

APOAMF Low-Rise Building Project

Community-Driven Housing Resilience for Informal Settler Families
in the Philippines

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November 2023



The Reach Alliance was created in 2015 by the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, in partnership with Mastercard's Center for Inclusive Growth. Our global university network now includes: Ashesi University, the University of Cape Town, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Singapore Management University, University College London, University of Melbourne, University of Oxford, and University of Toronto.

We express our gratitude and appreciation to those we met and interviewed for sharing their insights and passions with us over the course of this project. These individuals from the following organizations were instrumental and generously devoted their time to help us learn more about the Low-Rise Building Project (listed alphabetically): Alliance of Peoples Organizations Along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF), Ateneo de Manila University, Community Organizers Multiversity (COM), National Housing Authority (NHA), Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor (PCUP), Technical University Berlin, University of the Philippines Baguio, and Urban Poor Associates (UPA).

We also acknowledge our on-site research assistants, Luce Vida Sayson and Kloudene Salazar, who provided invaluable assistance in coordinating and translating the interviews. Thank you to Klarene Salazar for her early contributions to the project. We sincerely thank Drs. Sarah Haines and Amy Bilton who provided countless hours of mentorship and guidance throughout the research process.

This research received approval from the Ethics Review Board at the University of Toronto. Interviews conducted for this research were carried out virtually and in-person between April and May 2023.



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Cover photo: Two of the first buildings built in Phase 1 of the Low-Rise Building Project

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Executive Summary

In Metro Manila, Philippines, informal settler families (ISFs) have been legally occupying land near the Manggahan Floodway (a waterway built in 1986 to ease flooding impacts) since 1994, but that changed after a typhoon in 2009 washed out the informal houses, blocking the flood route. The government decided to evict and relocate the communities to out-of-city settlements. Several groups opposed this relocation, including the Alliance of Peoples Organizations Along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF), who led the development of the Low-Rise Building Project (LRBP). The APOAMF began as a group of

ISFs living in dangerous and crowded housing conditions. Today many of them live in low-rise building units that they rate with high satisfaction, and they are no longer considered “informal.”

The LRBP’s intervention succeeded as a result of the participatory and women-centred leadership of the community, its strong cross-sectoral partnerships and networks, and the community’s built and inherent resilience. This study exhibits how community-driven solutions can be used to address social housing-related issues, emphasizing the need for ongoing engagement of ISFs in housing projects while highlighting the connection between poverty alleviation and successful housing policy.

Context: Housing Access in Metro Manila

The contemporary urban planning and development of Metro Manila is the result of a complex mixture of geopolitical factors, including colonialism, political power, globalization, and natural disasters. This region's history traces back to Spanish colonization and Catholic missionaries, who laid the foundation for the development of the country's cities and towns and caused the migration of Indigenous peoples to larger settlements. Among these, Manila emerged as a significant administrative and trade centre because of its geographical proximity to the Pacific Ocean. Today, these historical influences continue to shape urban planning in the region, alongside the growing impact of neoliberal urbanism, which prioritizes privatization and individualism over public planning.

The Hard to Reach: Informal Settler Families

Although the Philippines is one of the most urbanized developing countries in the world, widespread poverty persists, with an estimated 18.1 per cent of the population living below the national poverty line as of 2021.¹ Roughly 30 per cent of the country's population lives in informal settlements (also known as slums), which have become more prevalent in recent years.² Manila is the most prominent overpopulated city in south-east Asia, partly as a result of high poverty levels in rural areas and uncontrolled migration to cities.

The region is home to a significant number of informal settlers, with an estimated 2.4 million people living in informal settlements, or over 500,000 informal settler families (ISFs).³ The



Figure 1. Informal settlement homes and shops along the West Bank Road



Figure 2. Informal settlement structure damaged by fire

1 The World Bank in the Philippines, "The World Bank." [↗](#)

2 "The Right to Life and the Right to Adequate Housing," ATD Fourth World Philippines. [↗](#)

3 Republic of the Philippines National Housing Authority. [↗](#)

Manggahan Floodway is one region where a high number of ISFs reside, attracted by the low rental rates, nearby job market, and proximity to business centres. Approximately 6,700 ISFs lived in the berm on both embankments of the Manggahan Floodway in 2009.⁴ These families often build their own housing structures out of materials they can source cheaply or for free in the surrounding area. Their houses are built close together, creating unsafe housing conditions, and increasing the risk of fire. They are also easily damaged by typhoons and the resulting floods, which are becoming more frequent with human-induced climate change.

History of Land and Housing

The Metro Manila region has been grappling with a host of challenges including an exponential increase in population, public planning failures, and the diaspora's role in urban spaces where migration and transnationalism shape urban geographies. Many rural Filipinos are moving to

urban centres for work, citing vast differences in minimum wage between the provinces and Metro Manila. Consequently, there has been an upsurge in ISFs in Metro Manila who come for jobs but cannot find affordable housing. The city's growth as a market-oriented metropolis has exacerbated the number of ISFs by pushing out and stifling informal spaces, thereby underscoring the urgency for social housing initiatives. To tackle the housing crisis, the National Housing Authority (NHA) was established in 1975 with a vision to "lead in the provision of comprehensive and well-planned human settlements for the homeless, marginalized, and low-income families, thereby improving their quality of life."⁵ The NHA has developed many housing projects but faces barriers to providing adequate housing such as lack of resources and land. This has led to many of the social housing projects being built outside of the metro region, sending ISFs back to the rural areas they once left in hopes of better job opportunities. However, the city's growth is only one issue.



Figure 3a. Informal settlements along the west bank of the Manggahan Floodway, Proclamation Site



Figure 3b. Presidential Proclamation 458 — Manggahan, Floodway (Pasig, Cainta, Taytay Embankment), 70,000 Families (Source: People's Plan Approach — Urban Poor Action Committee presentation, 17)

4 Mylene Rivera, "Manggahan Floodway: In-City Resettlement for Informal Settler Families," Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council, 2016.

