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Community Vegetable Gardens

There is a stone over the entrance to a 13th century royal palace in Sukhothai in which these concise, poetic words are carved: *Nai naam mee plaa. Nai naa mee khao.* In English:

*In the water there are fish.
In the fields there is rice.*

It's hard to imagine a better description of a place where all the conditions to support life are so gloriously abundant as in Thailand. But that natural abundance has been badly compromised by the forces of development, urbanization, changing agricultural practice, climate change and corporate control over food. As a result, Thai people - especially the poor - are eating food that is less nutritious, more dangerous and more likely to cause all sorts of maladies.

But there's good news. In the past few years, community networks in cities around Thailand have been finding innovative ways to grow vegetables and produce healthy food on leftover bits of land, both inside and outside their communities. These community gardens may not solve all the problems of hunger and food insecurity, but they have improved nutrition, lowered food expenses and built greater food self-sufficiency for some of the most vulnerable citizens.

It's become a movement now in Thailand's urban poor communities. Since the Covid-19 crisis hit, and so many people have lost their jobs and their ability to buy food, community gardens have become even more of a lifeline for the poor. In this report, we take you on a guided tour through four of those community gardens.

BANGKOK

The garden which the 58 families in the Koh Klang community have developed, in their tightly-packed inner-city settlement, is decentralized in hundreds of small bits and pieces of land and all manner of pots and containers throughout the community. The garden is a good example of how even in very crowded urban settlements, with very little space, it's possible to raise vegetables and herbs and create a green, healthy, abundant and flower-filled environment.



CHUM PHAE

The community network in this small Northeastern city has found ways to make their housing projects do double duty as vegetable farms and fruit orchards. They have also put their resources together to buy a big piece of land on the outskirts of the city, where they have developed a collective rice farm and vegetable garden, which provides cheap, good, organic rice and produce to community members and also serves as a land bank for future housing needs.



SURIN

The Sri Buarai community in this Northeastern city has turned the crisis of lost jobs and dwindling incomes during the Covid pandemic into an opportunity to revive their native practices of self-sufficiency by borrowing a piece of neighboring land from a temple and creating a collective community garden where out-of-work mothers and out-of-school children can grow their own healthy food, and learn about organic cultivation and food production in the process.



CHIANG MAI

A group of informal communities living along a historic canal that winds through the center of this Northern Thai city have joined forces with some young community architects to transform a nearby garbage dump into a verdant urban farm, which is now producing organic vegetables, fruits and eggs for families who lost jobs in the Covid crisis. And in the process, it is bringing together allies from many walks of life, who are longing for green in their fast-developing city.





“ We poor people may feel that there is little we can do to eat better, except to make more money to buy better food. But that’s not true. There is a lot we can do to produce our own healthy food, even in crowded urban communities. And food is another issue – like housing or land or finance – that we can use to make ourselves, our communities and our networks stronger. ”

(Mae Nong, senior community leader from Chum Phae)

The **NEED** which became a **PROJECT**, which became an **AGENDA**, which became a **MOVEMENT** . . .

In 2013, the Thai Government's Health Promotion Foundation entered into an unconventional partnership with the national network of urban poor communities, to develop community-managed projects in which community members would grow safe, healthy, organic vegetables and fruits in pots, planter boxes and on common land and around their houses in low-income communities, under its “Green Healthy Community Program”. The foundation provided a modest budget and training for community members (and especially school children) in how to grow organic food in pots and small spaces, and the community network coordinated the project and spread around the learning.

Hunger and poor nutrition are problems that can be invisible in low-income communities, where family incomes go up and down, and they are getting worse as health problems from pesticide-laced produce and corporate junk food become more common. The Green Healthy Community Program gave communities a means of addressing these problems and creating awareness through action which allows them to start right away producing their own healthy food, even in very limited spaces. In the process, the program has built new channels for sharing ideas on safe food production and expertise about gardening techniques between households within communities, between communities within the city, and between cities and regions, through the urban community networks which already exist.

In the first year, 100 urban poor communities in 40 cities took part in the program, and most of them were veterans of Baan Mankong housing projects. But as the process has continued and expanded, a program of individual community projects has become a more strategic and more citywide program of healthy food co-production, in which poor communities in more than 70 cities (and many rural communities also) are now working with their community networks, with CODI and their local governments to survey local food security problems and needs, and work together to develop citywide strategies to incorporate the growing of healthy fruits and vegetables and production of nutritious food in low-income communities, as well as promoting greater self-sufficiency in food production.

As a result of this program, which is being enthusiastically taken up by more and more communities all the time, some 50% of Thailand's low-income urban communities have now become green: growing their own organic vegetables, improving their community environments with vegetable gardens and fruit trees, reducing their expenditure on food and empowering community members (and especially children and youth) to learn how to garden, to nourish themselves and to take greater control over the food they eat. A process which began as a project intervention has now mushroomed into a national green community movement and is now a major part of the Thai urban community network agenda.

