

Briefing

Urban; Poverty

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Policy pointers

COVID-19 response and recovery projects targeting the urban poor can have greater impact when planned and implemented by community organisations that integrate those projects into their long-term efforts to secure adequate housing.

When designed and implemented by well-established community organisations, grassroots solutions can be creative, nimble, cost effective, scalable and sustainable, while women's leadership makes interventions even more effective.

With flexible funding, communities can do more for less. Policies and programmes should provide funds that allow community organisations to respond in real time to actual needs on the ground.

Experienced community organisations have used the crisis strategically to design initiatives that advance long-term goals while also addressing urgent COVID-19-related needs. Policymakers and others should recognise this as a development opportunity to work closely with communities and their networks.

Scaling up community-led COVID-19 responses: five key lessons

Community-led responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can be much more than just temporary relief efforts. Experienced networks and federations of the urban poor are valuable development partners and can deliver scalable recovery solutions that simultaneously address long-standing development problems and structural inequities in their cities. This briefing distils five key policy lessons from a 2021 action-research project in four Southeast Asian countries. Long-established community networks implemented projects that helped control the spread of coronavirus, increase food security, boost livelihoods, and make progress towards secure housing and land tenure. These projects have increased local institutional capacities and aligned with pro-poor urban development pathways. National policy and decision makers, municipal governments and international agencies involved with COVID-19 relief and recovery programmes and interventions should strategically support local efforts to systematically network and scale up such successful strategies.

By the end of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic had spread all over the world. But the greatest concentration of infections and the most profound effects were in cities, with over 90% of infections estimated to be in urban areas.¹ As with almost any disaster — natural or man-made — the pandemic has impacted the poor with disproportionate severity. Informal workers and residents of informal settlements have been made more vulnerable to the virus by crowding, poor housing and living environments, and limited access to public services and healthcare.²

A city's defences against crises like COVID-19 are only as strong as its weakest point. If so many people live in squalor, the whole city will remain

vulnerable. But in many cities, the public response to the pandemic made things worse for the poor. Lockdowns, curfews and other restrictions made it difficult for the urban poor, who rely on daily wages and informal livelihoods, to earn enough to survive. The International Labour Organization estimated that by mid-2020, 1.6 billion informal workers had lost work and wages.³ Some research found that poor informal-sector workers lost 80% of their income during strict lockdowns.⁴ Disruptions in food supply systems and rising food prices also affected the urban poor acutely and became a major humanitarian concern.⁵

But most local governments were overwhelmed and ill-equipped to respond to

the health crisis and the needs of the urban poor. Nor were those needs met by national governments or international development agencies, which have a history of directing more attention and resources to rural areas

than to problems of urban poverty.⁶ What little COVID-19 aid has reached the urban poor has been uneven and insufficient,^{7,8} leaving them largely to fend for themselves.

How the COVID-19 crisis has strengthened community organisations

Throughout the pandemic, poor communities have

come together and marshalled whatever resources they could to address their common needs in fresh, practical and efficient ways. These community-led initiatives, even when very modest, have strengthened people's capacities and political capital.^{9–12} Although the pandemic is far from over, policy discussions have already begun to shift from an emphasis on crisis response to recovery. What can we learn from the successes of community-led responses, and how can these lessons feed into pro-poor urban development?

This policy briefing highlights key learnings from an action-research study that examined community-managed COVID-19 responses in four Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand.¹³ The study, facilitated by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), aimed to understand and document the innovative responses of organised groups of the urban poor and their networks.

The study took place between August 2021 and January 2022. It allowed long-established community networks in the four countries to reflect on and document their COVID-19 responses (see Box 1). In addition to helping them to expand and deepen that work with some modest resources, the study enabled these community groups to meet each other regularly online, present their work to their peers in other countries, learn from each other's experiences, compare approaches and reflect on the role the pandemic has played in the progress of their community movements.