5 Republic of the Philippines National Housing Authority. [↗](#)

With the increase in climate change events such as tropical storms and floods, many governments are reassessing their infrastructure plans, land use policies, and zoning regulations to reflect the influence of the climate change crisis on land and housing. Sustainable and urban development strategies are essential to address the challenges posed by rapid urbanization, climate change, and social inequality in the country.⁶ One tool that the Philippines government has used to address some of the housing challenges is proclamations, which designate specific parcels of urban land for public housing.

The Floodway's Role in Urban Housing

In 1994, the Philippines government responded to a backlog in social housing by converting agricultural land along the Manggahan Floodway to a designated social housing settlement area through Proclamation 458, the presidential policy that reserved certain parcels of land along the Manggahan Floodway for this purpose. Low-income settlers quickly filled these regions and constructed their homes along the floodway (Figures 3a & 3b). The proclamation was later amended to include additional portions of the berm slopes of the east and west floodway.

In 2009, Typhoon Ketsana devastated the city, wiping out many of the residences along the floodway and blocking flood routes with debris. The government and the public blamed the floodway settlers for the blockages and set out to evict their communities. Executive Order 854 declared the floodway a dangerous area and ordered immediate relocation, overriding the previous proclamation.

The sudden relocation plan, marked by eviction and demolition notices, sparked concern and stress among the community who were unsure of

their land and housing rights under the emerging policies. The eviction plan involved moving settlers to distant relocation sites outside of Metro Manila because developers sought any available high-market-value in-city locations. However, these distant relocation sites are far from job opportunities and often lack access to basic services and community amenities. Many community groups and NGOs began to organize and mobilize to fight for the land and housing rights of the communities at risk of eviction/evacuation.

About the Intervention: APOAMF and LRBP

Alliance of Peoples Organizations Along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF)

When threatened by evictions after Typhoon Ketsana, 11 community organizations in three *barangays* (neighbourhoods) along the Manggahan Floodway formed an alliance called APOAMF (pronounced *apo-amf*). APOAMF mobilized to fight for the housing and land use rights of the informal settler families (ISFs) who lived in the community. Primarily led by the women who were managing their homes while their husbands worked in the city, APOAMF coordinated community action to oppose the forced evictions. The organization quickly grew to 900 members representing nearly 3,000 ISFs and put on community workshops to brainstorm plans to address their issues. The community-led work was recognized by other nongovernmental organizations in the housing space, and they were soon joined by Community Organizers Multiversity (COM) for support in organizing and government negotiations. With regular meetings

6 Arnisson Andre Ortega and Evangeline Katigbak, "The Urban Geographies of Philippine Transnationalism," *Current History* 121, no. 836 (2022): 237–42.

and support from COM, APOAMF recognized the need to develop a “People’s Plan” that allowed them to stay on their land, or at very least within the city. Thirteen years later, APOAMF has nearly 3,000 members.

APOAMF operates as a community-led alliance. Central to their mandate was the co-created People’s Plan, which involved a multi-step iterative process (Figure 4). Initially, a community workshop informed the community members about the plan and allowed them to design their dream community. The second phase of the process involved searching for and acquiring potential land. With the support of Technical Assistance Organization-Pilipinas (TAO-Pilipinas), a women-led, nonprofit, nongovernment association that assists urban and rural poor communities in the physical planning, development, and management of their communities, APOAMF developed a site development plan for housing units along the floodway. This plan was supported by the community members and later presented at a stakeholder forum involving the World Bank and other agencies such as the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and the National Housing Authority (NHA). Despite the community’s enthusiastic planning and presentation, the government remained unwilling to accommodate the People’s Plan for on-site relocation.



Figure 5. Research team with APOAMF leadership and residents during a site visit

APOAMF adapted and decided to explore the option of near-site and in-city relocation to expedite the approval process. With support from COM, they conducted land research and eventually found a two-hectare plot of land owned by the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), which would go on to gain approval as an appropriate relocation site. The next phase of the process involved creating a financial plan, preparing a site development plan, and conducting architectural and engineering design with the assistance of the NHA’s technical team and a private engineer-architect. After negotiations between APOAMF and NHA, a final agreement was reached regarding the housing design, the People’s Plan finally entered the implementation phase, and work on the LRBP began.



Figure 4. People’s Plan process (adapted from APOAMF’s presentation about its experience in community organizing and engagement with government agencies)

Low-Rise Building Project (LRBP)

Through years of negotiation, mobilization, and organizing efforts by APOAMF and their NGO partners, the LRBP was created as a solution for safe in-city housing. The NHA administers the LRBP and oversees the construction process, but the People’s Plan outlines steps to secure the community’s ample and fair influence on the project’s execution. The apartment-style structures are located just across the floodway from their original settlement site and house 60 families per building, with each family inhabiting a 24-square-metre unit. The goal is to have 15 buildings with 900 units over three move-in phases (see Table 1).

Construction of the climate-resilient buildings began in 2013, with the first two buildings officially opening for the most vulnerable families in 2015. As of spring 2023, 586 families have moved into units across 10 buildings. Despite the original mobilization’s successful project approval, the project is not yet complete and mobilization efforts continue to prioritize joint dialogues between APOAMF, affiliated NGOs, government agencies, and other stakeholders. Out of the five incomplete buildings, three are

partially constructed but are suspended because of unresolved contractor issues. The remaining two buildings have not yet started construction.

Within the APOAMF, the LRBP has its own leadership and building management structure to oversee day-to-day life in the housing complex. This structure includes an elected board of directors, a community administrator, a unit-holding representative from each building, a unit-holding leader from each floor, and 10 volunteer committees. These committees oversee auditing, disaster risk reduction, events, finance, grievance, livelihood, maintenance, parking, peace and order, and welfare.



Figure 6. The Manggahan Low-Rise Building Project (LRBP) as seen from the neighbouring NHA office

Table 1. Phases and status of the Low-Rise Building Project

	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
Total number of buildings	2	6	7
Status of buildings	Completed	Completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Completed • 3 Under construction • 2 Not started
Number of storeys per building		5	
Number of units per floor		12	
Number of units per building		60	
Average unit size (m ²)		24	
Number of beneficiaries (ISFs)	120	360	420

Key Project Stakeholders

In Manila, informal settler families (ISFs) have often needed to autonomously organize and develop their own networks, despite local laws that should protect them. Community networks give credence to local advocacy movements and provide incentives for families to undertake collective action to obtain property rights.⁷ Networks allow residents and community leaders to work with government officers to identify problems, set priorities, and develop solutions. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are also prominent actors at the local level, and they are known to form coalitions and partnerships with other grassroots to increase their numbers, merge their platforms, and gain more attention.