How it works :

The Green Healthy Community Program is a very important intervention. When people begin finding whatever space they can inside their communities and start growing vegetables and producing food, that food production becomes a kind of collective community welfare program: everyone participates in the cultivation and everyone can take part in enjoying the harvest. These vegetables are for everybody. The green program has built up the community spirit in these cities.

But to do that, the networks have to get as many communities as possible involved. A small grant of \$500 - \$1,200 (which comes from either the Thai Health Promotion Fund or CODI - or both) is given to the city network to set up a special fund to build up the green program in that city. That's usually enough to give small grants to seven or eight communities in each city. Many networks have been able to expand the program by negotiating for additional funds from the local government. That small funding is just enough of a nudge to give a nudge to each community to start their thinking, planning and proposing their green projects for support from the fund.

In most cities, there will be a few communities that have already upgraded their housing and many others that are either waiting or not ready yet. The green community project acts as a connection point between the upgraded and not-yet-upgraded communities in the city, and gets everyone active.



The community gardens we profile in this report are just a few examples from that movement's ever-expanding portfolio green innovation from Thailand's communities.

This green movement is managed entirely by the **urban poor** themselves . . .

Nim-Aroon Junsooksri ("Tan") comes from the Sawan Muang Mai community in Nakhon Sawan, and is one of the national community coordinators of the Green Healthy Community Program. These notes are drawn from a presentation she made to a group of visiting community leaders from Cambodia and Nepal in January 2019:

In each city in Thailand, we have a network of poor communities, and the first thing our networks all focused on was solving our housing problems, with the Baan Mankong program. But after upgrading our housing, we found that people were still poor and still had lots of other problems and needs. One problem is that when people finally get their own good houses and feel secure, they have no reason to link together with their neighbors any more. Everybody just goes inside their own house and closes the door, just like the middle class.

But housing and well-being go together, so we began making our collective systems within the community to bring people back together and address different aspects of our lives. We launched our community welfare programs, our housing insurance funds and our city funds. But people were still not healthy, and many were still getting sick with food-related illnesses. That's why we started our Green Community Program, and began to find ways to grow and produce our own healthy food, to improve our health and self-sufficiency. Part of the program involves making better links between urban and rural communities - sellers and producers of food - to make stronger chains of supply and selling for healthy food without chemicals. The program is now producing healthy food and bringing people all over Thailand together around the issue of food and self-sufficiency. The green community program has become a movement now - a movement that is managed entirely by urban poor communities ourselves.



A network-boosting tool: In many of the cities that took part in the early stages of the green community program, the community networks had slowed down or were inactive, without much energy or activities. So we used the intervention to boost those city networks and get everyone involved. Because growing vegetables is something simple and much-needed, that poor people can do right away, it's easy to link people together around that issue, and the networks start getting active again. The program is a tool to revive the networks and get them back in the active mode, in cities around Thailand. Now we have gotten 70 cities to revitalize their community networks, by producing food within their city and their communities and using the food issue to link with their city government also.



CAMBODIA: In the Pro Lay Toek community in the town of Neak Loeung, eight families have joined together to make a collective garden on a patch of borrowed vacant land right behind the settlement, which is already yielding chemical-free herbs, leafy greens and bottle gourds.

A good idea takes seed in **other countries** . . .

After groups of community leaders from Cambodia and Nepal visited some community garden projects in Thailand, as part of the IIED-ACHR Food Security Study, several went back home and persuaded their communities to start planting vegetables on small pieces of land in and around their communities – even in recycled water bottles and tires. Later on, many poor communities under Covid-19 lockdown in Dhaka also caught the gardening bug. Vegetables and herbs from all these micro-gardens are already going into soups and curries.



NEPAL: In Kathmandu and Kalaiya, several communities are working with the Lumanti NGO to learn how to cultivate organic chilis, spinach and tomatoes in gardens up on the roof terraces of inner-city houses and in whatever small spaces can be found within and around the communities.



BANGLADESH: In the Korail Bosti, a slum of over 100,000 residents in the center of Dhaka, twenty enterprising residents have cultivated small vegetable gardens on the banks of the lake which surrounds the slum. *(with thanks to Fahad Abdullah Kaizer for the photo)*



Turning a crowded settlement in **BANGKOK** into one big communal fridge

During ACHR's first regional food security meeting in December 2017, a group of community visitors from Cambodia, Nepal and Thailand were invited to make a tour of Koh Klang and have dinner with the community people. One of the many enthusiastic guides during that visit was Khun Ew, who is the secretary of the housing cooperative and an active leader in the community. These notes are drawn from her presentation:

After the housing project in Koh Klang was finished, all the families here had big housing loans to repay. Most of us still had low-paying jobs as vendors and daily wage laborers, so it was crucial for us to reduce our living expenses and increase our incomes, so that we could make our loan payments. We began to develop a variety of community projects which expanded our redevelopment process in different ways. Growing vegetables, producing food and boosting our economic and environmental well-being were a big part of that.