The COVID-19 crisis proved to be an opportunity to strengthen their networks and further their solutions to larger and more structural problems

of housing, land, livelihoods, services and access to finance. The study documented how established community organisations forged pathways to recovery that are faster, cheaper, and more effective and equitable than conventional aid interventions (see Box 2). It also showed that urban poor networks and federations make excellent development partners and, when supported, can reach those the formal system cannot and deliver solutions at scale.

Scaling up: five key lessons for policymakers

The study has highlighted several important policy-relevant lessons. It has shown how community networks have used the COVID-19 crisis more strategically, to not only address immediate needs but also tackle many issues of urban poverty while boosting their relationships with municipal governments, policymakers and other key stakeholders. Here, we outline five key lessons.

With flexible funding, communities can do more for less. Policies and programmes should support organised community networks to scale up collective COVID-19 recovery initiatives. But for resources to reach those most in need and have the greatest impact, funding should be as flexible as possible.

Communities on the ground know best who needs what help in a crisis — and, as this study has shown, can stretch scarce resources to reach more people and do more for less, compared to governments and formal aid agencies. For example, 60 community kitchens in Bangkok received funds to cook 110,000 meals at US\$1 per meal during the pandemic. By using only volunteer community labour, bargaining for ingredients, leveraging additional donations and materials locally, and growing some ingredients in community gardens, those kitchens were able to cook about 300,000 meals for the same price.

Community networks can sustain and scale up relief initiatives. Organised communities can respond quickly and effectively to immediate needs in a crisis. Yet the belief persists that only the state or large institutions can deliver systematic, long-term recovery assistance. This study has shown that when designed and implemented by well-established community organisations, grassroots solutions can be both scalable and sustained over time, especially if given the right support.

For example, in Thailand, the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) has long been a model for addressing urban poor housing needs by channelling state

resources directly to communities. During the pandemic, CODI provided small grants to community networks and individual communities to address urgent needs in COVID-19-affected communities and to strengthen the people-driven delivery model in the process. And in Thailand and Indonesia, community cooperatives pooled resources to grow or buy good-quality rice in bulk and distribute it to cooperative members free or at below-market prices. After a successful pilot in Jakarta, the JRMK Network has since scaled up its rice distribution and by January 2022 had purchased and distributed about 60,000kg of rice.

Recognise the COVID-19 crisis as a development opportunity. As policy discussions shift from response to recovery, policies and programmes must recognise and build on the successes of community-led responses to the COVID-19 crisis as a vital opportunity to support longer-term pro-poor development.

The community networks in all four countries thought strategically about how to design their COVID-19 projects so they address real and immediate needs and at the same time achieve important gains in their larger development objectives. For example, establishing community gardens to tackle immediate food-security issues has given community networks an avenue to build positive new working relationships with local governments and land-owning agencies, and to negotiate with formal city structures about using idle private and public land for urgent public purposes such as food production or housing.

In Indonesia, the JRMK Network now aims to expand and strengthen the capacity of community-based cooperatives to facilitate collective secure land tenure and support programmes that boost economic empowerment. In Bangkok, organised community networks have used the COVID-19 support from CODI to reach out to other vulnerable communities, with the clear objective of bringing them into the network activities and putting them on track to secure land and redevelop their housing.

Women's leadership makes interventions more effective. In particular, the study has shown that investing in women-led development programmes and activities benefits all residents in all aspects of family and community life. In each country, there was strong women's leadership on the ground in all the COVID-19 response projects. Because of that, these projects responded more fully to the gamut of family and community needs during the crisis.

Box 1. Research partners and activities

The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) facilitated action-research implemented by four organisations. Each has a long history of doing projects in collective housing, settlement upgrading, savings, fund management, land acquisition and disaster rehabilitation and working with their local and national governments:

- Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota Network (Urban Poor Network) and their support NGO Urban Poor Consortium (UPC) in Jakarta, Indonesia.
- The Women's Saving and Development Network and their support NGO Women for the World in Yangon, Myanmar.
- The Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc and their support NGO Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives Inc (PACSII) in the Philippines.
- Urban community networks in many cities and districts, in collaboration with the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), a Thai government institution under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, whose mission is to support and strengthen communities and their organisations as central actors in development.

Box 2. Community-driven COVID-19 response initiatives

The four organisations began organising relief activities as soon as the virus began wreaking havoc on people's health and economic survival. As the pandemic continued, their responses grew in scale and strategic sophistication. Their COVID-19-response projects fell into several categories:

- **Health and mitigation.** The groups distributed face masks and hand sanitiser, disseminated public health information and set up community-based quarantine systems and centres.
- **Food distribution and community kitchens.** To feed hungry and out-of-work community members, the groups distributed rice and food staples and set up community kitchens.
- **Community gardens.** The pandemic added new urgency to these important sources of vegetables and fruit in Asian cities. Community-garden produce helped feed needy families, supply community kitchens and boost incomes for urban farmers.
- **Livelihood support.** Later in the pandemic, the networks supported a variety of income-generating projects, including group enterprises to produce food and sell rice and groceries, and community savings groups to finance individual livelihood-boosting initiatives.
- **National support programme.** In Thailand, community-designed and managed COVID-19 relief projects were more systematically supported by a special national programme managed by CODI. By January 2022, CODI had channelled over US\$6.2 million to urban and rural community networks for projects including community kitchens and gardens, food distribution, livelihood revival and community isolation centres.

This finding reaffirms the long-term experiences of ACHR, where women have always played central roles in savings groups and community finance, housing and land tenure activism, and collective action to improve living conditions.

Strong communities, secure housing and decent living conditions are vital. Secure and decent housing is a structural solution to problems of poverty and a more holistic and systemic way of solving those problems.

People need secure, safe and healthy housing that also builds communities at the same time. For the poor, the community is their welfare unit, social support system, safety net and the organisation that can ensure that everyone is taken care of — not only during this crisis, but in future crises as well.

The COVID-19 crisis has been a wake-up call for cities with large populations still living in squalid, insecure and substandard housing. Solving these housing problems at a city-wide scale should be recognised as an urgent necessity — and governments, municipalities and other stakeholders should work with organised communities and their networks to tackle these issues.

For example, in the Philippines, COVID-19 relief projects bolstered land negotiations between the government and residents of vulnerable informal settlements living on prison-authority land. As Ruby Papelaras of the Homeless People's Federation explains, 'We use all these various activities during the COVID-19 crisis — like community kitchens, community gardens, savings and livelihood loans — to strengthen these communities on government land and increase their pool of allies, so they can negotiate for secure land from a stronger position.'

From crisis to recovery: what next?

When poor communities and their larger networks and federations are organised and supported, they can develop innovative and sustainable solutions to problems of housing, land, livelihood, services, access to finance and many other issues. The projects in the study have

also strengthened relationships between communities and local governments, local support groups and civil society organisations, and with national and provincial governments. In doing so, these organised groups of the urban poor have demonstrated that they are excellent development partners who can do many things the state and the market cannot do, and can deliver those solutions at scale.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that poverty cannot be solved by treating only its symptoms. The solutions must be bigger and change the structures which cause poverty, exclusion and homelessness in the first place. The strategic COVID-19 interventions designed by these mature community networks show how to tackle the structural roots of poverty by focusing on securing land for housing, using public land for public purposes, building stronger and more inclusive city-wide networks, and creating new collective structures that belong to the poor and help them meet their basic needs.

As we move from crisis to recovery, national policy and decision makers, municipal governments and international agencies should recognise the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to ensure that people's organisations are central to designing and implementing new, pro-poor urban development pathways.

Thomas Kerr, Cecilia Tacoli and Tucker Landesman

Thomas Kerr is the English language publications coordinator for ACHR. Cecilia Tacoli is a senior associate in IIED's Human Settlements Group. Tucker Landesman is a researcher in IIED's Human Settlements Group.

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Knowledge Products

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The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) is a regional network of grassroots community organisations, NGOs, professionals, activists and architects who work together to promote community-driven development processes across Asia.

Contact

Tucker Landesman
tucker.landesman@iied.org

Thomas Kerr
achr@achr.net

Third Floor, 235 High Holborn
London, WC1V 7DN
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

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Notes

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