NGO SUPPORT: COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS MULTIVERSITY (COM)

The APOAMF-COM partnership involves community organizing and training community members who wish to secure housing and resist government evictions. Through grassroots organizing, APOAMF contacted Community Organizers Multiversity (COM), who helped shape them into a well-organized alliance. COM supports ISFs by assigning each affected community, such as APOAMF, a community organizer (CO) who is employed by COM. When APOAMF had yet to secure housing, the CO trained community members to identify their issues, set up committees to spur more mobilization, create an action plan for further developing their People's Plan, assist with land research, and conduct workshops on how communities can resist evictions while still living in informal settlements. Through this multi-year process, APOAMF had three COs assist them in their fight to gain Low-Rise Building Project (LRBP) approval. Now that the one-time ISFs are residents living in the LRBP, COM assists members

with how to manage their building and manage interpersonal relationships with stakeholders, including the NHA.

THE GOVERNMENT PARTNER: NATIONAL HOUSING AUTHORITY (NHA)

The NHA is the government arm for housing development responsible for implementing social housing programs, particularly for the lowest-income people (30% of the population). It is mandated to implement housing programs for affected families living in dangerous areas in Metro Manila. The APOAMF–NHA partnership began with tension as they opposed each other's relocation plans at the negotiating table. Over time, through ample negotiation, compromise, and relationship building, they finalized plans for the formal LRBP partnership between APOAMF and the NHA. NHA administers the housing units' construction and collects monthly fees, while the community oversees the maintenance of the estate. Today, APOAMF and the NHA have a close professional relationship as project partners, and the NHA office neighbours the LRBP residence site.

Key Success Factors

The APOAMF began as a group of informal settler families (ISFs) living in dangerous and crowded housing conditions. Today many of them live in low-rise building units that they rate with high satisfaction (87% satisfaction according to this study's demographic survey), and they are no longer considered "informal." This transition is largely the result of community-led grassroots mobilization. Several things made this community mobilization successful: leadership, management, decision making, partnerships, and resilience. There were also external circumstances that supported their success.

7 Toru Nakanishi, "Hidden Community Development among the Urban Poor: Informal Settlers in Metro Manila, Policy and Society," *Policy and Society* 25, no. 4 (2006): 37-61; Gavin Shatkin, *Collective Action and Urban Poverty Alleviation* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Leadership, Management, and Decision Making

When asked why they believed the fight to secure housing was successful, several interviewees noted the leadership of APOAMF and of the newly formed Low-Rise Building Project (LRBP) community. They said the leadership structure provided the opportunity for participation while strongly upholding clear parameters for the work. Many became emotional when talking about the leaders themselves, referring to the resilience, dedication, and power of the women at the forefront.

LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

APOAMF's leadership structure encompasses both hierarchical and horizontal components. Council meetings bring together council leaders, executive directors, board members, building representatives, and floor leaders (Figure 7). By fostering participatory decision making within their planning process, the APOAMF leadership created an environment where diverse perspectives were valued and considered. At afternoon meetings, women-led consultations with government stakeholders, inclusive dialogue, and democratic discussions among committees allowed members to deliberate upon concerns. This participatory approach fostered a strong sense of ownership of the building process among the residents and allowed APOAMF leadership to proceed with their newly empowered negotiating skillset. These skills are essential for advocating for social housing rights in the Philippines (or perhaps anywhere), navigating complex NHA building standards and requirements, and reinforcing commitment to the housing specifications outlined in their People's Plan.

After moving into the LRBP, they formed internal committees. Predominantly spearheaded by the women in the community, this managerial structure ensured that every community member had an active role in shaping their living experiences within the residences and provided

opportunities for people to step forward and get involved if they were not already. Because these committees include topics such as auditing and finance, which are highly technical, they also helped to up-skill residents. We heard from committee leaders that while they were unsure of their abilities to take on these technical and challenging roles, they were encouraged, uplifted, and trained by the other leaders and the COs and now find themselves excelling in their roles.

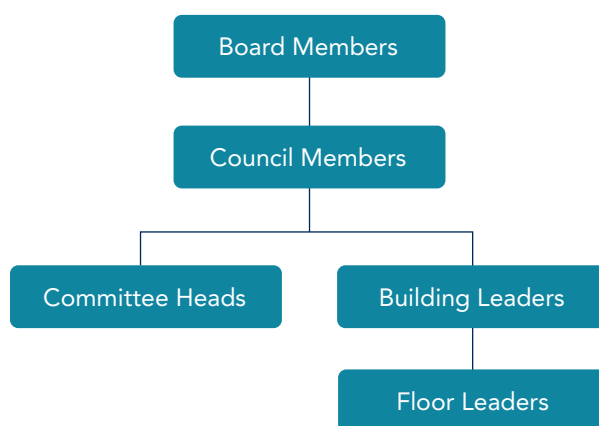


Figure 7. Organization structure of the (APOAMF-PASIG) board and council members

WOMEN-CENTRED LEADERSHIP

Women play a crucial role in APOAMF's leadership. Over 70 per cent of council members are women, including the president, and they make up at least half of all other roles. Their resilience is clearly seen and appreciated by the majority of the community. However, women-centred leadership is not unique to the APOAMF. In the Philippines context, women often step into advocacy leadership positions because their husbands are occupied with work and lack time for active engagement. While this is how women typically initiate their leadership roles, women leaders are often more empowered in civic activities and possess better interpersonal skills than men, especially when it comes to advocacy and conflict navigation with the government. Women leaders contribute to resolving the

community's struggle through various acts, including leading and organizing community events and demonstrations, engaging in internal and external dialogue, and emotionally nurturing their community to persist in their struggle. Interviewees shared how the women leaders are "really forceful, not aggressive, but forceful and passionate in making their point." They articulate their thoughts fearlessly which "works in their favour to get things done."