The focus was always on working together, and solving our problems together, as a community. We started with small projects to help us reduce our household expenses and foster a sense of belonging. Then, as we got more confident, we took on larger projects to address other social and environmental problems and tackle other needs in the community - many in collaboration with the District Authority and other agencies. We organized cultural programs, youth projects, elderly exercise programs and outings. We also set up our own community loan fund and a "one-baht-a-day" welfare program that we manage together, which takes care of everyone "from birth-to-death". As part of our redevelopment, we decided to follow the principles of self-sufficiency that were promoted by Thailand's late king, even though our land is very limited - self sufficiency in food, waste-management and environment:

COMMUNITY GARDEN #1

No such thing as a space too small for growing fruits and veg

Many urban poor communities - even the up-graded ones - are so crowded that there isn't room enough for people, much less for growing vegetables. But cramped conditions haven't stopped a lot of communities in Thailand from finding imaginative ways to grow vegetables and produce food - perhaps not all that they need, but enough to give residents the sweet taste of self-sufficiency.

The Koh Klang community makes a good example of this, for they have found ways to use every nook and cranny in their densely-packed 4,800 square meter community to produce food. Koh Klang is a very old informal settlement of 58 households, built on an island within a canal which leads into the Chao Phraya River, in Bangkok's Klong Toey District. The community is smack dab in the middle of the city, with skyscrapers, billboards and roaring elevated expressways on all sides.

For many years, there had been problems of drug addiction and conflicts in the community, as well as accusations from neighboring buildings that the people were polluting the river. In 2008, the people used a terrible fire, which reduced the whole island to ashes, as an opportunity to organize themselves and start all over again. First they registered as a housing cooperative, then they negotiated a long-term lease to their land, and then, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program, they completely rebuilt their houses and infrastructure - all with good collaboration from the land owning agency (Crown Property Bureau) and the District Authority.

1 COMMUNITY PRODUCTS: Making our own community products for every day use like shampoo, soap, bug spray and aloe vera gel, so we don't have to buy them.



2 WATER TREATMENT: Our solar-powered water treatment plant takes polluted water from the river and cleans it enough to water all the plants in the community.



3 KITCHEN FILTERS: We make our own grease trap waste-water filters, for each kitchen. They keep the fats from cooking from going into the canal and river.



4 NATURAL FERTILIZER: As part of our program to manage our waste, we produce our own natural fertilizer, in liquid and solid forms, from kitchen scraps.

5 GARDEN COMPOST: We also make our own compost and raise our own worms for vermiculture, to improve and fertilize the soil in our planting beds and flower pots.



6 GARBAGE SEPARATION: All the waste that's not organic gets sorted into paper, plastic, glass, metal and hazardous bins, which are collected later by the District.

7 RECYCLE CRAFTS: We use a lot of recyclable waste materials like drinks cartons, plastic packing and paper to make handi-craft products we can use and sell.



8 CANAL CLEANING: We organize annual canal-cleaning festivals, where we use the EM ("Effective Microorganism") balls we make ourselves to help reduce pollution.



“ This garden is our fridge beside the house. When we want to cook, no need to go the market, we can just step outside the door and pick whatever we need. ”

Khun Ew,
Koh Klang Community



This garden belongs to **everyone** . . .

Even though the open spaces in Koh Klang are very tiny, every square inch of our community is filled with trees, plants and flowers, in pots or in the ground, or hanging from trees or from the railings along the river. And most of the plants are for eating or for medicinal purposes. The garden is divided into zones, and families living within each zone have the responsibility to water and maintain the plants near their houses.

The garden belongs to everyone. The rule here is that anyone who wants to take the herbs and vegetables and fruits and mushrooms for their own use is welcome to do so. And that's just what we all do. When I'm cooking dinner, I can get some coriander from over there, a few stems of green onions from over there, and some Thai basil leaves from the pot right in front of my house. Our mushroom cultivation has been especially successful, and we're encouraging everyone to use them in their soups and stir-fries.

We started growing a few things soon after the housing project was finished. But our self-sufficiency gardening got a big boost in 2013 from the Green Healthy Communities Program, which is run by our national urban community network, with support from CODI and the Thai Health Foundation. Now Koh Klang has become a "learning center" for economic development and self-sufficiency in Klong Toey District. That means that it's our job to link with the 46 other poor communities in the district, teach them about our various development initiatives, show them what we've done and transfer to others the knowledge we've built as a community over the last ten years. Our community even got an award from the Thai Parliament for being "The best urban agricultural community and environment."

