# GOLD VI

*Case-Based Contribution*
*to Chapter 5: Caring*
GOLD VI Report on Pathways
to urban and territorial equality

## Thailand Homeless Network

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**CHAPTER**

5: Caring

## SUMMARY

Governments often make the mistake of assuming that people who experience different kinds of vulnerability are helpless, so their needs should be defined and met by professional helpers. But experience has shown that, when people in all kinds of vulnerable situations are given the chance to come together, organize themselves and take active part in tackling their own problems, as a group, the process strengthens them, and their solutions are often more fine-tuned to real needs than external, top-down assistance. The Homeless Network in Thailand makes a good example of how even an extremely vulnerable group of people (society's most poor and marginalized) can create comprehensive, lasting, appropriate and affordable solutions to a problem governments and NGOs have not been able to solve. By joining together to address their various needs and by creating and managing their own shelters and permanent housing projects, Thailand's homeless are becoming full, legitimate citizens in the cities that once cast them aside. This case study describes that process.

**Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. "Thailand Homeless Network".**
*GOLD VI Pathways to Equality Cases Repository:* **Caring (2022).**
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The Suwit Watnoo Homeless Center, in Bangkok's Taling Chan District, was the country's first homeless shelter to be designed, built and managed entirely by homeless people themselves. Source: ACHR

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The Homeless Network in Thailand makes a good example of how even an extremely vulnerable group of people (society's most poor and marginalized) can create comprehensive, lasting, appropriate and affordable solutions to a problem governments and NGOs have not been able to solve. **By joining together to address their various needs and by creating and managing their own shelters and permanent housing projects, Thailand's homeless are becoming full, legitimate citizens in the cities that once cast them aside.**

Thai cities have their share of people who become homeless for various reasons. Some are landless farmers who migrate to the city and cannot find jobs, some come from broken families, some are elderly or disabled and have no one to look after them, some find that after being released from jail society does not accept them. In Bangkok, the homeless stay in parks, around the train stations or under traffic bridges. It is a difficult life, especially for women: being raped, robbed, beaten-up, chased by the police, harassed by Social Welfare Department staff and forced to sleep in the rain. **Without a secure place to live, bathe or cook, and without ID cards, these most vulnerable of Thailand's poor find themselves shut out of most government welfare and healthcare programs.**

In 2003, the Bangkok-based NGO Human Settlements Foundation (HSF) conducted the first survey of homeless people in Bangkok, to find out who they were and what they wanted to do with their lives. In August of that year, the governor of Bangkok announced a policy of evicting all the homeless people from the Sanam Luang parade ground, in front of the Grand Palace. In the crisis of this eviction, **the city's first meeting of homeless people was organized.**

They decided to go as a group to the Bangkok Municipal Authority (BMA) to ask for some place to stay, as an alternative to the government-run homeless shelters, which homeless people hated and ran away from. **The government shelters didn't allow families to stay together, but had separate shelters for women and men and children, with locked doors, and rules set by others.**

Their first negotiations with the government were unsuccessful and the cat-and-mouse game of homeless evictions continued. With support from HSF, they continued to carry out surveys, gather to discuss how to have a better life, and support each other in ways that allowed homeless people to retain their freedom, while knowing they had friends who can help. In this way, Bangkok's homeless network was born.

A few years later, the network began discussing the idea of establishing its own center for homeless people in Bangkok, which they would manage themselves, in their own way. This time, the BMA agreed to support it, and they began looking for possible land. A plot of vacant land was found in one of the informal railway settlements in Bangkok's Taling Chan District. With support from the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), they got permission to use the land from the State Railways Authority, on the condition that the land be leased by the BMA for the shelter. The BMA agreed to lease the land, but did not offer any support for building the shelter, as they had promised. That gave the network time to plan, strengthen their organization and build their network. They went back to CODI, which persuaded the BMA to allow CODI to take over the lease. CODI also gave the network a US$ 77,000 grant to build the shelter.