Women leaders also adapted and learned, as evidenced by their acquisition of knowledge on housing rights and land searches, their skills in brainstorming problem-solving solutions with assistance from their community partners, and their mastery of technologies like Zoom to enable them to actively participate in virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strong cohesion among them can be attributed to their long-standing familiarity and shared history along the Manggahan Floodway. In interviews, many APOAMF leaders mentioned how they willingly sacrifice their time with their families to contribute to their community's struggle, recognizing that it is not solely for their own benefit but for the greater good of the entire organization. While gender inequality remains prevalent in global leadership and decision making, this is not the case in APOAMF where women's involvement has reshaped the community. Some interviewees mentioned that women leaders are so focused on resolving issues and concerns for the community that they sometimes fail to consider how those issues affect them individually as a vulnerable sector.

Partnerships

With support from local NGOs, COM, TAO-Pilipinas, as well as the NHA, the APOAMF spearheaded the creation and implementation of their in-city housing relocation project, the LRBP. Critical to the success of this safe housing solution are the myriad of partnerships formed

across sectors (Figure 9), networks maintained, stakeholders involved, and locals mobilized for over a decade.



Figure 8. Researchers interviewing an APOAMF woman leader in the LRBP office with help from a local research assistant and translator

APOAMF-COM PARTNERSHIP

The APOAMF-COM partnership has been integral to the LRBP's existence. Many people we spoke with emphasized the important role that COM played in assisting APOAMF. One noted that just when they were "feeling like they had no more hope, COM came in and educated them on their rights." COM utilizes a proven five-step process to help urban poor communities secure and maintain housing within the city. The process involves integration, investigation, role play, mobilization for action, and strengthening the organization. COM has learned to leverage their community networks (e.g., Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies or PHILSSA) to ensure the community's People's Plan is progressing. This involves organizing various training workshops for community members (e.g., advocacy, conflict resolution, housing-related law), as well as hiring professionals (e.g., lawyers) to support internal

processes. Many residents of the LRBP we spoke with expressed their immense pleasure with the outcome of their joint advocacy efforts to gain safe housing in the city. There was a resounding sense of gratitude for COM’s support, including “genuine admiration for [their] work and their approach to community organizing [which] truly embodies a people-centred approach.”

APOAMF-NHA PARTNERSHIP

Many community residents described how support from local governments in community endeavours is crucial to the smooth implementation of a public housing project. The NHA was already a key contact for the LRBP because they manage social housing projects, but when APOAMF identified the two-hectare government-owned plot of land as a potential relocation site, the role of the NHA in securing that land became critical. This instigated coordination and engagement between the NHA and MMDA in securing the

land, made possible by the fact this land along the embankment is included in Proclamation No. 458. The NHA was also instrumental when it came to the design of the buildings. An NHA technical team was formed to discuss with APOAMF the housing plans and site design, which was reduced from 49 proposed buildings down to 17 and now the current 15-building plan. Both NHA and APOAMF agreed on the final housing design, symbolizing a shared commitment to the LRBP’s success and building maintenance.

As one NHA representative said, NHA’s initial role they envisioned for themselves in this partnership was “securing the land because the land was still part of the government.” NHA also sought to provide residents with “community empowerment, livelihood assistance, and other programs to adapt to life in a low-rise building setting,” which is considerably different than the “landed” buildings typical of the Philippines.

PARTNERSHIP ECOSYSTEM			
ISFs	NGOs	Government	Academia
 APOAMF	 COM	 NHA	 U. of Philippines College of Architecture
	 UPAC	 MMDA	 Ateneo de Manila University
	 TAO-Pilipinas	 PCUP	

Figure 9. Key project stakeholders (NGOs, government, and academic)

The NHA and APOAMF also worked together to update the National Estate Management Manual for low-rise buildings that is being piloted in the LRBP and may be used for other NHA-supported housing projects throughout the region.

NETWORKS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Urban Poor Associates (UPA), a sister organization to COM, has been helping urban poor communities across the Philippines for over 30 years. They help communities and residents similar to the APOAMF residents to fight for safe in-city relocation after eviction. Much of their work centres on advocacy and articulating to government stakeholders the multifaceted housing issues that urban poor communities face. Similar to COM, they assist communities with creating their own People's Plans to ensure community participation is "baked" into housing resettlement decisions. UPA has fostered many networks and partners, like COM and the government, media relations to amplify their message, as well as subject matter experts like architects and scientists to consult with as needed.

Our conversation with UPA staff and its founder shed light on the intricate networks within the Philippines that work in the human settlement and urban poor advocacy spaces. Specifically, they mention a network of other NGO and government agencies that they call an "urban cluster," the media, academic institutions, and experts in architecture, geology, and earth and building sciences. These supporting networks are brought in when a community is fighting for safe housing and the right to use parcels of land, and they also help with capacity building for community members to learn about negotiation skills for interacting with various external partners, facilitation skills when leading internal team

meetings, and communication and conflict-resolution skills when running estate management.

PHILSSA (Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies) is another network of NGOs engaged in urban poverty-focused development work that APOAMF belongs to. PHILSSA's network currently has 72 member NGOs across the Philippines engaged in varied fields of development service and aims to strengthen members' capacities on good NGO governance, enhance the sustainability of the network and members in terms of finances, leadership, and other capacities, and build multistakeholder partnership models for delivering integrated social services for poor communities.