What has come of all these activities? This community used to be a dirty squatter settlement with bad houses and drug problems - nobody would ever dream of coming here! Now we are united. We live together as a warm community. And even though we live on a small island, we're no longer isolated - we have lots of friendly links with other communities, other agencies and other networks. We are part of the network of communities in Klong Toey District, part of the network of communities on Crown Property Bureau land, and part of the network of urban communities developing green and self-sufficient food production projects. In the process, our relationship with the local authority, which used to be antagonistic and mistrustful, has become friendly and productive.



Active promoters of **lonely graveyards** . . .

On our tour through this beautifully green community, we passed a bed of plants which Khun Ew told us are called *Paa Chaa Ngao* ("Lonely Graveyard"). This medicinal herb has so many therapeutic properties that anyone who chews on its bitter leaves or boils them and drinks the infusion every day "will forget to die," so the graveyards will be short of newcomers and the grave-diggers will be out of work. Some of the plants and vegetables in the Koh Klang community are grown as products to be sold, but some – like this wondrous herb – are only given away, and only to special visitors. What better symbol for what communities like Koh Klang - and many others across Thailand - are doing with their collective gardens. Working together, raising and eating nourishing food and living in healthy, green, flower-filled communities may not quite stop death, but it certainly can make our time between now and that graveyard a lot more healthy and a lot less lonely.



Every nook and cranny gets cultivated in Baan Rom Yen in **CHUM PHAE**

All of the 13 Baan Mankong communities in Chum Phae have found ways to “green” their environment: planting trees for shade and fruit, growing flowers and herbs and vegetables on spare bits of land and in pots - and even raising fish and poultry. The Baan Rom Yen community, with its 30 modest one and two-story houses, makes a good example of this. This is Mae Nong’s community, and it was one of the city’s pioneering Baan Mankong projects, in which a group of squatters got together, formed a housing cooperative and negotiated to lease a plot of public land on which to build their new community.

Thirteen years later, this little community has been transformed into an oasis. Despite having no big pieces of land for a proper vegetable garden, most of the houses are festooned with hibiscus, pomegranate, papaya, bananas, and with pots in which all sorts of herbs and vegetables and flowers are growing. The small spaces behind and between the houses have likewise been turned into pocket gardens, where green onions, coriander, chilis, lemongrass and leafy greens spill out of raised beds and all manner of unconventional planters. Mae Nong says “You start growing things in pots and in small leftover spaces between the houses, and gradually develop. It’s like making something from nothing.”

Some families grow things in pots raised up on recycled concrete pipes, and Mae Nong explains that this innovation stops dogs from peeing on them. “People grow different things, so they can all share and exchange produce. No need for everyone to grow everything they need. One person grows coriander, another grows eggplant, another has good chili plants, another has a big lemon tree. People can grow anything, and most share with others.”

The rule here is that everyone can pick and eat these vegetables. “A funny thing happens psychologically,” Mae Nong says. “When sharing is the rule and everyone can pick whatever vegetables and fruits they like, everyone takes just a modest share and grows their own to contribute.” A recent community visitor from Cambodia was astonished at this and said that in Phnom Penh, if somebody grew such lovely vegetables in a pot like this, others would steal them in no time. Mae Nong said there were no problems like that here. “If all the households have pots filled with vegetables, what need is there to steal?”

“If we go on the basis of sharing and giving, those who steal will feel bad and may even start growing something themselves, to share with others. It’s so important to believe in people’s goodness and then make your system based on that. On the basis of giving and trust, we can build a community where everyone contributes, everyone is responsible. Trust is the most important thing.”

At one end of the community, next to the children’s library, a small garden is surrounded by a low wooden fence. Anyone can pick those vegetables too, and everyone helps cultivate and look after them. Mae Nong uses this little garden as an “indicator” of people’s well-being: if a family comes and picks vegetables there several times a month, that’s a sign they have little money to buy food, and so she’ll go talk to them and see what’s the problem.



COMMUNITY GARDEN #2

Collective gardening is both a singular and plural verb in this city

Chum Phae is a small trading and manufacturing town in the fertile rice-growing province of Khon Kaen, in northeastern Thailand. Though small, the town has its share of the usual urbanization problems: in-migration of poor rural people, rising land prices and housing costs and increasing commercial pressure on urban land - all leading to problems of eviction and lack of affordable housing.

As Sanong Ruaisungnoen (“Mae Nong”), the chairperson of Chum Phae’s community network says, “When we started our savings, network and upgrading process back in 2004, Chum Phae was full of slums, where living conditions were bad. And people had no pride, no courage, no togetherness, no idea what to do.” Since then, this very strong and very big-thinking community network has gone from strength to strength.

