



Collective Rice Farm & Land Bank in Chum Phae

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • DECEMBER 2020

The urban poor community network in this small Northeastern city has found ways to make their cooperative housing projects do double duty as vegetable farms and fruit orchards. They have also put their resources together to collectively purchase a big piece of agricultural land on the outskirts of the city, where they have developed a collective rice farm and vegetable garden, which offers garden plots to community members interested in growing their own food, and provides cheap, good, organic rice and produce to community members without green thumbs. The rice farm also serves as a land bank for future housing needs.

- Project Collective Rice Farm & Land Bank
- Location Chum Phae City, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand
- Size 1,052 households
- Finished 2012
- Type Community rice farm and vegetable garden that is collectively owned and managed by a network of 13 housing cooperatives in the city

CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

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*. This is what that means 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 collective 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 national 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.

Here we take you on a guided tour through one shining specimen of those community gardens. The community network in the small Northeastern city of Chum Phae has found ways to make their cooperative housing projects do double duty as vegetable farms and fruit orchards. They have also put their resources together to collectively purchase 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.

The 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.

The community process:

As Sanong Ruaisungnoen ("Mae Nong"), the chairperson of Chum Phae's community network says, "When we started our savings, network and housing 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 now completed 13 cooperative housing projects, which provide permanent, secure, decent housing to 1,052 poor households (some on land the communities purchased and own collectively, and some on public land the community collectively leases). 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.

EXAMPLE: COMMUNITY GARDEN IN BAAN ROM YEN

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.

COLLECTIVE RICE FARM & LAND BANK

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.

100% organic 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.

SUPPORT GROUPS & PARTNERS

- **The Chum Phae Urban Community Network** was formed in 2004, and focused in the early years on community savings and credit and developing housing and settlement upgrading projects to solve the serious housing problems of its member communities. After constructing 13 cooperative housing projects, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program, the city's urban poor housing problems have been mostly solved. So the community network has expanded its work and activities to address other needs and problems in the communities, with welfare and housing insurance programs, youth and elderly groups, community libraries, livelihood boosting programs, community enterprises, food production and running their own city development fund, which provides flexible finance for many of the network's activities.
- **CODI (Community Organizations Development Institute)** is an independent public organization under the Thai Government's Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. CODI's mission is to support the strengthening of communities and their organizations - in both urban and rural areas - as key agents of change and as central actors in development which affects their lives and communities. Besides budget from the government which supports many of its ongoing programs, CODI's chief financial tool is the CODI revolving fund, which provides soft loans to community cooperatives and community networks to undertake a variety of development initiatives they plan and implement themselves.
- **Baan Mankong Program** is one of CODI's main development programs, and was launched in 2003 to address the housing problems of the country's poorest citizens. The program channels government funds, in the form of infrastructure subsidies and soft housing loans, directly to poor communities, which 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 poor families, the Baan Mankong Program (which means "*Secure housing*" in Thai) 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 Thai cities. By November 2019, the Baan Mankong program had spread to 405 cities, in 76 out of the country's 77 provinces, where community

housing cooperatives had designed and built 1,035 housing projects which provide decent, secure, permanent housing to 105,739 urban poor families. All 13 of the cooperative housing projects in Chum Phae were supported by the Baan Mankong Program.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS IN CHUM PHAE

Some reflections on the community rice field, and the community-driven development process in Chum Phae, by Sanong Ruaisungnoen ("Mae Nong"), chairperson of Chum Phae community network:

"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."

"Growing healthy food is 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."

"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."

"The community network developed a vision for Chum Phae, in which everyone has a house and enough income to live a decent life. Everything should be shared, and common to everyone, as much as possible, and everyone should have a place, should have some capacity in the process. Now that we've solved most of the housing problems of the urban poor in Chum Phae, we have a lot of development plans to move forward. We need to do tangible projects which show and inspire people - not just talk and ideas in the air! In all our work, we use five strategies:

- build people's capacity
- keep initiating as many activities as possible to bring people together
- make sure that our development is holistic and covers all aspects of our lives and well-being and that it builds up friendships between communities and other actors, agencies
- develop people's jobs and careers so they have sufficient income to meet their needs
- build up our own city fund, to provide flexible finance for all the programs we develop."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please follow this link for more information about the Chum Phae community gardens, and other community gardens in Thailand.

http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file_04112020135702.pdf

For more information about the development process in Chum Phae, and the Baan Mankong housing program, please visit the CODI website:

<https://en.codi.or.th/>

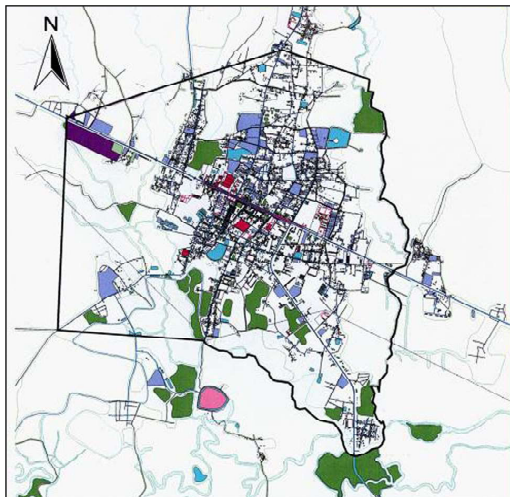
For more information, please contact ACHR:

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)
73 Soi Sonthiwattana 4, Ladprao Road Soi 110, Bangkok 10310, Thailand
tel. +66 - 2 - 538 - 0919
email: achr@achr.net
website: www.achr.net

PHOTOS



This is what conditions were like in many of the informal communities in Chum Phae, before the community network was formed and began in earnest its project to make sure every single poor family in the city lived in decent, secure, permanent housing.