PHILSSA and its supporters contributed significantly to appointing reform-minded officials in the Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor (PCUP) and Social Housing Finance Corporation (SHFC). The PCUP recommended the allotment of an additional PHP 1.26 billion (approximately USD 22,000,000) through the NHA for social housing projects identified by civil society groups and announced another PHP 10 billion (approximately USD 180,000,000) by President Aquino in September 2011 as part of the government economic stimulus package aimed at addressing informal settlements in high-risk areas of Metro Manila.⁸

PARTNERSHIPS SPURRED GREATER COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The vulnerabilities of urban poor people are well-documented. Many people live in high-density neighbourhoods in close quarters which makes them vulnerable to heat stress and transmittable diseases. With limited access to health services and low health-seeking behaviours, residents also struggle with low daily income and unstable,

8 "Institutionalising Local and National Partnerships to Address Urban Poverty and Homelessness in the Philippines," GTF222 Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies, Fourth Annual Report Web Update. [↗](#)

intermittent paid work.⁹ However, ISFs make up for their lack of financial and physical capital through their abundance of solidarity networks. The LRBP and its close-knit community members exemplify two forms of social capital. Abundant *bonding* capital involves social relations based on trust within one's community where members feel comfortable engaging in borrowing and lending money among each other, as well as having informal babysitters and referral to employment and income opportunities. *Linking* capital connects the members of communities to other forms of support and institutions that others may not know about.¹⁰

The ISFs who moved into the LRBP have relationships with each other beyond simply being neighbours. Better-off households help those who are worse off during emergencies, such as buying food on credit at *sari-saris* (local convenience stores on the ground floor of the buildings), and pooling resources when needed. Community organizations may find it easier to help the urban poor when they are as well organized as the LRBP residents whose community organizations have been known to connect the urban poor to NGOs, local government units, churches, and more.

The process of structured organizing and community partnerships laid the foundation for the local government to be able to rely on local partners who were advocating for safe housing. As local organizations and networks built up their influence, and became more organized internally and more recognized publicly via their demonstrations and advocacy efforts, they were able to provide more services and spearhead action after presenting ideas to local government departments.

After the devastating impacts of Typhoon Ketsana in 2009, APOAMF remained steadfast in their efforts to secure safe housing and economic opportunities in Manila. When framed as the fight for their lives, it is unsurprising that residents of the LRBP were as resilient and dedicated to community organizing as they were. A major driver of their commitment was the renewed sense of hope they got from having so many local networks, NGOs, and community partners they could tap for help with resisting evictions, staging demonstrations in front of the mayor's office, negotiating with the NHA, teaching them how to run their estates once they moved into the LRBP, and much more.

Resilience

Collaborating with various NGOs and local government, the community embarked on a journey to design and develop a social housing proposal that reflected their desired living demands. From their first-hand experience facing the challenges posed by climate change, including the threat of eviction from their homes, they strategically proposed architectural designs for residential apartment buildings with components that were resilient in the face of flood, fire, and earthquake, and that maintained geotechnical stability. The buildings that currently house ISFs from the Manggahan Floodway stand five floors tall on land adjacent to the floodway's east bank, elevated above typical flood waters. The 10 buildings on the project's land allotment have reduced the residents' vulnerability to extreme flooding resulting from climate-change-induced weather, typhoons, earthquakes, and fire outbreaks.

9 Anna Marie Karaos, "Urban Poor Vulnerabilities, Solidarity Networks, and Pathways to Resilience," National Resilience Council COVID-19 Webinar, May 2020. [🔗](#)

10 Emma Porio, "Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Resilience to Floods and Climate Change-Related Risks among Marginal, Riverine Communities in Metro Manila," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 39, no. 4 (2011): 425–45; Ricardo Abad, "Social Capital in the Philippines: Results from a National Survey," *Philippine Sociological Review* 53 (2005): 1–57.



Figure 10. Treetops outside of Metro Manila with the city and Manila Bay on the horizon

While the buildings, which were primarily designed by the NHA, did not prioritize climate resiliency in their plans, the community became climate resilient through site selection and vastly improved housing. Families were able to create functional areas that served their needs within their new units. For example, most residents creatively repurpose their units into living spaces, laundry areas, home offices, and even small shops exemplifying their resourcefulness and adaptability.

With support from their leadership, the LRBP residents also demanded that critical housing amenities like adequate water supply, access to reliable internet connection, stable power, and electricity supply be provided to serve their community needs. The active maintenance structure put in place by the leaders played a crucial role in ensuring the proper functioning of every essential amenity serving the community. Appointed building representatives and floor leaders promptly addressed community issues and escalated them as needed. The community's advocacy for specific features within the buildings and their success in achieving them demonstrated their proactive approach to improving their living conditions. For example, they insisted on larger hallways than what the NHA had initially proposed. This attention to detail and advocacy resulted in a housing structure that was suitable to control traffic and established unobstructed flow in shared spaces which improved temperature regulation and emergency preparedness.

The climate-resilient housing features within the LRBP buildings recognize the community's power of social learning. The APOAMF actively sought knowledge and expertise from the University of Philippines' College of Architecture to understand the merits and disadvantages of cantilevered housing on an embankment as a sustainable housing solution to flooding. They engaged with other relevant stakeholders to access information on disaster-resistant housing features such as replacing timber (wood) structural frames with materials made of reinforced steel and in-situ concrete and found what was most important to demand in their social housing proposal to the NHA. Leveraging this knowledge, they built internal committees that oversaw development of community living spaces, planning, design co-creation, communication, and construction administration of the LRBP, all of which was enshrined within their People's Plan and subsequently shared with government.

Aside from technically demonstrating housing resilience, APOAMF has also shown deep community resilience and dedication to their cause. Leaders' and other project stakeholders' dedication to this project over the past 13 years comes from a passion for housing justice and an unbreakable commitment to collective well-being. They have fostered their resilience by being vulnerable with each other, earning and giving trust, establishing effective lines of communication, sharing a collective vision, and developing leaders

from within. Much of this is captured in the spirit of the People’s Plan, which has proven itself an excellent tool for project longevity.

Supporting Circumstances

The APOAMF has successfully mobilized through their leadership, use of partnerships, and resilience, but certain external conditions also made this project possible. Increasing urbanization in Manila has generated an intensive urban landscape of high-rise buildings and large, unplanned, and often illegal settlements. A common structural issue that the urban poor advocacy organizations in Manila face when fighting to defend their housing rights is the lack of available land. Although in-city relocation is often expensive and plagued by land and urban developers vying for space, ensuring that the community was relocated in the city allowed ISFs to access their livelihood and basic services. This is why the APOAMF’s People’s Plan included a phase dedicated to land research to survey the availability of land for resettlement. APOAMF community members’ survey revealed that the vacant plot adjacent to the current NHA site was designated land meant for public housing and was mere steps from the existing Manggahan Floodway settlement area. Property lines were ascertained through negotiations with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Google Earth helped people to complete maps. Both the land’s location and the fact that it was designated for social housing significantly contributed to APOAMF’s successful relocation strategy. Many stakeholders noted these two factors as defining elements in the relocation’s success.