With support from CODI’s Baan Mankong Program, the network has completed 13 housing projects (with 1,052 houses). Having solved most of the city’s housing problems, the network has gone on to promote many activities to improve other aspects of people’s lives and well-being and make sure nobody is left behind - many in close partnership with the local authority: their own city development fund, a “birth to death” welfare program, a housing insurance scheme, community libraries, elderly and youth groups, livelihood projects and community enterprises to bottle drinking water and grow mushrooms.

The Chum Phae network has also incorporated community gardens and food security concepts in several innovative ways, and in these pages we will look at two of them.



“ Gardening is rejuvenating. People can come here when their spirits are low. It always makes them feel better to work in the rice field or in the vegetable garden for a little while. ”

(Mae Nong)

This collective **rice farm** is owned by the community network

The community network in Chum Phae has also developed its own collective rice farm, on a 6.08 hectare piece of land they bought in 2012. It's right on the outskirts of town, just ten or fifteen minutes by bicycle from most of the communities. The foreclosed land was being sold by the Government Housing Bank at a very cheap price of 2.63 million baht (US\$ 82,000). On the day of the sale, when the bank learned the network was interested, they jacked up the price to 4 million baht (US\$ 125,000), and some hard negotiating had to happen before the network could persuade the bank to sell it at the original asking price.

FINANCING THE LAND: To pay for the land, the network took a 2 million baht (US\$ 62,500) loan from CODI, at 3.5% interest, on a 7-year repayment term, with twice-yearly repayments of 162,320 baht (US\$ 5,075) per repayment. The remaining 630,000 baht (US\$ 19,688) they borrowed from the network's own Chum Phae City Fund (which had been set up in 2010 with seed money from ACHR's ACCA Program) at 2% interest, on a 7-year repayment term, with twice-yearly repayments of 59,850 baht (US\$ 1,870).

BENEFITS FROM THE RICE FARM: The network decided that for the first five years, all the earnings from the sale of rice grown on the collective farm would be used to repay the loans to CODI and the City Fund. Then, from the sixth year onwards, profits from the sale of rice would be allocated like this: the production team would get 15%, 10% would be kept in a collective rice farm fund, and the remaining 75% would be divided between members.

ROLES AND DUTIES: Rice farm members hold shares via the group, take active part in the farming work and get a share of the profits from selling the rice crop. The farm is overseen by a committee of 15 community people, and looked after by a manager who looks after the farm and plans for its many uses. The Chum Phae community network's city committee sets rice field policies, selects the rice farm committee members, and appoints the rice farm manager. Two people work full time at the farm: Khun Tan is an elderly man who lives on the site and looks after the farm, as caretaker. Instead of being paid, he can grow his own vegetables. Sri-An Pada, the farm manager, is big, gentle-souled guy whose knowledge about farming is so deep that no visitor leaves the farm without dozens of tips.

150 MEMBERS SO FAR: 150 families (from 13 communities) are now member-shareholders of the rice farm. Anyone who wants to join can request to become a member with the network's City Committee. Members can grow their own rice and pick vegetables and fruits for their family use from the communal planting beds, but are asked to leave a little money (10 or 20 baht) in the box at the entrance. For members who grow rice on the farm, two parts of their yield is kept for their own consumption, and one part goes to the network, which then sells it to community people at a low price.

CULTIVATION: All the cultivation in the collective rice farm is done organically, without any chemicals. In the rice paddies, they use the "throw rice" technique for cultivating the rice, and mix a little wheat in with the rice to attract the birds, who then eat up the insects. In the vegetable gardens, they also mix things together, to keep away the bad pests and attract birds and the beneficial insects, without having to use any pesticides.

The **land bank** that doubles as a **food bank**

The original idea was for the network to acquire some land of its own to have ready for meeting housing needs in the future, when land in the city might become too scarce or too costly. That was always the focus, but in the mean time, the network decided to cultivate the land, which was already rice paddy, and make use of their collective land bank to boost the health and food security of the city's poor by producing rice and healthy food for community members to eat.

And that's just what it does. The collective rice farm is big and well-irrigated. Besides rice, the farm has all kinds of fruit trees, fish ponds, chicken coops and substantial areas for growing vegetables. And every product from the farm is a direct investment in the health and well-being of Chum Phae's poorest citizens.



COMMUNITY GARDEN #3

A lesson in how to revive some long-lost skills in self-sufficiency

This community garden story comes from the rice-growing, papaya salad-eating heart of Northeastern Thailand. Surin is a very old city, and is dotted with ruins from the 11th Century Angkor kingdom it was once part of. The city has many poor communities, and all of them have been badly affected by the pandemic, and by the lockdowns and economic crash that came with it.

One of those communities is Sri Buarai. In 2007, it was the first in Surin to upgrade its housing, with support from the Baan Mankong Program and the city's community network. First they formed a savings group, with all 157 families. Then, with the help of two young architects from Khon Kaen, they planned a project to fill the land above flood level, lay roads and drains, construct a community center and make modest housing improvements. After forming a housing cooperative, they were able to negotiate a long-term lease to the land they had been squatting on for decades - public land which falls under the central government's Fine Arts Department.

