GOLD VI

Citywide and community-driven housing supported by the Baan Mankong program in Nakhon Sawan, Thailand

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ORGANISATION NAME

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

CITIES/COUNTRIES IT COVERS

Nakhon Sawan (Thailand)

CHAPTER

9: Democratizing

SUMMARY

The provincial capital of **Nakhon Sawan**, in central Thailand, has long been an important trading and transport city, and has been a magnet for poor migrants looking for opportunities. They find jobs, but they don't find affordable housing, so they are forced to make their own shelter in the city's many informal settlements, most of which are on vast tracts of public land in the city that is controlled by central government agencies. As a result, neither the communities nor the municipal government were able to address the city's growing housing problems. This serious structural problem, which Nakhon Sawan illustrates very starkly, creates poverty and deepens inequality. This case describes a process by which the city's very strong, active network of poor communities has collaborated with a supportive municipal government and other stakeholders to negotiate for permission to use some of that central government land and then to develop citywide plans for solving all the city's housing problems in a more comprehensive way, using the development energy of people themselves, and support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program. The 30 housing projects they have now completed provide secure, decent housing to 60% of the city's urban poor.

Nakhon Sawan has long been an important transport and trading hub in central Thailand, and a bustling provincial capital of 130,000 people. The city has offered work opportunities for many poor migrants, but the provision of affordable housing remains a challenge. Poor citizens have no alternative than making their own shelter in squatter settlements. Twenty years ago, Nakhon Sawan was Thailand's most squatter-rich city, with 40% of its residents living in informal settlements, mostly located on vacant public land. Evictions happened all the time, but there was little the people or the local government could do about it.

The reasons for that have a lot to do with the highly centralized control of land, resources and building regulations in Thailand. Despite legislation on devolution and a parade of progressive new constitutions, local governments and citizens still find themselves powerless to use vacant land in their cities to deal with urgent local development needs, since decisions about how land is used are made in faraway Bangkok. **80% of Nakhon Sawan's municipal land is under the control of central government agencies** like the Treasury Department, State Railway Authority and Forestry Department. The lack of subsidiarity in land governance hinders localized responses to urgent housing needs, perpetuating poverty and deepening inequality.

In 1996, Nakhon Sawan's beleaguered informal communities came together and formed a network. First they set up savings groups which gave small loans to members for livelihood and daily needs. Within three years, the network mushroomed to 50 savings groups – all in squatter settlements and strongly women-led. With support from the Municipality's Social Welfare Department, these women also began tackling other problems of health, flooding and degraded environmental conditions. It was the constant threat of evictions which

eventually pushed the network and the city to seriously examine the particular land-use problems behind the evictions and connect with the *Baan Mankong Program*.

The *Baan Mankong Program* (*"Secure housing"* in Thai) was launched in 2003 to address the housing problems of the poorest citizens, and it is one of the main development programs of the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), "a public institution that facilitates a development process driven by Thailand's urban poor and rural communities" (CODI, 2021). **The nation-wide *Baan Mankong Program* channels government funds, in the form of infrastructure subsidies and soft housing loans, directly to poor communities**, which form housing cooperatives and then plan and carry out improvements to their housing, environment, basic services and tenure security and manage the budget themselves. Instead of delivering housing units to individual families, the *Baan Mankong Program* puts Thailand's informal communities (and their networks) at the center of a people-driven and citywide process of developing long-term, comprehensive solutions to problems of land and housing in more than 400 Thai municipalities.

Members of the Nakhon Sawan community network examine a map of the city where they have worked with the municipal government and CODI to ensure that more than 60% of the urban poor are now living in decent, secure housing.
Source: ACHR

In 2005, two on-site upgrading projects successfully demonstrated the viability of collaboration between community networks, CODI's *Baan Mankong Program*, the Nakhon Sawan municipality and the National Treasury Department. These experiences set the precedent for a more comprehensive, citywide strategy to solve the housing problems of all the urban poor in Nakhon Sawan.

In collaboration with the municipality, the network surveyed and mapped all the city's squatter settlements between 2007 and 2008 in order to create a common understanding of the city's housing problems. The survey counted every family, identified tenure conditions and inventoried vacant land for possible future housing. At a time when the municipality officially recognized only 19 settlements, the survey identified 53 informal communities around the city, with 10,030 households – more than half on public land. This assessment not only provided vital information for planning purposes, but built the **collective confidence of organized communities and their recognition as part of the city**, both key elements towards increased urban equality.