Political allies, such as former President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III, were also critical in the process of developing in-city, low-rise buildings for the APOAMF. Whether the political administration in power supported or rejected community People’s Plans, or whether administrations

favoured in-city relocation after flooding disasters, historically played a pivotal role in resolving their housing issues. President Benigno’s government relocation plan for ISFs living along identified danger zones was approved in 2011. This included relocation to safe, decent, and affordable resettlement sites supported by a PHP 50 billion (approximately USD 900,000,000) budget allocated to provide homes for around 104,000 ISFs, of which 60,000 were living along waterways. Given APOAMF’s strong working relationship with the Aquino administration, along with the support of COM and UPA, the financial commitment marked a historic shift away from previous top-down approaches that prioritized traditional off-site relocations. This funding also came at an opportune time as APOAMF was beginning their People’s Plan process — it was key to getting the NHA to approve and administer the project.

Challenges Encountered

Despite the Low-Rise Building Project’s (LRBP’s) success, the Alliance of Peoples Organizations Along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF) faces external challenges related to People’s Plan diversions and internal challenges related to the community’s future leadership.

People’s Plan Diversions

Our interviews identified three major challenges to the project’s success that are external to the Alliance of Peoples Organizations Along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF) operations: government overreach in the People’s Plan, the buildings’ substandard quality, and delays in construction.

GOVERNMENT OVERREACH

Participation and inclusion of community members in the decision-making and implementation processes of the People’s Plan are relevant to the LRBP’s success. However, our interviews

consistently indicated that the unexpected and undesired nature of the government's contribution has surpassed the initially defined boundaries for their involvement. The LRBP's ownership is attributed to the community members, although there have been reports that the National Housing Authority (NHA) has asserted ownership and demonstrated limited acknowledgement of the People's Plan in the absence of APOAMF.

In some of the first buildings, the NHA had greater control, resulting in limited community input in the design and management structures. For example, the beneficiaries lacked the autonomy to select their own contractors and check the quality of the buildings, which we heard was a typical process for other People's Plan projects in the city. The government, through the bids and awards committee, held ultimate decision-making power and granted the work to contractors who had unresolved quality issues on other projects. Some of the winning contractors subcontracted work to other parties at lower costs, leading to poor quality and slow construction progress.

When government administrations change, the project faces continuity problems: previous commitments made to APOAMF were sometimes overlooked, necessitating renegotiations. Another threat to the project's success is land ownership, which remains under NHA control. Residents occupy the land based on a user agreement. Their duration of occupancy, ranging from 30 to 50 years, depends on the NHA's assessment of each building's status. Considering some of the quality issues with the current buildings, the useful occupancy may be on the shorter end of the range, leaving questions for the LRBP occupants about what will happen when this time is up.

BUILDING QUALITY

The substandard construction practices pose significant challenges to the project. Because of budget constraints, there were limited choices

in implementing climate-resiliency measures. Further, the building's structural integrity may not endure earthquakes despite being built to withstand 10-magnitude earthquakes: there were cracks in the units following a 4.6-magnitude earthquake. Contractors also left various issues, such as leaking pipes, water pressure problems, and blockages in the sewage system. A recurring problem was the flooding on the fifth floor caused by water seepage through a damaged roof during the rainy season.

Residents on higher floors experience weak and slow water flow because two or more buildings relied on the same water source, leading to insufficient water pressure. There were electricity-related issues in the first phase, including the installation of the wrong electricity lines. The sewage-treatment plant failed to pass quality tests, resulting in unpleasant odours and health issues, particularly for residents living close to the sewage system. Despite the improvement in quality of life from the informal settlement conditions, and the fact that residents rated their satisfaction with their living conditions highly in comparison, these quality issues are still substantial.

CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

The construction on the remaining five buildings has been significantly delayed. The need for a robust electrical grid to provide appropriate capacity in power and energy supply and substandard construction practices have contributed to these delays. The COVID-19 pandemic also played a role in disrupting the project, causing setbacks and disruptions. Additionally, challenges related to project timelines, lack of details, and communication gaps have hindered the construction process even with a sufficient budget. These delays leave three of the 15 total buildings in the mid-state of construction, with two buildings still not started. Residents who are set to move into these incomplete buildings have been waiting for housing now for nearly a decade. They continue

to face threats of eviction and the demolition of their homes along the floodway.



Figure 11. One of three unfinished buildings in the LRBP complex

A New Era of Leadership

While the dedication and perseverance of the leadership team was crucial to the project's success, the community still faces some challenges with leadership, internal conflict, and management. The leadership team, particularly the board of directors, has been fairly consistent since the APOAMF's inception, with many of the key leadership roles filled by women who were on the front lines of mobilization along the East Bank Road over a decade ago. One official election for leadership occurred in 2019, but subsequent elections have since been pushed back because of COVID-19 and other barriers. The leadership required during the days of eviction, negotiation, and mobilization in an informal settlement may

look different from the leadership needs in a newly established low-rise building community. Given the tension between unchanging leadership and an evolving community structure, certain issues have arisen.

For example, some community members believe the unchanging leadership excludes those who are not part of the team that has developed strong bonds over the years of shared challenges they faced during the housing struggle. Although the leadership team does not intend for their comrades to be exclusive, some community members feel left out. Others are interested in disbanding the structure of the APOAMF and redesigning a new structure and leadership team to suit the new community's needs. Others observe that the leadership's current structure is overly hierarchical, where youth or other nonleadership members feel like they must defer to the board when speaking about the community or the LRBP.

People are adjusting to a new way of living, with more rules and expectations than they experienced in the informal settlement. These stressors and tensions occasionally lead to intercommunity fighting, including posting grievances online. Despite these tensions, the community has effective conflict-management processes and internal conflict is said to be lower now in the LRBP than in the prior informal settlement. Community organizers, such as Community Organizers Multiversity (COM), also help manage conflict and work to remind the community that they are stronger when they are united.