One of the network's first tasks was to survey and map all the poor settlements in Chum Phae, and identify possible land for resettling those who can't stay in the same place.

In the coming years, one housing project followed another - all with good cooperation from the local and national government.



There have been several mayors since 2004, and the network has managed to make all of them friendly allies in their citywide housing process.

Community-managed savings and loan groups were an essential part of the community development process in Chum Phae, to help these poor communities learn to manage money together. Even the children were included in the savings process.



These are a couple of photos of the Baan Rom Yen community soon after their pioneering housing reconstruction was finished. The 30 modest one and two-story houses have been laid out in such a way as to make sure everyone gets full daylight and ventilation on all sides.



Here are several generations of Chum Phae's community leaders, who made all this happen, and you'll notice that most of them are women.



This is the children's library in the Baan Rom Yen community - closed up in the early morning while the community children are at school.



And the shady playground in Baan Rom Yen, which has welcoming equipment for both kids and fitness-oriented grown-ups.



The floors, walls, columns and ceilings of the much-used community center have been painted with whimsical figures by the children.



▲ Here is Mae Nong showing around a group of visitors from poor communities in several cities in nearby Cambodia, in March 2019.



▲ These recycled tires make excellent planters for green onions and leafy greens, and are kept up on pedestals to keep them away from dog pee.



▲ That's Mae Nong again, with the group from Cambodia, looking around the vegetables and herbs in Baan Rom Yen.



▲ Everything you need for Thai-style clear soup, right there on your doorstep: green onions, leafy greens, white gourd.



▲ In the community's system, anyone who wants to take some limes or vegetables or herbs is welcome to do so - the garden belongs to all.



▲ Mae Nong watches who takes vegetables regularly from this patch, as an "indicator" that the family may be having some money troubles.



Here a group of community leaders from the Urban Poor Community Alliance (UPCA) from all over Asia come to visit the network's brand new collective rice field, in December 2012. The rice field project has been an inspiration for community networks in many parts of Asia.



And here a group of urban poor community leaders from Cambodia visits the rice field seven years later, in March 2019.



When you walk through the shimmering green rice field, and smell the good, wet, earthy smells, and hear the insects whirring happily, you can understand what Mae Nong means when she says that gardening is rejuvenating, and that such places can restore your spirits when you're feeling low.



Bananas, rice, pumpkins, coconut trees - the placement of the garden's bounty has come about naturally over time.



No visitor leaves the collective rice farm without getting dozens of tips from Sri-An Pada, the farm's knowledgeable and gentle-souled manager.



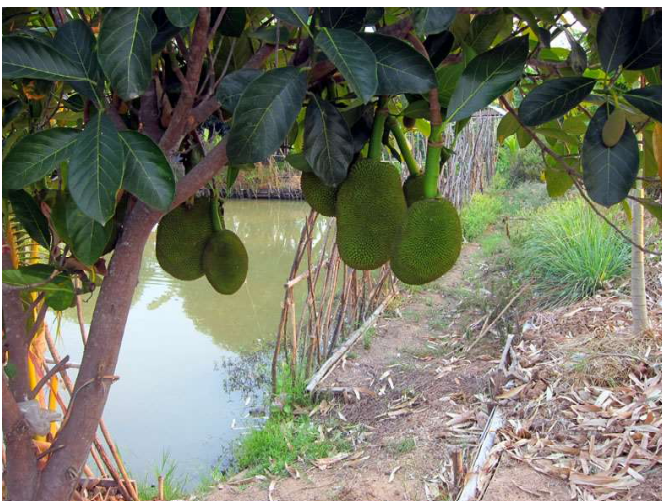
▲ The ponds do double-duty for rain harvesting and raising fish like plaa chon (snakehead), plaa duk (catfish) and plaa nin (talapia).



▲ These egg-laying hens have to be kept in their enclosure at night because there are plenty of predators around ready to gobble them up.



▲ People can grow their own rice, but all of the vegetables and fruits on the farm are grown collectively, and anyone who wants to pick what they need can do so, but is asked to leave a little money (10 or 20 baht - about half a US dollar) in the box at the entrance.



▲ These plump jackfruits can go into curries when they're green, or become a sweet and fragrant treat when they're allowed to fully ripen.



▲ Here is a bag of the 100% organic unhusked rice from the collective rice farm - ready to be taken to the rice mill to be polished.