

Maurice Leonhardt

ACHR – The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

Before the emergence of ACHR, there was no common forum or regular organising for NGOs, professionals and grassroots groups working in Asian cities to exchange ideas. This was despite an expressed need to share experiences, tackle the large problem of forced evictions in the region's cities, develop opportunities for organisations of the poor and consider their place in city planning. It was with these intentions in mind that ACHR was formed in 1988. Since then, the links between coalition members have matured, regional programmes have been formalised and ACHR has become recognised as one of the most important players in urban poor development in the region by international agencies and urban actors. The coalition is action-orientated, highly decentralised, and aims to provide an alternative model of urban development based on Asian realities and experiences.

Introduction

We're new to video technology, but feel that as the cost of the technology comes within our range and the potential for use on the Internet and elsewhere becomes increasingly apparent, we should start experimenting with this medium so that when it becomes as omnipresent as email, we'll be in a good position to help put forward the voice of the urban poor in a way so as to maximise impact.

Figure 1 Maurice's portrait (from IDS workshop, May 2000)



We've had great success with our community-to-community exchange programmes across Asia. With video, we can supplement this process and allow more communities to actually 'see' what's happening with other poor communities in Asia. Where possible, participants (of our exchanges) go back to their country with an unedited, un-narrated video record of their exchange visit. Groups from Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Nepal and elsewhere have told us that this has been useful for them when they are giving feedback to their communities and others upon their return. The need to spin their own story as narrators also helps reinforce their learning; put them in a local context and language (and saves on translation as most grassroots participants do not speak English and in combined exchanges come from a variety of countries). Our feedback suggests that groups have found this type of 'documentation and presentation' easier and more productive than participants writing reports to be distributed and particularly for confidence building; 'seeing is believing', which is a big reason for exchanges. Often we've accumulated footage of sights, field visits and processes from previous exchanges and these can be inserted quickly before copies are given to participants.

In our travels through Asia and Africa as well, we also document (record) urban poor traditions and culture: working songs from Tibet; federation music from Africa; saving people's songs; traditional building and innovative techniques. The collection is small but growing. Often we document these processes for a very simple reason: 'It's really something magic, to lose it would be tragic'. Other times we can pass the footage around the region as a learning experience for others.

As we get to know more about the technology, we're able to use it in more diverse ways and respond quickly to requests for stories.

For example...

In the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights we have been instrumental in establishing a Federation of savings groups in Phnom Penh since 1993. These groups are now operating in over 200 poor communities in Phnom Penh. We're in constant contact via email etc., and almost

monthly exchange visits between Cambodia, Thailand and India. During December 1999 and January 2000, we realised that the largest slum community was facing eviction threats from government under pressure to redevelop the land. In collaboration with local grassroots groups we re-surveyed the large site, checking previous detail on length of stay, family sizes, income levels, housing space etc. This is all the information needed to empower communities with sufficient information to negotiate either to remain on the site or to participate in a negotiated and acceptable resettlement plan. At the same time our 'Young Professionals Network' in Cambodia and Thailand worked together in Phnom Penh with the communities. The site was mapped previously by the community; they now made new maps, and discussed and drew up alternative solutions involving, among other things, land-sharing alternatives. They held community meetings to design alternatives and the Young Professionals (YPs) drew up the 'professional' plans.

In the following weeks, the Planning Department of the Municipality welcomed the YP and community alternative and we arranged for Planning Department staff to visit some similarly devised successful solutions in nearby Bangkok, Thailand. The Municipality welcomed the efforts, and the principle of land sharing as an alternative to removal was accepted as a good and feasible alternative for the city. The strategy was in line with one of our basic principles in negotiations – '*come armed with viable solutions – not demands*'. However in the case of Bassac (the largest squatter community in Phnom Penh) the municipality had little control as the plans for eviction were being directed from above, by people in national government. It was clear that we (ACHR) and the local federation of urban poor SUPF (Solidarity for the Urban Poor Federation) would have to influence government at a higher level than the friends we had already made in the municipality – as high up as the Prime Minister of the country.

Friends in local government told us that the preferred method for the Prime Minister to get an understanding of new influences was to have them explained via video. This was an attractive alternative to initial meetings and was more efficient for the Prime Minister in terms of time and convenience. Those who were to present it to him were also more confident of conveying our message via video. It must be said that the video was merely the tool of presentation and that five to six years of hard work in forming the federation and its partnership processes with local government (i.e. the content) were vital ingredients in convincing the PM to engage with us. So, the best way to do this, said local officials, was to make a short 10-minute video of the work we were doing involving partnerships with government organisations and slum communities. It would offer an alternative process to forced evictions of the poor from communities in Phnom Penh.

Within days we collected the footage taken over the past few years in Phnom Penh – by ourselves and by locals with whom we'd left a camera. How did locals end up with our cameras? The power equation between the poor and government planners is unequal. The role of professionals working with the poor in many ways is to aid the communities in redressing the imbalance. With this in mind we set up an Urban Resource Centre (URC) in Phnom Penh a few years ago to support communities in their surveys, house and infrastructure designs and in gathering information about the city that may affect communities of the poor. At the same time we (the ACHR Secretariat and others) were experimenting with video and up-graded our camera to a digital model. We gave the VHS camera to the URC in Phnom Penh to help document local urban poor processes.

All this meant that by the time we were ready to produce a video for the Prime Minister, we had a large store of footage of important events and processes over the past years. Together we made the video in 48 hours, and sent it to Phnom Penh for a Khmer language narration dubbed from English. From here it went to the Prime Minister Hun Sen. The PM immediately agreed to meet with the local SUPF and inaugurate a relocation site and, in the process, donated US\$200,000 to buy land for the urban poor as well as contributing \$2,000 a month to our UPDF (housing loan fund). The PM's support combined with the urban poor's savings contribution will act as a seed to attract funds from international donors. In another strategy borrowed through our exchange processes in Asia, we were able to make the PM an advisor to the UPDF and thus hopefully engage with him on a regular basis. We recorded the Prime Minister's inauguration of the new site on video and sent him an edited version, with thanks (stills of the inauguration are on our web site: <http://www.achr.net/hunsen.htm>).

Figure 2 The Cambodian Prime Minister visits the slum dwellers' exhibition



Photo: M. Leonhardt

Participatory or popular communications?

While meeting with video activists from around the world at Sussex this year, it became quite obvious to me that our efforts in video so far, while having some good impacts, were far from 'participatory'. In terms of the theories of participatory video, perhaps we would have scored 3 out of 10. In the example above, the script was devised by me as was the editing and storyline. We only had a couple of days to put it together. I'm not suggesting it would have been more effective if it were a more participatory process (certainly it would have been good for the communities to be more involved in the whole production, in terms of their empowerment). But we're content with using various strategies to suit the time constraints and context and perhaps even the PRA purists would agree. It was great though to get more ideas on this important aspect at the workshop in the UK and we'll be experimenting in this direction over the coming months. We're already exchanging ideas and receiving advice from Lars and Verena at *Maneno Mengi Africa*¹ – a group we met at the workshop and at the front line of participatory video making.

With thanks,
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¹ Maneno Mengi is a small organisation with a large international network. Making use of the latest digital technology, they work with participatory media production and communication. Their purpose is to create new development practices that offer authorship to people whose voices are otherwise not heard. They can be contacted at: P.O. Box 3979, Zanzibar, Tanzania. Tel: +255 (0) 54 31952, E-mail: maneno@africaonline.co.tz, website: www.zanzibar.org/maneno.