Acknowledging the concerns that leadership has not changed over the course of the project, we uncovered some of the challenges that the leaders face in fulfilling their roles. Leading the community through mobilization, fighting evictions, negotiations, and moving over to the new site has been exhausting for the leaders, but they persevere because of their dedication to the well-being of their families, friends, and

neighbours. We heard from many that being a community leader puts a significant strain on their family lives and their ability to manage and care for their own homes. Moving into LRBP housing has presented a new set of challenges for these leaders: building management. Given cost constraints, the leadership chose to take on the management of the buildings themselves, including security, maintenance, utilities, parking, and finance through various committees. Many of them did not have this experience prior to moving into the LRBP so they face a massive learning curve and upskilling.

One community member noted that when they do not have those skills and “rely on outside technical workers,” it is “not sustainable for the community” over the long term. For example, when the cost of outside expertise became prohibitive, some community members “joined seminars to try to educate themselves on how to handle sewage waste treatment.” While there has been great success in some areas of estate management, such as maintaining the water utility account, it is still a large and unfamiliar burden on the leaders.

Although the leadership team’s roles and responsibilities are growing, there is also a perception among some that APOAMF is unwilling to invite in new leaders to share the workload. Many leaders we spoke to shared how they were tired and wanted to step back from their intensive roles, but that they could not find appropriate successors. Some community members articulate a desire to lead or have a leadership title but are unwilling to put in the required work. One leader described how even active members of their committee often did not contribute what was asked of them.

Since these leadership roles are not well-paid positions (typically earning only a small monthly stipend and relying primarily on volunteer hours), it’s challenging to recruit skilled and effective successors, particularly youth in the community who prefer to go outside the LRBP to find higher-

paid jobs. This has led to some leaders feeling stuck because they cannot find successors, yet they refuse to give up or turn their back on the community that they have served for over a decade.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the development and implementation of the Low-Rise Building Project (LRBP), the community’s leadership, partnerships, and resilience appear to be key features that helped them mobilize from the bottom up to realize their housing rights. Sustained support for bottom-up community-led interventions, with a steadfast focus on community resilience, will be paramount in the future. We propose four lessons for other communities or policymakers that aim to create sustainable, safe, and accessible housing initiatives.

Recognize community-driven solutions in response to nationwide issues

Multiple interviewees described how issues within the Metro Manila housing system were systemic, multifaceted, and complex. Moving forward from historic urban planning decisions, an influx of private development, and lack of land availability will not occur overnight. However, the LRBP and community grassroots organizing demonstrate that practical change can be realized when community members co-develop concrete housing solutions with local governments that are tailored to their needs and respectful of their ways of living. APOAMF demonstrates the power of the people, especially when marginalized community members come together in a participatory process to develop alternative housing solutions to eviction. At the centre of the People’s Plan was knowing their rights to both housing and land, as well as the commitment to remain in their city after flooding disasters. While the LRBP does not fix problems with the housing

systems in Manila for the urban poor, it effectively sets a precedent that informal settler families (ISFs) can take care of themselves and their homes by advocating for themselves, forming coalitions, and partnering with the government.

Engage in ongoing negotiations with the government during all project phases to maximize housing rights

People we interviewed indicated the importance of continued negotiation and mobilization with the government during the construction phase and after move-in to maximize housing rights and effective building management. Several interviewees indicated that ISFs' needs changed both before and after moving the LRBP, which had a negative impact on the community's unity. For example, they were considered informal settlers, so they solely focused on securing a place to stay; however, after moving into the new locations, some people's priorities shifted toward improving their living conditions, while others became satisfied with their current situation and did not wish to pursue further changes. It's crucial to inform the ISFs that their rights and needs should be continuously assessed and addressed to foster a sense of trust and ensure active participation in election and leadership events.

During the construction phase, it is important to maintain open communication with the government to address any potential issues or concerns that may arise. This includes discussions on land ownership, the selection of constructors, the quality of construction, adherence to building codes and regulations, and the adaptation of building structures to meet the beneficiaries' needs. After people move in, negotiations continue to be essential in safeguarding housing rights.

This may involve advocating for maintenance and repairs and access to basic services and utilities, as well as addressing any issues related to tenure security. By actively participating in ongoing negotiations with the government, ISFs can work toward maximizing their housing rights and creating sustainable communities.

Social mobilization and poverty-alleviation strategies contribute to the success and scalability of housing interventions

For housing security to be successful, especially in rapidly developing cities across Asia, social mobilization and poverty alleviation must be an integral part of the efforts taken by the affected urban poor community. For example, a community-driven development program in Bihar, India, called JEEViKA, empowered women and the poor by providing them with various forms of financial support, including job opportunities, and skills training, which, in turn, contributed to their living situations and helped them mobilize against corruption and improve governance.¹¹ This was similar to the situation in Metro Manila, where the availability of land is scarce, housing has become very expensive, and the government has a limited budget to support public housing projects. Even the housing alternatives designed for the low-income ISFs are often not within municipal budgets. Thus, social mobilization and a focus on employment and poverty alleviation, as in the case of Bihar, demonstrates that it is a shared responsibility between the government, NGOs, and the affected urban poor community itself to develop plans focusing on empowerment, skills development, and the redistribution of resources to empower them to address their housing needs and bring the urban social housing projects into the range of affordability.

11 Rajiv Verma, Saurabh Gupta, and Regina Birner, "Can Grassroots Mobilization of the Poorest Reduce Corruption? A Tale of Governance Reforms and Struggle Against Petty Corruption in Bihar, India," *Development and Change* 48, no. 2 (2017): 339–63.

Informal settler families have knowledge and lived experience to contribute to improving housing outcomes and should not be overlooked

The APOAMF was determined to integrate the knowledge gained from living as climate adaptation leaders on the Manggahan Floodway into their People's Plan — which they presented to their government partners. The resulting completion of their LRBP showcased how ISFs can remain resolute in organizing and mobilizing over time to shift government policies in their favour. By scaling up such knowledge and experience from the LRBP, communities can build their capacity to understand their rights, respond to unfavourable political acts toward them, forge partnerships that enhance their resiliency, and achieve communal security. Research by Padawangi and Douglass found that collaborative efforts between communities, government agencies, and NGOs were necessary to effectively address the significant problem of chronic urban flooding in Jakarta, Indonesia.¹² Examples of such co-productive approaches in Jakarta and participatory processes in the LRBP in Metro Manila confirm and recognize the importance of lived experiences, partnerships, and inclusion in building community resilience to climate-induced disasters.

