society] is doing a good job in overcoming their fears. And I hope the Philippines can follow their spirits as well. Because, right now, I would admit that the government is one step ahead of the people. But I hope they won't last for long. Because they've really done a lot of [bad] things, although activists still try to find ways to work around that. For example, nowadays, nobody uses Facebook Messenger anymore.

RHJ: What kinds of international solidarity causes have you been connected with during the COVID-19 period? Could you share one or two examples of causes you have in common?

Michael: Lots of things and webinars. I went to California, U.S. last March. So when a lot happened in the Philippines, I was in the U.S. for a solidarity mission on Filipinos' human rights. I met many organisations during the beginning of the pandemic. Most recently, a lot of work that Kadamay has been doing is in regard to connecting with people in the United States. On our end, of course, it is with Duterte, at the same time on their end, it is with Trump, Black Life Matters, so it was also a time to make connections.

For example, one of the organizations we are connecting with is called Right to the City Alliance. They have West Coast and East Coast headquarters. They are a national organization. They also visited our communities last year. So I would say we are more closely connected to them. They're abolitionist activists. They are calling for decriminalization of poverty. And one other organization that we are interested in is called Moms 4 Housing. They also occupy houses, like we did. There have been a lot of webinars, fundraising events, things like that. Because last year a lot of other people from the U.S. were supposed to come to the Philippines and visit us. But of course that did not happen because of the pandemic.

RHJ: Regarding occupying the houses, is it squatting?

Michael: Yeah, similar. But I would say, the term squatting seems to have a connotation of being unorganized and something that has naturally occurred. That's how I see it. While occupation is something organized, planned...But of course it is too hard to take place during the pandemic. Because of mobility and security. Because the police are around all the time.

RHJ: Following this thread of personal safety, I'd also like to check with you concerning the format of editing this interview. What sort of format do you think would work the best to protect you? Do we need to anonymize or to edit out anything sensitive?

Michael: Ah... I think just to publish my full name and everything I said would be the best protection for me. For us, we think getting more visibility is actually better protection. Like I have an activist friend who has got a warrant. And he was asking what we should

do. We said, make a facebook page! Make yourself an influencer. And if people like you, if the police arrest you, politically it is harder to arrest you. As people know your name. They can accuse celebrities for being a communist but they don't arrest the celebrities. So being visible is better protection than being invisible.

Note from the authors

This conversation happened on 22 February online. Hung-Ying and Michael talked while Ana was unfortunately lost in time zones and missed the appointment. She still feels bad about missing that. The interview was collectively edited by Ana and Hung-Ying.

Participants

Michael Beltran is a Manila-based activist and journalist.

Hung-Ying Chen (RHJ) is Post Doctoral Research Associate at Durham University (UK), and member of the Taiwan Alliance of Anti-Forced Eviction and International Tribunal on Evictions (ITE).

Ana Vilenica (RHJ) is a member of the Radical Housing Journal collective, editorial collective for Central and South East Europe at *Interface*—a journal for and about social movements, and the EAST-Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational.