

# ACHR e-news

News from groups around Asia about what's happening in the region . . .

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

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JANUARY 2009

- Young professionals workshop in CAMBODIA
- New redevelopment nightmares in KOREA
- Riverside upgrading in Solo, INDONESIA
- City-wide upgrading launched in Viet Tri, VIETNAM
- Somsook leaves CODI in THAILAND
- ACHR regional meeting in January 2009
- The curious case of the disappearing poor people
- Women's savings update from LAO PDR

## ASSISTING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN HOUSING in CAMBODIA :

During the month of February 2009, a workshop for young professionals from different fields who are interested in working with poor communities in Cambodia will be held in Phnom Penh, February 2009. This is the second such workshop that's been organized in Cambodia, and if it's as successful as the first one more than twelve years ago, we'll be looking forward to a fresh batch of enthusiastic young talent to add to the support system for the country's growing community movement and their fast-expanding housing and upgrading initiatives. The 4-week workshop is being jointly organized by UPDF, ACHR and the Municipality of Phnom Penh, with the collaboration of the Royal University of Fine Arts (Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism) and several other Cambodian universities and technical and agricultural institutes. For more information about the workshop, please contact May Domingo, who will be taking a month away from her community upgrading support work Iloilo to coordinate the workshop. ([mayjonloukel@gmail.com](mailto:mayjonloukel@gmail.com)). Here are a few excerpts from May's brief on the workshop :



### **What is the workshop for?**

- **Understanding the city:** To familiarize participants with issues faced by the urban poor of Phnom Penh and other Asian Cities (e.g., understanding current problems of the city and existing and future policies, plans and projects that drive/govern its development, and how urban poor communities are affected by them).
- **Understanding the urban poor and urban poverty:** To deepen understanding of the root causes of urban poverty and the dynamics and initiatives of urban poor communities in finding solutions to their problems.
- **Sharing experiences from other Asian Cities and the work of Asian young professionals:** To introduce good practices of solving urban poor issues and work done by urban poor communities in other Asian Cities (through sharing and exchange visits); and understand the role of professionals in supporting the communities' development initiatives.
- **Participatory approach:** To gain some hands-on experience in working and interacting with communities and promoting community participation in gathering community information, community planning and design, etc. – e.g. being community architects, engineers, lawyers, etc.

### **What will be the content and the format?**

- **First week: Lectures and inputs with local and international resource persons**, covering such themes as urban development and urban issues in both the Asian and global context, different perspectives on housing and urban development in Cambodia, sharing of experiences by Asian young professionals' work with urban poor communities.
- **Second week: Field work, community visits and needs assessment with communities**, including information-gathering activities and interaction with poor communities to understand their problems and needs.
- **Third week: Exchange visits / trip across Cambodia and Thailand**, to visit communities which are doing or have done upgrading or housing work, with opportunities for interacting and sharing with Thai young professional groups.
- **Fourth week: Making of community plans and final presentations-**, including discussion about and practice of techniques for doing participatory planning with communities and presenting plans in a public forum.

**Who will be participating?** About 60 senior students from the Royal University of Fine Arts (Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism and Department of Environment), Norton University's Department of Architecture, the Cambodia Institute of Technology's Faculty of Civil Engineering, the Royal University of Agriculture's Faculty of Land Management, the Royal University of Law and Economics and the Royal University of Agriculture.

## FULL CIRCLE on HOUSING and EVICTION in SEOUL, KOREA

In October, Maurice traveled to Korea to attend the 24th session of the CITYNET executive committee in Changwon. Afterwards, he headed to Seoul to re-connect with some of ACHR's old friends and understand the fast-changing situation there. Korea is undergoing another big wave of urban redevelopment, in which large chunks of the inner city - even areas that are now fully developed with houses and apartment buildings owned and rented by middle class people - are being forcibly taken over by the government, demolished and rebuilt by developers as high rise blocks of flats, commercial buildings, shopping centers and totally new layouts of streets. It's a very bad deal for the poorer tenants, who get no rights to in the newly developed projects at all, but it's no great deal for the owners either, since the only compensation they get for their houses or flats (which they have bought in the formal sector market!) is a place on the list of those entitled to buy units in the new schemes! Here are a few notes from Maurice on the trip :

**News from Father Frank :** I was able to catch up with Father Frank (Mun Su Park) at a rather noisy but joyous fund-raising event in the basement of one of Seoul's many skyscrapers. His sad news was that John Daily, now weakened by various illnesses, is no longer able to work. Fr. Frank's term as pastor of a parish in Seoul will end this month, but he will continue to live in the neighborhood and have more time for his research, consultations and work in Korea's housing rights movement. Fr. Frank was recently honored by the Seoul Bar Association with an award given for his contribution to human and housing rights in Korea and for his support for communities in their struggle against unjust evictions. Fr. Frank has distributed the \$10,000 award money among several housing rights groups and community organizations and the outreach center where he is now working.

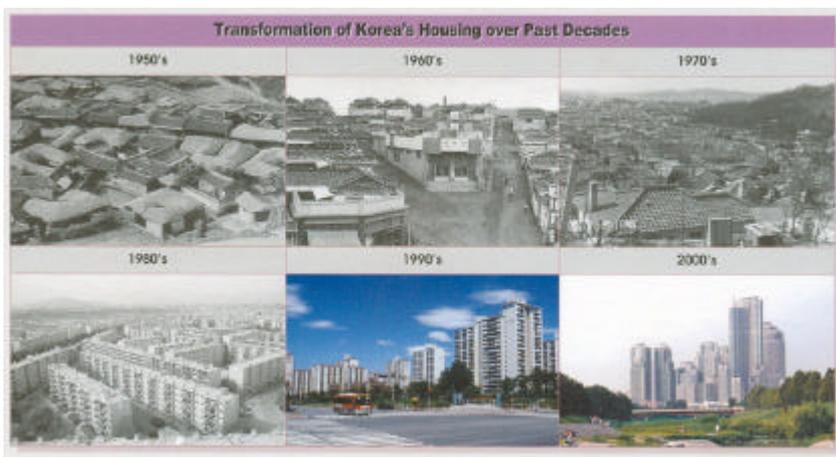
**News from Professor Ha :** I had dinner with Prof. Ha, who is active in research, housing and advocacy for the poor through the Korea Center for City and Environmental Research (KOCER). Prof Ha, who has recently been appointed Vice President of Chung-Ang University, has been associated with ACHR for many years.

**News from Hyo Woo Na :** Na was my host in Seoul, along with some of his energetic young students. After working with LOCOA in the Philippines and studying in the USA, Na returned to Seoul and formed *Asian Bridge*, an organization which links Korean civil society with Asian NGOs, advocates for disadvantaged groups (such as the urban poor and migrant workers), carries out research and provides training and information. One evening, I was invited to speak about ACHR at an "Urban Forum" organized monthly by Na's group. My co-speaker was a Korean who had just returned from working with the poor in South America. For more information about Asian Bridge, please contact Na at [nahywoo@hotmail.com](mailto:nahywoo@hotmail.com) or visit their website: [www.asianbridge.asia](http://www.asianbridge.asia)

**Revisiting the site of old struggles :** Na took us to visit some of the older communities where (when ACHR first began in 1988) the poor had struggled to resist some particularly brutal evictions taking place for the Olympic Games. We met with some of the bravest of these communities and their leaders who had held out and were now living in apartments surrounded by parkland and children's playgrounds - a well-deserved victory.

**Seoul's latest wave of redevelopment :** Na then took us on a tour of several other communities in Seoul which are under threat of eviction by the new government's urban development schemes known as "New-Towns". During the 1990's and early 2000s, the number of evictions in Seoul had decreased and attitudes and policies towards the urban poor had improved, but the new national government has reversed this trend, giving in to large-scale developers and their upscale vision of huge high-rise apartment complexes in which only the rich can afford to live. Even middle-class home-owners are being forcibly removed in these "New-Town"

developments, and their only compensation is being given the right to an apartment - *which they still have to pay for!* Renters, who get no compensation, have no option but to move out, usually to poorer areas on the outskirts of the city where job opportunities are few.



**BUT IT GETS WORSE!** On January 20th, 40 middle class residents of a 5-story apartment in Seoul barricaded themselves on the rooftop of their building in protest against plans to evict them to make way for another of these "New-Town" redevelopment schemes in Seoul's central Yongsan district. In scenes that might have come out of a Hollywood action movie, helmeted police commandos being lifted by cranes onto the rooftop were pelted with bricks, firebombs and paint thinner, causing a fire which swept across the building and left six people dead. The scene also brought to mind the dramatic resistance struggles poor communities in Seoul made against an earlier wave of redevelopment schemes being foisted on them twenty years ago, in preparation for the 1988 Olympic games. Back then, the confrontations between community people and the evicting authorities were just as fierce and just as violent, but they took place in mountain-top squatter settlements instead of the rooftops of middle class apartment buildings. For more information on this story, please follow this link : <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article5550919.ece>

## RELIVING A 20-YR OLD RIVER-SIDE UPGRADING IN SOLO, INDONESIA

Antonio is an architect who is based in Bali but has been involved for many years with community upgrading and low income housing projects around Indonesia. Twenty years ago, Antonio was one of a team of young architects hired by the World Bank to help plan and carry out a pilot upgrading scheme in one section of Kelurahan Mojosongo, a sprawling and problem-filled river-side kampung (poor squatter community) in the Javanese city of Solo. As part of the project, one area of the kampung, with about 200 houses, was completely reblocked, with a slightly improved layout of roads, infrastructure lines and public spaces and new houses. All the planning and implementation of the project was done through an intense, vibrant and (at that time) unusual participatory community design and construction process. Antonio is now putting the story of Mojosongo into a book, with the idea of sharing some of the lessons from the project with others involved in similar community upgrading projects. A few excerpts :

- **"Holistic" community upgrading** : Besides new infrastructure, houses and public amenities, the people at Mojosongo developed community-based programs to help deal with all aspects of life in the community: physical, economic and social. So the project included community-driven initiatives to clean up the heavily-polluted river, to set up trash recycling program, to use green methods to recycle the community's wastewater, to improve incomes and self-employment opportunities through collective savings and credit groups, to make community gardens and to build a new community center and market.
- **"Organizing the unorganized"** : The "self-rearranging" settlements process in Mojosongo began with community people measuring and mapping their original situation, and using this information as the basis for their planning. And although the community people were the main actors in the upgrading project, the whole process was carried out with the good collaboration of the other key development actors: the local city government, the teams of architects (community facilitators) and the World Bank. This collaboration was an important part of building greater recognition and legitimacy for a large group of poor people who had been considered illegal squatters.
- **Housing loans** : The people all took loans of 10 - 20 million Rupiah each to build their new houses (which they built collectively) from a special government-run loan program that was set up by another Indonesian architect Parwoto, with support from UN-Habitat. The loans and house designs were carefully worked out to match people's affordability.
- **Infrastructure** : The new roads, drainage lines, water supply and electricity systems were all built by the community people themselves (following the traditional Indonesian system of mutual-aid called *gotong royong*), using funds that came partly from their own contributions and partly from the local government. The trunk infrastructure and levees along the river were built by contractors as part of a larger flood control project in the area being financed by a loan from the World Bank.
- **Lots of young architects** : The project was a magnet for a lot of young architects and architecture students who were keen to get involved in a process in which a poor community was being allowed to stay where they were and upgrade their housing in-situ, at a time when huge evictions of poor people had been happening under the Suharto regime.
- **Setting a new model** : After the Suharto regime ended, the project at Mojosongo was considered as a model of on-site, participatory community upgrading by the Ministry of Public Works, and there were some similar projects carried out in other places with some government support. But it didn't take long for a more developer-driven strategy for dealing with problems of housing the poor in Indonesian cities to take over, with the same old model of government building high-rise blocks of subsidized flats for resettling the poor who had been staying in run-down and insecure kampungs.



Mojosongo **BEFORE**



Mojosongo **AFTER**

**A country full of river-side slums** : Like some of its watery neighbors in southeast Asia, Indonesia is a country especially rich in river-side and canal-side slums and squatter settlements. While these communities have long been seen as pests and polluters and targeted for eviction, there are a few interesting upgrading initiatives in other cities that are trying to show that canal-side communities can be beautiful, healthy and vibrant neighborhoods and can be assets to a city's efforts to maintain its water-bodies and flood-control systems :

- **Surabaya** : After years of struggle and negotiation and hard work, the Stren Kali Network of river-side communities in Surabaya has got an agreement from the local government to allow them to stay and upgrade their housing in the same place, as long as they can figure out how to finance the work. Upgrading work in these communities is now underway.
- **Yogyakarta** : The UN's Slum Upgrading Facility (SUF) is trying to initiate a similar community upgrading program in that city's river-side communities, as a pilot case for Indonesia, and are now working to organize the communities and figure out how the process will be financed.

## CITY-WIDE SAVINGS AND UPGRADING in VIET TRI, VIETNAM

The city-wide community upgrading process (under ACHR's new "Communities Act Program") in Vietnam has begun! Three cities (Quinhon, Danang and Viet Tri) have been selected as pilot cities, but we expect that about 6-10 cities can actually start and implement upgrading and housing projects under the new program this year. ACHR has proposed that the Association of Vietnamese Cities (ACVN - an important new partner in the national savings process) make a plan to implement similar community-driven savings and housing programs in 100 cities within 3 years!

**Thinking big is no longer an extravagance but a necessity :** It is very important when we think about development more realistically with the real scale of poverty and people who should be involved. This figure of 100 cities may be too big and at the end of those three years, we may not actually achieve it. I think it doesn't matter at all. What really matters is the developing a way of thinking that is relevant to the real scale of problems and that allows us to build various kinds of horizontal platforms to link people and their activities together and to impact existing change *at scale*. (Somsook)

**Viet Tri is a small provincial city** of about 170,000 people, 2 hours northwest of Hanoi. It is one of the eight cities in the growing network of community savings groups, which has been supported by ACHR, ENDA and ACVN. Between December 18 and 21, 2008, a seminar was organized in Viet Tri, to give a boost to the process there, in which community leaders and Women's Union and local government officials from several other cities came to learn and share. Here are a few brief notes from that meeting :

**Strong savings in Viet Tri, but no experience with housing or land issues:** The community development fund / community savings process in Viet Tri is by now quite strong and active, with good support from the Women's Union, especially around income generation. The process got a big boost last August 2008 when Minh Chau, ENDA, the Women's Union and ACVN organized a big seminar there, and many new savings groups were launched. The big question now is how to use the savings and CDF process to mobilize people to take on housing and upgrading activities, not just income generation. ENDA has little experience linking savings with housing, and for ACVN and the Women's Union, this is also new territory in Vietnam, where the state system manages everything.

**Two kinds of slums in Viet Tri :** There aren't many informal squatter settlements in Viet Tri, of the sort we see in most other Asian cities, but there are two kinds of poor settlements with housing, land and environmental problems :

- **"Vertical slums" :** Which are dilapidated, run-down collective social housing in low-rise (2-4 stories) blocks, where low-income and poor people stay, which the government wants eventually to tear down and "redevelop" with new housing.
- **Run-down collective housing** like the one we visited during the meeting, in Nong Trang Ward, which are essentially run-down collective rowhouses for workers, where the occupants do not have land use rights. In these settlements, there is a mix of mostly poor households and some not-so-poor. The government wants eventually to redevelop these old collective housing developments in some way: by demolishing and rebuilding the settlements in-situ, or by relocating the people to newly developed housing elsewhere - or some combination of the two. Either way, the redevelopment process is so far conceived only as a conventional top-down, state-planned, contractor-built process with almost zero participation of the communities and in which the people will be expected to pay for everything: land-use rights, infrastructure and new housing. When they can't pay - as is often the case - the communities are left in legal limbo, or else they lose their houses and land. People in these communities want to stay and they want to upgrade their houses and living conditions. But their top priority is getting land-use rights, and they are worried that if they cannot afford the steep costs of the provincial authority's redevelopment projects, they'll never get their land-use rights.

**Showing a simpler, cheaper, people-built alternative :** As Lek Sompop (in the Thai team) put it, *"We have to make a new choice for people here. In cities like Viet Tri, the people's only choice is the government's plan. We need to make a new choice to compare with the government's plan. When people see that the community can build cheaper and better, the change will happen all by itself! And that is what we are going to be trying to do in Viet Tri and the other pilot cities."*

**Viet Tri's first-ever community housing planning workshop :** As part of the 3-day's activities, the visiting team from Thailand conducted Viet Tri's first-ever community housing planning workshop, with a group of poor farmers in the city's peri-urban Kim Duc Commune. Instead of just talking about how to increase people's participation in solving their housing problems, why not just do some real designing? The four groups were given colored paper, cutters, glue, scaled maps of a square piece of land, and small cut-outs of typical 40 sm housing plots, and let loose to start designing. Lek asked, *"What else do you want to add in your new community? Markets? Health centers? Sports grounds? Kindergartens? Gardens? Community centers?"* For most of these community people and ward officials, this was the first time they'd ever thought about designing and laying out their own community, even if it is only a theoretical community on paper! After about an hour, each group presented its plans.



### "Housing for the poor" becomes "Golden Buffalo"

One of the groups started out with a working name for their community: *"Housing for the Poor."* But in the process of designing their community, they became so fond of their project that they began to feel the name was uninspiring. But what else should they call it? Finally they decided to call their community *"Golden Buffalo"*, to symbolize strength and prosperity!

## SOMSOOK LEAVES CODI for FULL-TIME REGIONAL WORK with ACHR

Somsook's term as director of the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) ended on January 9, 2009. This is a considerable milestone for Thailand's community movement as a whole, and for Somsook personally, since it comes after some seventeen years of work with CODI and its predecessor UCDO, and more than three decades of passionate involvement with community development and housing in Thailand. The days leading up to and following that day were full of meetings, visits, ceremonies, parties and (as one CODI colleague reported) enough tears to cause a flood. The piles of gifts, tributes, sweets and fruit baskets have made it difficult to navigate around the ACHR office! On January 7th, we were managed to catch Somsook between appointments and to hear some of her thoughts on this important transition. These brief notes have been drawn from that discussion:

**This is not a 100% goodbye, though!** Somsook will still be active in the Thai community process. She's been chosen to sit on the new CODI board and will certainly be asked to act as advisor to various initiatives of CODI and the national community movement. Also, now that Thailand has a brand new government, she has been working with others to try to sell the idea of people-driven development approach to this new government - which has been no easy task. As one community leader told her, "Oh it won't be so easy for you to leave, because the knowledge and experience and belief in communities is in your blood, so you'll be around!"

### **The Urban Community Network leaders throw a farewell dinner party for Somsook**

: Yesterday I was invited to have dinner with some 200 leaders from the community network, under the Baan Mankong Program. We had a talk that was quite interesting - and often times a little emotional! - which was a reflection on the ideas behind the Baan Mankong upgrading program - especially the program's core idea that we just let people do it! As I sat facing all these people, who have all accomplished so much in their upgrading work, I couldn't help but feel astonished to recall what they were like and where they were five or ten years ago. How difficult their lives were then, how uncertain they were what to do, how reluctant they were to speak, how little they felt they had to say, and how clumsy they were when they did speak. And none of them would have had the confidence to imagine that they could all do such beautiful upgrading and housing projects as were represented in this big group!



**"Graduates of the University of Baan Mankong"** Most of the 200 leaders who joined the party have already completed Baan Mankong upgrading projects in their communities, or have projects well underway. I said, "You are the people who have already graduated! You are all graduates of the University of Baan Mankong!" Because by the time people have worked through a single community upgrading project, they've just about covered the whole spectrum of community development issues. They've all started with situations of great informality and insecurity, in which everything is complex and illegal and messy, and they've had to deal with almost constant battles and arguments, both within the community and with outsiders. But little by little, they have put every untidy, informal, problematic element in their lives and settlements into a system: first they've come together and saved and set up their financial systems, then they've secured their land tenure and set their planning systems and their materials purchasing systems and construction management systems. People have had to agree on all this, because they don't have the luxury of selecting their participants - everybody in the community has to be on board, no matter how uncooperative. *This is a big challenge all by itself!* People have passed through that long, arduous, messy, difficult process, and at the end, they have transformed their slum into an extremely beautiful housing projects! And these projects have all been made by the hands and ability of poor people - people who very recently felt they were clumsy, that they had no confidence, that they didn't know anything worth knowing!

After she sat listening for a long time, one of the community ladies, Pa Kaam (from Klong Sawan in Pathumthani), was saying "That is really right. It touched my heart, because I am also very poor and I have four children. When my husband died, I really didn't have any hope. I didn't think I could do much beyond trying to feed my children, going day by day. Until we started this Baan Mankong process and I began linking with my friends in other communities. Now I cannot stop! I've got to go and help others with their savings and their upgrading projects!" Paa Chan (community leader from Klong Lumnoon in Bangkok) was also saying, "This change that happens when we upgrade our land tenure and our houses and our community is like a new freedom in our lives. And it's something we never ever thought before we'd be able to do. It's like going from black to white."

**"Isn't this something amazing? And isn't it especially amazing that this is happening at such a huge scale, in hundreds and hundreds of communities around the whole country?"**

**All this is possible only because of the strong belief that people can do it. It's so simple. It's a belief in human beings.** No matter that they may look poor or clumsy or uncertain, and no matter that they may not know much or be able to say a word about things! And all the whole world is looking at these people and calling them stupid, marginal, illegitimate and illegal, and saying that they need to be disciplined and they need to be taught what to do and how to be! So many systems in our development profession try to "train" them or to persuade them to be more obedient "recipients" of somebody else's idea of what they need! But some of the community leaders were telling me that the more they find themselves in these kinds of "training" exercises, the less confidence they have in themselves, and the more they believe that they are stupid!

## BUT WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO CODI?

A lot of people have been asking, with some trepidation, what is going to happen to CODI once Somsook's tenure as its director ends. CODI is an institution with a considerable track record of innovation and an equally strong record of opening up its work as a kind of common regional laboratory that welcomes groups in Asia and Africa to come visit, share and learn. As a government organization and a finance institution that is working in new and flexible ways to support a people-driven development process on a national scale, CODI has become an important source of inspiration and new possibilities for many people working in various sectors in the region. It's no surprise that they may feel a little possessive of this Thai institution, and a little nervous about its future without Somsook at the helm. Somsook spoke about this question at length during that Jan. 7th session. Here are some notes from her remarks :

**Hopefully CODI will be going ahead on its own strength.** Many senior people at CODI and in the community networks have been saying that the ground work and the concepts that underlie CODI's work is strong enough now to continue on its own: this foundation where wide-scale communities are feeling they are the doers and the drivers of the development process, and CODI is a supporting mechanism to what they are doing. One community leader was saying, "Don't forget that in this car we're going along in, communities are in the driver's seat, and you are our assistant sitting in the back! This is our car and we are the driver!" This clear sort of explanation very vividly explains the concept of what CODI is about and the way community people look at CODI, as *their secretary* and as the supporter to *their change process, and they are the ones who make change, they are the owners of this change process.* This belief that people are able to do it is now very strong and very deeply embedded in CODI and in the community movement..

**"This is MY CODI"** Of course we still have a lot of forces within Thai society that will continue to put troublesome pressures on poor people and on their organizations and their initiatives - forces like top-down governance structures and rampant commercialization. But the discussion about these forces is now out in the open and people are in on it. So when people believe that "This is my CODI," then I think they know how to deal with those pressures. This next period of CODI's evolution will be a chance to test that community ownership of CODI - a very important test. And I think the organization will go for the better. Anyway, I feel that my work in CODI has been too long. They need some fresh air, some new possibilities. One person shouldn't stay in any organization too long. But as we came to the moment of this transition in CODI, we decided to take a quick look at what CODI has been able to support up to now:



- **SCALE** : Out of a total of about 8,000 wards (both rural and urban) in the country, CODI has been able to support to about 4,500 of those wards and link them into the process. A little more than half of the country.
- **UPGRADING** : Upgrading projects and secure land tenure in 1,275 communities in 230 cities, covering some 77,000 households, through the Baan Mankong upgrading program.
- **COMMUNITY WELFARE** activities which now cover 3,000 wards all over the country with 800,000 poor community beneficiaries.
- **LOANS** of US\$ 123 million have been given for housing and community development, benefiting 380,000 households.
- **COMMUNITY PLANNING** has been implemented in 1,501 wards around the country.
- **LEARNING CENTERS** : More than 700 community-based "learning centers" have been established in places where innovative and successful community initiatives have been implemented and can be visited and learned from.
- **DISASTERS** : Helped solve disaster problems by community organizations in 900 wards hit by disasters such as the tsunami, mud-slides, floods, fires and storms.
- **LAND REFORM** : Solved land problems by community people themselves, in more than 550 wards.
- **COMMUNITY COUNCILS** have been formed throughout the country, according to the 2008 Act of Parliament, uniting 29,900 community-based organizations
- **PARTNERSHIP** : Supported the work of NGOs and social services in more than 160 projects.
- **RURAL / URBAN** : Supported natural resources management, sustainable agriculture, community media, revival of local culture and local wisdom and other community development activities.

**All these achievements have only been possible because CODI has been using a new approach, of allowing community people to be the army.** People are the key actors. If we compare CODI to so many big, big organizations (bigger in terms of size, of budget, of status) we can see that the big numbers of communities CODI has been able to support, and the big numbers of community development initiatives CODI has been able to facilitate, comes from the new concept that people today have changed so much! They are eager and able to make change. But there have been no tools for them to make that change. So at CODI we've been trying to open up a big space for poor people and to create some tools that can help them make that change themselves - tools like flexible finance, better status, linkages among them and with other partners, platforms in which they can present their ideas and work to whatever related organizations and policy support.

**The amazing thing that we discovered in the process is that Thailand is a country that is very rich with the combined strength of community people who are eager to make change. And any approach to running this country should look at this great strength in communities as the real force to make these changes possible.**

**And at CODI we have proved this truth.** Otherwise, how could such a small organization like CODI open up space for such a huge number of processes by people, all over the country, in both urban and rural Thailand? So I would like to propose the work that CODI has been doing as evidence (proof) that a new approach is necessary today. If we do things this way, and if many organizations and the government can understand this, then we are going to have a really big force of change, by people in the country. *This is the big statement that I was trying to make today.*

**CODI has been designed to look into the change of the people all over the country and to see how people can make change by themselves on a big scale - which is needed!** With such a process that CODI supports, we are creating space and linking people together with several agendas, and we've found enormous dynamism in the people's process. It is something amazing, really. But to be able to support this dynamic people's process, the organization can't become static - it has to keep moving and adjusting itself, according to that dynamism, and by so doing it must be dynamic itself. And this is exactly what CODI has been about from the beginning.

**When the upgrading program was beginning, so many people asked us, "How can you announce such a huge housing program?"** *You don't have enough workers in CODI! First you have to first train your workers so they have skills and so they know how to follow all the steps. You have to organize a proper system first!* If we had followed their advice, we could never have done the Baan Mankong Program! We wouldn't have even got much beyond the first ten pilot projects! It would have been a dead program from the beginning - *definitely!* And most development organizations and housing agencies and NGOs are getting trapped by that way of thinking - which is the "supply-driven" approach. But because we began with that belief that *people are able*, we could open up our work right away, to everybody, to communities in cities all across the country.

## ACHR REGIONAL MEETING in BANGKOK, JANUARY 28-31, 2009

ACHR will be holding a 4-day regional meeting in Bangkok this month, between January 28th and 31st, right after the Chinese New Year (*the year of the Ox*) at the Prince Palace Hotel (*still the cheapest rooms, the most furiously air-conditioned meeting rooms and the best lunch buffet in Bangkok!*). We're expecting about 100 people from around Asia, including a few friends from England and Germany. Here is super brief outline of the meeting's activities.

- **The first day of the meeting** will be given over to site visits and project inaugurations of community upgrading projects around Bangkok, with a big party in the evening, hosted by the now-beautifully-upgraded canal side community at Bang Bua.
- **The second day's discussions** will focus on the planning of ACHR's next phase of work in the Asia region and the launching of our new regional program which we are tentatively calling the "Communities Act Program".
- **On the third day**, we will all have a chance to tell about what's happening, what changes have occurred over the past twenty years, since ACHR was established, and what are the trends for the future in both the overall Asia region and in the various countries.
- **On the fourth day**, we will discuss more specifically about ACHR work over the past twenty years, its various roles and set down some ideas and possibilities for how it could work in the future.

## HOUSING RIGHTS and EVICTION NEWS FROM THE E-MAILBOX :

- **Evictions in Nigeria :** The Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) has received word from the National Union of Tenants of Nigeria (NUTN) of some ongoing and planned mass evictions and demolitions taking place in the informal settlements along the waterfront in the Nigerian city of Port Harcourt - a city where half the 3 million residents cannot afford formal housing of any sort and are forced to live in informal settlements. For more information or to join in HLRN's e-mail campaign, please contact Angie Balata at [abalata@hlrn.org](mailto:abalata@hlrn.org)
- **Evictions in Egypt :** We've also gotten word from the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights of a sudden and brutal demolition of 300 poor people's houses in a district called "Al-Beramble" - Atfih Center located in Egypt's Helwan Province. These are the latest of thousands of evictions taking place across Egypt to clear land for the Egyptian State development plan. For more information or to join the protest campaign, please contact Ms. Manal Tibe at [manaltibe@yahoo.com](mailto:manaltibe@yahoo.com)
- **New Housing Rights Network :** The International Alliance of Inhabitants is a global network of social movements of inhabitants, cooperatives, communities, tenants, house owners, homeless, slum dwellers, indigenous populations and people from working class neighborhoods who are trying to construct another possible world, starting from the achievement of housing and city rights for all. There are now over 1.2 billion people in the world facing eviction or living in insecure and sub-standard housing. The Alliance's "Zero Evictions Campaign" has been using videos and media to expose the evictions and destruction of people's lives and shelter that are the "hidden face" behind so many of the gleaming cities and brilliant urban development policies around the world today. For more information or to get on the mailing list, please e-mail: [newsletter@habitants.org](mailto:newsletter@habitants.org)

**CITYNET NEWS :** CITYNET is an organization which promotes mutual understanding and technical cooperation between its member cities in the Asia-Pacific region. The secretariat in Yokohama has announced that the election of its new office bearers for the 2010-2013 term will take place in September 2009, and that they are now welcoming nominations of people, organizations or cities for positions and membership with CITYNET. For more information, please contact the secretariat at [info@citynet-ap.org](mailto:info@citynet-ap.org)

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING POOR PEOPLE . . .

We've been talking a lot in recent years about building standards and planning bylaws and how they continue to be used to keep the poor out of legitimate and affordable housing, and to deny the settlements they improve themselves the legitimacy of legal permissions and permits because they are in various ways "sub-standard."

- **Disappearing poor communities in Thailand** : Many of the slums that have been upgraded by poor people themselves, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program, have been transformed from situations of insecurity, squalor, illness and hopelessness into proud, vibrant, clean, secure and well-built neighborhoods. But some of these upgraded communities still have no official house registration or construction completion certificates, which allow residents to access municipal services and to register their children in local schools. Why? Because their lanes are a little too narrow, or their houses are a little too small or too close together and don't quite measure up to a set of standards that have been set for the city's more affluent citizens.
- **Disappearing poor people in Vietnam** : People staying in run-down collective workers housing can only get long-term land-use rights (which is as close as you can come to land ownership in socialist Vietnam, where all the land technically belongs to the government) if they agree to pay the full cost of having their communities and buildings demolished and redeveloped by contractors to a very high standard. Needless to say, most of the poor staying in this kind of housing in Vietnamese cities cannot afford the costs of this state-managed redevelopment process, and so are effectively being evicted without compensation and simply *disappearing*.
- **Disappearing poor people in New Orleans** : Before Hurricane Katrina hit, New Orleans was a city of poor black people - and a city whose long history, marvelous warm character, jazz music, rich food and vibrant historic neighborhoods belonged as overwhelmingly to its poor black majority citizens. But since the storm caused the whole city to be evacuated to the four corners of the globe, almost every official act and economic assistance program and urban revival policy to come out of the city, state and national governments after the storm have made it as hard as possible for poor renters and home-owners to return to the city and fix up their flood-damaged houses and put their lives back together. On the contrary, a city that was once a predominantly poor, black city is being vigorously turned by these policies and regulations and bylaws into a predominantly affluent white city.

**And then the disappearance-inducing qualities of poverty lines** : But building standards aren't the only magic trick by which the poor are being made to disappear. While building regulations are saying their settlements and houses are not posh enough to be legitimate, poverty lines are saying their meager diets and lousy incomes and squalid living conditions and social marginalization are all too posh to be considered "poor" - as long as they're eating enough calories to stay alive!

- **Poverty lines in Victorian London** : In 19th century England, for example, conventionally-determined poverty lines allowed the authorities to greatly underestimate the number of very poor people in London and to mask the complexities and various aspects of deprivation which made them truly poor - and more importantly to reduce the amount of public budgets set aside to help them. In a fascinating and beautifully-written new book called *The Blackest Streets: The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum*, by the English historian Sarah Wise, there is one chapter which talks specifically about how poverty was measured in late 19th century London, and how one amateur statistician's field work in East London proved that the degree of poverty was much greater than generally thought, and that setting a simple income-based poverty line didn't even begin to describe the realities or classify the facets of urban poverty and deprivation in London, and were in fact used as a means of sweeping problems nobody wanted to confront under the carpet.
- **Poverty lines in India** : Another shot has recently been launched against the narrow-sighted thinking of poverty lines in the form of a scholarly paper which examines the history of and debate about poverty lines in India, and how their use and mis-use has allowed the nature and extent of poverty in this very big and very poor country to be seriously underestimated for a long, long time. The paper was written by our friend Meera Bapat, a researcher and activist based in Pune who has been both working with the poor and studying their lives and settlements for many years. It's interesting to learn in her paper that the country that still uses a cruelly minimal poverty line to determine who is and isn't poor (if you earn enough to put 2,100 calories into your belly every day in India, you're not poor) is also the country that produced the Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, whose 1999 book *Development as Freedom* presented one of the most elegant and impassioned arguments yet that poverty is much more than simple lowness of income. Sen argued that poverty must be seen as the deprivation of "substantive freedoms a person enjoys to lead the kind of life that he or she has reason to value." Meera's paper, *"Poverty lines and the lives of the poor: The underestimation of urban poverty in India"*, will eventually be published by IIED in London, but at last writing, Meera was still putting the final polish on it. For a sneak preview of the draft, please contact Meera directly at [meera18@pn2.vsnl.net.in](mailto:meera18@pn2.vsnl.net.in)



All of which brought to mind a famous quotation from Samuel Johnson, in the 18th Century, which we looked up to get it right:

**"Life is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding;  
yet for the poor we delight in stripping it still barer."**

## NEWS FROM THE WOMEN'S SAVINGS PROCESS IN LAO PDR

A new memorandum of understanding has been signed to cover this year's continuation of the collaboration between ACHR, CODI and the Lao Women's Union. The new MOU, which was signed on December 23, 2008, covers the period July 2008 - June 2009, and is an official agreement between these three organizations to continue their joint support for the community savings and community fund process, which is now in its ninth year and becoming a national movement belonging to some of the country's poorest women. Here are some notes from Somsook on developments in Lao :



**Why the delay?** The plan was to sign this MOU six months ago, when we had been expecting to receive the new project budget from Misereor. But since Misereor finally decided against supporting the project's continuation, the MOU signing got delayed. We now have resources to support the project's continuation, at least for the year covered by this new MOU, from ACHR's new regional *Communities Act Program*, which is being supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. But we will still have to find a stronger budget to support the work's expansion in the coming three years.

**Expansion of the process in the next 3-year phase :** During the December 23 meeting, we also discussed with the Lao Women's Union and the project team in Lao the plans for extending the work in the next three-year period, under a new MOU that will be signed later in 2009. We all agreed that the activities will broaden to cover not only more rural and peri-urban communities in other provinces, but to more communities in urban areas also. We expect that with support from ACHR's new *Communities Act Program*, several cities in Lao PDR will be able to start implementing a city-wide community upgrading process, and this will bring an extremely important new dimension to the process in Lao.

**A more "bottom up" MOU next time :** We also agreed that the content and plans outlined in the next 3-year MOU will not come only from us, as the project organizers. We would like to organize a country-wide process which will allow the community people to review what they have been doing in the five provinces so far and to set their own plans for what they want to do in the next phase. This will help to make this one a *highly participatory* MOU! This deeper process of assessing the change process so far and planning for the future by the communities themselves will be one of the important tasks in the coming six months, and will involve community savings groups in different districts and sub-districts to meet and share ideas and compare their ideas. In these ways, we are pushing people into developing a longer term vision: after the savings and credit and welfare and income generation, *then what?* What kind of broader or more structural changes could be possible and could be pushed for now?

**New unit being set up within LWU to support these activities :** As a signal of its increasing commitment to the process, the Lao Women's Union is also considering setting up a special unit within its national structure to give more focused support to these growing community savings and community upgrading activities across the country.

Table Showing the Progress of Saving Activities in Lao PDR (Figures as of June 2008)

Province	District	No. of Villages	No. of savings groups	No. of members	Total savings (Kip) (US\$1 = 8,500 Kip)
Vientiane	1. Pak Ngum	53	55	10,828	15,342,771,000 kip
	2. Nasaithong	65	55	15,476	12,575,845,000
	3. Sangthong	37	38	4,649	3,623,561,500
	4. Sisattanak*	40	32	3,379	1,700,996,500
	5. Chantaburi*	37	33	4,344	4,121,621,000
	6. Sikotabong*	61	41	6,031	3,049,066,000
	7. Hatsaifong*	60	13	1,689	599,800,000
Champasak	8. Pakse	57	16	3,342	3,355,031,000
	9. Khong	136	15	1,611	289,967,000
Laung Prabang	10. Luang Prabang	116	20	1,377	523,162,500
	11. Ngoy	112	12	720	156,006,500
Phung Sali	12. Boonnuer	70	11	430	50,433,000
	13. Yod-U	91	12	1,060	239,246,000
	14. Phungsali*	89	15	590	208,624,000
Bor Kaew	15. Huaysai	111	13	1,510	149,734,000
	16. Ton Phung	52	11	1,189	364,156,500
<b>Total 5 provinces</b>	<b>16 Districts</b>	<b>1,178 villages</b>	<b>388 savings groups</b>	<b>58,323 members</b>	<b>46,365,568,000 Kip (US\$ 5.45 million)</b>

**Note :** \* refers to the towns that have established saving groups but are not included in the project areas indicated in the MOU