During the Covid crisis, the Sri Buarai community borrowed a piece of vacant from a nearby temple and turned it into a collectively-managed garden that is now providing a bounty of nourishing, organic fruits, vegetables, eggs and fish to dozens of the city's most vulnerable families. The story of that garden is told here by Roongrat Maneesod, who is the chairwoman of the Sri Buarai community savings group (as written down by Ruengyuth Teeravanich at CODI).



“ Instead of wasting your time doing any old thing, why not grow vegetables? ”

Roongrat Maneesod,
Sri Buarai Community

This community vegetable garden is on land borrowed from a temple in SURIN

In the years since we upgraded our community, we have continued to develop ourselves and to find solutions to various problems, like increasingly frequent droughts. But nothing could have prepared us for the troubles we've faced with Covid-19. Most of us have lost our jobs, and our children have been unable to go to school - first because the schools were closed during the lockdown, and then because we had no money for their books and uniforms when they reopened. We've tried our best to deal with these new circumstances: we have our own community quarantine system, we sew our own face masks, we organize food donations from rice mills and local groups and assign the children to help deliver the food to each house. But we're not comfortable being only the receivers of help from others.

After the Covid crisis hit, our network surveyed all 33 poor communities in Surin to better understand the problems people were facing and how to help. The situation was really bad, and some families had no food to eat at all. The network began distributing donated rice, set up donation cupboards and started a community kitchen that cooked meals for hundreds of hungry families each day. We also discussed how to make ourselves more self-reliant during the crisis - especially in food, which for Buddhists is considered one of the four elements necessary for life. Years ago, we grew our own rice and vegetables around the community, but those days are long gone. When we thought about how to bring back some normalcy to this crisis, we got the idea of reviving those old practices of growing our own food.

The problem was that we had only a small patch of unused land at the back of our community, which wasn't enough. There was, though, a big piece of vacant land right next to Sri Buarai, which belonged to the temple. When we proposed to borrow that land for cultivation, the temple's abbot readily agreed. He also offered us the use of the temple's water supply. When we put together our land with the temple land, we had a good-sized area of about 6,400 square meters - big enough for everyone who wanted to join.

That was the beginning of our community garden in the Sri Buarai community. We joined together with a neighboring community, Tessabaan Anusawn, and invited community members from both settlements to join the project. Any family that was hungry and interested could get an allotment to grow their own vegetables and raise their own food. About thirty families joined initially, and together we subdivided the land into small garden beds.

Getting the community kids involved in the garden

During the time of the lockdown, all the schools in Thailand were closed and the children were at home. So we invited the community kids to come tend the vegetables and learn about cultivation and nutrition in the process. When the planting began, the children had a lot of fun, playing with the water at the same time they were learning things. Besides the vegetable beds, we also have an enclosure to raise chickens and a fish pond. The whole project has become a learning laboratory for the children and young people in the communities. One of the planting beds is managed entirely by a group of children, and they have been able to earn a little pocket money for buying sweets by selling their produce. In this way, the project is also bringing us our future leaders from the new generation.



Once we got started, lots of **helpers** . . .

When news of our community garden project began to circulate, we got offers of help from many places. The municipal government came with their big earth-moving equipment and helped turn over the soil and make the land flat for planting. The provincial government has a policy to promote organic farming, and their Agriculture Department sent a specialist, Khun Surapan, to show us how to plant and fertilize and water without using any chemicals. Everyone in Thailand can grow things, but with a little more technique, we can grow better quality produce and get better yields. Khun Surapan also coordinated with other government organizations who helped us make fish ponds and learn to raise hens for eggs and meat.

A local shop that sells gardening supplies, called *Suan Rak Mai* ("Plant Lovers" in Thai), offered to donate seeds and seedlings to the project. We didn't like the idea of being only receivers, so we took the donated supplies on the understanding that later on, when we sow our crops, we will make seeds and give them back to the shop, to sell or to pass on to another community.

The community people all came out to help when it was time to make the planting beds. Pi Kak made the first planting bed, as an example for us to learn from. Then we all began to plant things - bananas, papaya, dragon fruit, carrots, Chinese cabbage, lemongrass, coriander, scallions, pandanus, cucumbers, garlic, chilies, eggplants, yams, bottle gourds - so many things!

People use the vegetables they grow for two purposes: first and most importantly to feed themselves and bolster their food security. And then if they have enough after feeding their families, they can sell the surplus. It's a way to boost the incomes of people who have lost jobs during the lockdown. The vegetables are so good that a local hotel has contracted our community to produce organic vegetables to supply their hotel kitchens - which they buy from us at market rates. The provincial governor has come to visit the garden and supports the project.