Conclusion

The success of APOAMF's Low-Rise Building Project offers a replicable framework for mobilizing housing rights initiatives in marginalized urban communities throughout Manila, with the potential for wider implementation across the Philippines and the greater Southeast Asia region. However, persistent challenges pose risks to interventions aimed at supporting hard-to-reach populations in Metro Manila. This case study serves as a powerful reminder of the pivotal role that community-led initiatives, participatory decision-making processes, and collaborative partnerships among community organizations, NGOs, and government agencies play in shaping successful urban planning and development endeavours. The report also underscores the significance of addressing issues related to land tenure and ownership faced by ISFs residing in these settlements. Tackling these challenges is not only essential for achieving sustainable urban development goals but also for specifically reducing inequalities, establishing resilient cities and communities, and effectively implementing climate adaptation.

12 Rita Padawangi and Mike Douglass, "Water, Water Everywhere: Toward Participatory Solutions to Chronic Urban Flooding in Jakarta," *Pacific Affairs* 88, no. 3 (2015): 517–50.

Research Team



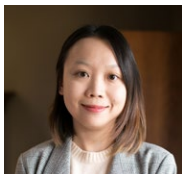
Hajar Seiyad completed her undergraduate degree studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough with a double major in mental health studies and political science. She is an avid qualitative researcher involved in initiatives focused on subjective well-being, patient-centred practice and policy, health equity, and knowledge mobilization. As a former member of the University of Toronto’s Sustainable Development Goals Student Advisory Council and a current member of the university’s Inlight Student Mental Health Research Initiative, Hajar is passionate about amplifying student voices and building an equitable future for all, by all. She currently works as a research associate with the University of British Columbia investigating national youth access to contraception.



Cayra Tansey is a graduate of the MSc Sustainability Management program at the University of Toronto Mississauga and holds a bachelor of commerce degree from the University of Victoria. She has conducted research on the role of social enterprises in building community resilience and is passionate about helping communities understand and adapt to climate change, socially and physically. She is also interested in how traditional and nontraditional businesses can contribute to a sustainable society through systems change. Cayra works at Boston Consulting Group (BCG) management consultancy contributing to climate and sustainability projects. Previously, she worked with BCG’s Centre for Canada’s Future on climate research and as a sustainable development analyst at an Indigenous social and environmental consulting firm called Two Worlds Consulting.



Mena Uchendu-Wogu is an MSc Sustainability Management candidate at the Institute for Management and Innovation with over four years of multidisciplinary design experience in green buildings, resiliency infrastructure, and SDGs research. His academic research and professional design portfolio focus on developing inclusive solutions for marginalized populations and dismantling the cycles of disadvantage in underserved communities. Mena worked on the Sustainability team at RioCan Real Estate Investment Trust where he supported their sovereign ESG strategy and contributed toward developing their social impact assessment framework. Mena is an award-winning architect with global recognition for green architecture from the Architecture MasterPrize 2021, DNA Paris Design Awards 2023, and the Nigerian Institute of Architects. He holds a bachelor of science degree in architecture from the University of Nigeria.



Beiwen Wu is a PhD candidate in epidemiology at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. She grew up in Nanjing, China, and came to North America in 2012 for her postsecondary education. Prior to pursuing her PhD, she completed her MSPH in human nutrition at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and worked as a research dietitian at the Johns Hopkins ProHealth Clinical Research Unit. In this role, she was involved in intervention studies examining the effects of dietary components on health outcomes related to chronic diseases. Her doctoral research focuses on investigating the associations between comprehensive lipid profiles and lung cancer risk, utilizing data from the UK Biobank and publicly available genome-wide association studies. While the Reach experience is different from her usual research, she is highly motivated to step out of her comfort zone and acquire skills in qualitative research and knowledge translation on a global scale as she strongly believes these skills are vital for promoting health equity.



Amy Bilton is an associate professor in mechanical engineering and the director of the cross-disciplinary Centre for Global Engineering (CGEN) at the University of Toronto. Her research group, the Water and Energy Research Lab (WERL), focuses on developing innovative water and energy technologies that are geared toward global development. She has worked with industry and NGOs around the world, most notably in India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Mexico, and Nicaragua. She has published over 30 peer-reviewed journal articles in top journals such as *Science Advances*, *Nature Sustainability*, *Environmental Science*, and *World Development*. She completed her PhD and MS in aeronautics and astronautics at MIT and her BAsC in engineering science (aerospace) from the University of Toronto. Amy received the prestigious Engineers Canada Young Engineer Achievement Award for her contributions toward engineering for global development.



Sarah Haines is an assistant professor in the Department of Civil and Mineral Engineering at the University of Toronto. Her interdisciplinary research group, the Indoor Microbiology and Environmental Exposures (IMEE), integrates building science, engineering, and microbiology to analyze the impact the built environment has on human health. She uses cutting-edge microbiology techniques such as next-generation sequencing, metatranscriptomics, and bioinformatics to determine the relationship between the indoor microbiome and indoor environmental quality. Linking to climate change, her research explores the impact of weatherization and extreme weather events on indoor air quality, particularly in low-socioeconomic communities who may be at a higher risk for respiratory diseases. Recently she partnered with multiple Indigenous communities across Canada to co-develop solutions for housing self-sufficiency and sustainability. She completed her PhD and MASc in environmental science and her BAsC in environmental engineering from The Ohio State University.



Founded at the University of Toronto in 2015, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, the Reach Alliance has since scaled to seven other leading universities around the world. As a student-led, faculty-mentored, research and leadership initiative, Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful (or not) in getting to some of the world's hardly reached populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend nine to twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics, and business leaders.

Inspired by the United Nations' call to eliminate global poverty by 2030 as part of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our mission is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach.



Published by the Reach Alliance, November 2023
Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy | University of Toronto

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