**The two-story shelter was designed by network members, with technical support from the CODI architects, and built by a local contractor the network selected themselves.** To keep costs as low as possible, all the unskilled labor was provided to homeless network members. As a last step in taking possession of their center, the network persuaded the State Railways Authority to transfer the land-rental contract from CODI to the Homeless Network, which now pays the land rent themselves. All but the elderly or very ill residents pay 600-1,200 baht (US$ 20-40) per month to live in the center, depending on whether they stay in a separate cubicle, or with others in the dormitories. **That small rent is crucial to keep the center running and to ensure its independence. To help residents earn, the center has lots of income-generating projects: a recycling cooperative, a plant growing and landscaping business, soap-making and songbird-raising enterprises and community kitchen that not only feeds the residents but sells inexpensive meals to low-income workers in the area.**

Between 70 and 100 people stay in the Taling Chan center, including families with children and elderly, disabled and blind people. Many are older, and some have serious illnesses: a reminder that life on the streets takes a heavy toll. **Even if they choose not to live there, the center helps homeless people with many problems, like getting ID cards or medical help.** They can use the homeless center as their legal address to get a house registration, which they need to apply for jobs. The main thing is to help them out of their isolation, help them realize they are not alone and have friends who can help them.

The center made history in several ways, and represented a sharp departure from government-managed homeless shelters. This was the first shelter in Thailand that was designed and run completely by homeless people themselves, with their own rules and their own set of support programs, including a savings group, a welfare fund, a kitchen garden and livelihood projects. **The shelter also represented a new co-production strategy for addressing problems of homelessness, in which the government provides the land and finances the construction, and the homeless people design, build and run the shelter, making their own rules and regulations, according to the real needs of the residents, with support from CODI, NGOs and other community networks.** The model pioneered in the Taling Chan center has been accepted now by the government as the chief strategy for dealing with the country's urban homelessness problems.

Inspired by the success of this first homeless center, and two others that followed in other parts of Bangkok, as well as the homeless network's campaigns and joint community movement, **the Thai government allocated a budget of 118.6 million baht (US$ 3.1 million) in 2015 to support the creation of more self-managed, collaborative homeless shelters** in Thailand's three largest cities, where homeless networks are now active – Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen. Land for new shelters was found and purchased in Khon Kaen and Chiang Mai and new homeless shelters there were inaugurated by the Minister of Social Development and Human Security in 2018 and 2019. Like the ones in Bangkok, these centers were designed and built by homeless network members, and include spaces for singles, couples and families to stay, as well as savings and welfare funds, and a variety of facilities and livelihood programs.

The two-story center in Chiang Mai is organized around a courtyard, shaded by a centuries-old rain tree that was carefully preserved in the design. Each floor is divided up into partitions for homeless singles, couples and families to stay, with bathrooms, meeting rooms and generous balconies on each floor. There are lots of windows and good cross ventilation everywhere. Besides their savings group and welfare fund, they have a roof garden, a cafe that trains homeless people to become baristas and spaces for income-generation activities like making tie-dyed clothing, organic fertilizers, soap and baked goods.

**After staying in the center for a while, many find their lives changing: their self-confidence improves, their health improves, they make friends, and they start to think about having a house of their own.** In 2015, a group of twelve pioneering families who were living in the Taling Chan shelter formed a cooperative, and developed the country's first-ever permanent housing project designed and built by (formerly) homeless people themselves, on land they leased inexpensively from the State Railways Authority, with soft housing loans from CODI's Baan Mankong program and guiding support from an upgraded railway community nearby. These were the first homeless people to "graduate" from the homeless center, and it was a big step for them: repaying housing loans and managing many complicated things which they did not have to do when they were homeless. This powerful test case is already inspiring others and opening up new possibilities for other groups of homeless people in cities around Thailand.

# References

CODI English website: https://en.codi.or.th/

**CARING**

This paper has been produced as a Case-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create "Pathways to urban and territorial equality". The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the *Pathways to Equality Cases Repository*, which collects the over 60 Case-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI report.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 5 on "Caring", which focuses on the multiple actions that promote the care of diverse groups within society through safety nets and solidarity bonds, and the ways in which local and regional governments can promote caring practices that support structurally discriminated and/or vulnerable groups, as well as those that have historically "taken care" of others.