A series of co-design and planning workshops brought together the communities, the local government, CODI, and a local university. Information from the survey was used to draw up a citywide plan for providing secure housing for all the poor in Nakhon Sawan. The community planning workshops were facilitated by community architects from CODI and a technician team from the local government, and other communities who had undergone community planning processes trained and supported the Nakhon Sawan community network in developing their citywide plan.

The workshops allowed for the development of typical solutions that, nonetheless, respond with flexibility to the diverse conditions and

capacities of each community. For communities who could secure the land they already occupied through negotiation, they could upgrade or reconstruct their housing *in-situ*, while communities on flood-prone land, facing eviction or in the path of development projects could relocate to public land they chose, where they would build new communities.

For both *in-situ* and relocation solutions, the responsibilities of all actors for implementation were to be shared: the *Baan Mankong Program* would provide soft housing loans and infrastructure subsidies, the local government would play a **facilitation role in the negotiations between the communities and the land-owning agencies, as well as integrating the community's infrastructure plans into its annual administrative and fiscal plans**, thus providing trunk infrastructure and basic services. Finally, the communities themselves would plan and build the houses. In the years since then, dozens of community-driven housing projects have been implemented under this scheme.

For everyone involved, a ground-breaking feature of this process was to overcome the project-based approach to housing by looking at all the communities as a set and planning a progressive solution which provides secure housing for all. This citywide and multi-stakeholder engagement also enabled schemes of collaboration that are increasing land tenure security for poor communities, pragmatically implementing two key principles to address urban inequality: the redistributive role of the state and the social function of land.

To facilitate the Baan Mankong process and other community projects in Nakhon Sawan, a collaborative City Development Committee was formed. This committee, chaired by the mayor, meets regularly and

brings together representatives from the community network and all the relevant sector stakeholders: representatives from public utilities and public land-owning agencies, officials from the municipality and from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and academics.

The City Development Committee functions include: 1) discussing issues of housing and land tenure for the urban poor, **2)** developing a yearly action plan, **3)** monitoring the progress of the Baan Mankong projects and dealing with emerging problems, **4)** mediating between the community network and various municipal and provincial authorities and **5)** integrating the community network's action plans into the local government's annual administrative and fiscal plans.

The efficacy of this committee is expressed in the scale of housing solutions it has facilitated. By January 2019, 30 of the city's 52 informal communities (including 6,600 households, or about 60% of the city's urban poor) had solved their housing problems and were living in fully upgraded communities, with secure land, good housing and full infrastructure (including 24 on-site upgrading projects, five on-site reconstruction projects and one relocation project).

However, the achievements of the committee go beyond housing units. The active involvement of poor communities has had many spin-offs, has expanded into rural areas and neighbouring towns, and broadened its work to address many issues besides housing, such as community welfare, savings, food security, environment and quality of life. The community network also manages its own city-level Community Development Fund, which supports a variety of community needs, and was key in channelling quick assistance to vulnerable families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The community network has become a proactive partner in many other aspects of the city's development, and works closely with the mayor, the municipal authority and other local agencies. Since 2013, the network has collaborated with the local authority to create a Citywide Development Plan. As the recognized representative of the city's low-income people, the network also sits on the Provincial Housing Board, which was set up in 2019 by the central government and tasked with developing a 20-year housing plan for the Nakhon Sawan Province. The board is an integrated platform which plans housing development and monitors its implementation. It includes all key stakeholders related to housing at provincial level (the governor, Land Department, National Housing Authority, Social Development and Human Security office, representatives from civil society and low-income communities).

Through these various collaborative bodies, meaningful participation of excluded communities has been ensured in a city that is just as plagued by heavy, bureaucratic, top-down government structures as most cities. The network's proposals for low-income housing development are being included in both municipal and provincial development plans. For example, ensuring official targets and budget allocations for 500 households/year served through Baan Mankong in the urban area; 100 households/year in rural areas; and 140 households/ year for housing improvements for elders and PWD.

While the Nakhon Sawan's City Development committee's outputs in terms of secure land tenure and housing units are remarkable, the process itself has developed collaboration schemes that support **mutual care and self-determination, build recognition of excluded communities, and developed schemes of participatory governance** that ensure meaningful participation in agenda-setting, target definition and budget allocation beyond the local scale.

References

CODI (2021). Community Organizations Development Institute . Retrieved from https://en.codi.or.th/

DEMOCRATIZING

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 9 on ¨Democratizing¨, which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for local and regional governments in implementing meaningful participatory processes, and democratizing decision-making, unpacking asymmetries of power and the underpinning trends affecting processes of democratization. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote more egalitarian, participatory and democratic processes, giving voice to marginalized groups of society, minorities and other groups, and thus contribute to urban and territorial equality.