Our garden project in Sri Buarai has several aims. The first is to have enough good, healthy food for our children, our families and our community; to supplement incomes by earning a little from selling surplus produce; to boost collaboration between communities and with the local authority, with temples and with other friends, to make a more sustainable development for the whole city; and finally, to help make people more self-reliant, in any situation.

A community garden like this can help people to survive during any kind of hard times, even if they have no job, no money and no food. We don't have to be afraid of Covid or any disaster, because we have people and we have friends who help each other to produce good, sustainable food. So you can see that this kind of project has a good future. My wish is that this project expands into other communities and eventually produces enough for the whole city!



“When people can come together and learn how to grow vegetables like this, we meet each other and eat together all the time. It makes a happy atmosphere. There’s something about the simple acts of planting, tending and harvesting that allows us to see the future together, and to see it as being a good future, a good life.”

Meet some of Sri Buarai’s **community gardeners**



Wanpen Eangsonok

used to work in a restaurant, but after the restaurant closed, she had no income at all. She joined the project to learn how to grow the vegetables she can no longer afford to buy. If the restaurant reopens, she'll go back to work, but will continue to cultivate her vegetable bed as a side job.



Pia Puttanu

is a 15-year old boy who had an after-school job at Car Care to supplement his family's income. But after the Covid crisis hit, the schools closed and he got laid off from his job. After joining the community garden, he has been able to earn a little money growing vegetables, to help his family.



Mongkon Salarum

is on the Sri Buarai community committee. He decided to join in the garden because he didn't like waiting around for people to donate things to the community. Donations don't come regularly, so sometimes they had nothing. "All 33 communities in the city have to stand on their own feet."



The city's first Urban Community Farm for the poor is born in **CHIANG MAI**

In March 2020, when the Covid crisis was just beginning, and Thailand had closed its borders to tourism, we visited the Mae Kha communities to see how our friends there were doing. Many were out of work and facing serious difficulties feeding their families. Some local groups were donating food, which helped a little, but the situation was really bad and people were hungry. Some had even begun growing vegetables along the edges of canal, even though the water is so polluted.



COMMUNITY GARDEN #4

Another innovation from Chiang Mai's canal communities

The Mae Kha Canal flows through the historic center of Chiang Mai, linking the springs of Doi Suthep Mountain to the Ping River. The canal has deteriorated over time and is now badly polluted, but with its great old trees, it still functions as a crucial green lung in the fast-developing city.

Along the shady canal are several informal settlements, which are home to some 2,500 urban poor families. Twenty years ago, in the face of repeated attempts by the city to evict them, these communities came together as a network. They initiated savings groups, mapped their settlements, organized regular canal cleanings and undertook settlement and housing upgrading projects - all to improve their living conditions, bolster their right to stay and show the city that they are vital partners in looking after this historic canal.

For several years, the architect Supawut Boonmahathanakorn ("Tee") and his office colleagues in *Jaibaan Studio* have been working with the Mae Kha communities to revitalize the canal and develop several housing planning and settlement-improvement projects. In the process, the canal communities have won broad civic support in Chiang Mai for the active role they are playing in restoring and protecting the historic canal - an amenity which belongs to the whole city.

On these pages, Tee tells the story of the community garden the Mae Kha communities have created, with support from Jaibaan Studio and many others in the city. The text is drawn from a blog post Tee wrote for the IIED website.

That's when the idea of making an urban farm for the poor began to take shape. Our first step was finding a possible site for our urban farm, and we didn't have to look far. In their earlier searches for alternative land for housing, the Mae Kha communities had identified a 4,800 square meter plot of vacant land right next to the canal. The land was owned by the government and had been used for years as a garbage dump. So Jaibaan Studio drafted a quick plan to propose to the municipality and began talking with other communities and civic groups, to muster support for the project and strengthen our negotiations to use the the land.



The mayor was reluctant at first, but we found keen supporters for the project in the Governor of Chiang Mai Province and the municipality staff. Nobody promised any financial support, but the Provincial Governor gave us preliminary permission to use the land, and the municipality offered the loan of some big earth-moving machines to help prepare the site.



After getting a green light from the provincial governor, we spent April and May working on the site: clearing away some 5,700 tons of garbage, levelling the land and bringing in a meter's thickness of new topsoil. We got the soil from the government's Marine Department, which had dredged it from the Ping River. It was good, rich, alluvial soil, but because the Ping River is also somewhat polluted, we've had to take care to improve the new soil and make sure the vegetables grown in it will be clean and safe.



On the advice of organic gardening experts in the area (and there are lots!), we mixed compost and "biochar" into all the new planting beds. Biochar is a kind of organic charcoal made by burning corncobs or rice straw. When it's mixed with the soil, it can help a lot to reduce contamination, improve fertility, promote plant growth and increase yield.

Later on, we launched a campaign to raise funds for the project and generate awareness

about the serious issue of food security and the role of urban farming and vegetable cultivation as vital new skills for urban people. Donations started coming in: seeds, seedlings, gardening tools - even cow dung for fertilizer! With a small grant from CODI, our office designed a bamboo structure for training and meetings, which can also function as a farmers market, where small-scale farmers from around Chiang Mai can bring their fresh produce to sell to the public. Another important ally has been the 12-story Shangri-La Hotel, which is just a block away and overlooks the site. They were keen to beautify an eyesore their hotel rooms had looked out over for decades. The hotel helped finance the land development and soil replacement.





All sorts of public events have been organized in the new garden, to promote the idea of organic gardening and greater food self-sustenance in the city, to involve different groups in the project and to make the urban farm something that belongs to everyone.

Planting started in June 2020

After two months of preparing the land and raising funds, we organized our first big public event on June 7, 2020. We invited anyone interested in the project to come and help plant the fruit trees people had given us. The provincial governor was the guest of honor, and we had good support from many local NGOs, civic groups and community people.

After that, we began organizing regular events to encourage people of all sorts to come and work together on the new urban farm: people from all the Mae Kha Canal communities and other poor settlements in the city, members of the Chiang Mai Homeless Network, kids and teachers from nearby schools, agriculture students from the local university and families who want to share a collective garden bed. The main focus is on enabling vulnerable communities to produce their own nourishing food, but we want to extend the engagement and sense of ownership of the urban farm to as many people as possible.

People have contributed many ideas that been adopted and have helped to transform this smelly dump site into a lush public farm that belongs to everyone. By July, all kinds of vegetables were growing on the site, and were already being harvested and carried home to families that were in great need of them. A friend from a local university is helping to analyze the vegetables in a lab, to make sure they continue to be safe.

In September, we organized a workshop for all who want to be part of the project, to formulate a system for managing the farm together and to plan the next stage of our negotiations for the land and financial assistance from the municipality. Our common aims for the urban farm are to bolster urban food security by producing food and knowledge about how to produce it, to create a public space where people can engage and work together and build human bonds, and to create a pilot project which shows how vacant public land can be jointly managed by people and the government for the public good.

Somsook Boonyabancha, CODI's former director, was able to join us for that workshop, and she had this to say about the urban farm project: *"If it's the right process, everyone gets changed by it: the project changes us and it changes the city."*

On October 10, we organized a public forum with the provincial governor and the mayor, to share what we have learned and to discuss how to move this project forward. The forum took place in the community garden and was aired on the Thai public television station. Our idea was to use that event to negotiate in public for long-term permission to use the land, with support from citizens in so many parts of Chiang Mai. The good news is that at the end of the forum, the mayor gave us permission to use the land and pledged his support to move this urban farm project forward. Now, using Mae Kha as a pilot, we are looking for other public lands around the city to make more urban community farms.



For more information about the Urban Community Farm in Chiang Mai, please contact Tee, whose contact details are on the back cover.



A sombre note on the subject of poultry . . .

At one point, a decision was taken to introduce poultry into the urban farm project. So a netted enclosure was built and a flock of plump brown laying hens moved into it. The hens became a great favorite of children coming to the farm. But one morning, they discovered that the entire flock had made a hearty - if unintended - dinner for some stray dogs in the area. The tragedy led to reinforcements being made to the enclosure, and after a suitable period of mourning, a new flock of hens (donated by a local free-range chicken farm) moved into the stronger enclosure and are laying eggs there now.



Growing healthy food: a perfect task for the old and the young

“ We elderly people in Thailand are strong. Most of us grew up in a time before all the farming was done with such heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, as is common practice now. There have been big changes in how food is produced in Thailand, and now the younger ones are sick and badly nourished - they're even dying of cancer. So we need to educate our children to beware of the chemicals in food and to try to eat local food and vegetables that are free from chemicals, as much as possible. How can we change the attitude of community people about food, to get them to start growing and producing their own food, for better health? If we start teaching children when they are small, about gardening, herbs and healthy food, it's easy for them to learn to make producing healthy food a natural part of their lives. We have to make sure to include children in our food security campaign. And the elderly also. Both these groups can be active in growing and producing food in our communities. ”

*Sanong Ruaisungnoen (“Mae Nong”),
chairperson of Chum Phae community network*

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*We are fast becoming connoisseurs of great
community garden and food security stories
here at ACHR and would welcome any new
stories or news of innovative projects that we
can help share with groups in the Asia region.*



Green Community Exhibition

*The community networks organized
a big exhibition and celebration of
the national Green Healthy
Community Program in December
2017, at the CODI office in
Bangkok. The gala event was an
opportunity for communities from
around the country to tell their
garden stories and show off their
opulent produce and community
food products - and for others to
taste them!*



**Asian
Coalition
for Housing
Rights**

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