

ACHR e-news

AUGUST 2008

News from groups around Asia about what's happening in the region . . .

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights
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NEW SELAVIP NEWSLETTER :

The Selavip Newsletter is a “*Journal of Low-Income Housing in Asia and the World*”, and that’s no exaggeration! The October 2008 issue runs to 100 pages and covers nearly thirty projects in 14 countries. This is one of the longest-running and most information-rich catalogues of community processes in Asia, Africa and Latin America on the scene - any issue is like a primer on some of the most important work going on in community-housing. The *Newsletter* has come out twice a year since 1977 and has been a labor of love for Father Jorge Anzorena, a Jesuit Priest from Argentina. Father Jorge is a gentle crusader for the urban poor and a familiar figure on the international development scene. The organization he has been associated with all these years, the Selavip Foundation, supports housing initiatives of many sorts, but it is in his role as **super networker** that Father Jorge is best known. Father Jorge was also one of the founders of ACHR and continues to be one of the coalition’s key guiding lights.



Many trace the genesis of the idea of community exposure trips to this early champion of direct, people-to-people learning - a poor people’s pedagogy that is now standard operating procedure for so many groups working in Asia, Africa and even Latin America. It was Father Jorge who said, “*Why should professionals like me have a monopoly on all this vast experience, while the poor are stuck in their settlements? Why shouldn’t they, with their great hunger to improve their lives, also be able to travel, to see the best of Asia’s development?*” And so, with modest funds from the Selavip Foundation, he began in 1985 to help set up and support some of the first exploratory grassroots exchange visits.

To the task of “telling about” he brings warmth, enthusiasm and an encyclopedic awareness of who’s doing what around the world. When he isn’t teaching in Japan, Father Jorge is out traveling, meeting people, visiting new projects and collecting material. Bimbo Fernandez, at the Pagtambayayong Foundation in the Philippines, has for many years helped Father Jorge put it all together, and the newsletter is printed right there in Cebu City, in Bimbo’s own printing shop. The articles are short, cleanly-written, loaded with ideas and illustrations. *This is documentation at its most accessible.*

Inside the front cover is a logo that sets the newsletter’s tone - it shows four interlocking, clasped hands, and beneath it the words, “*This publication is not covered by copyright and may be quoted or recopied in part or in full, with or without acknowledgement or notice to its authors and publishers.*”

You can now read both current and back issues of the Selavip newsletters online.

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NEW ORLEANS UPDATE : Sam Jackson sets up a new non-profit called "May Day"

Two years of the Asian Tsunami / Hurricane Katrina exchange process : Over the past two years, groups of survivors from the Asian tsunami and from Hurricane Katrina (along with their support organizations) have traveled around the world to visit each other several times, as part of a growing program of mutual support across cultures and across the world.

Linking with poor communities in USA is a new experience for ACHR! In the past 20 years, most of ACHR's work has involved building learning and mutual support links between developing countries within Asia and Africa. For us, this exploratory exchange with poor, disaster-hit communities in the USA (the richest, most powerful country on earth!) was a completely new experience. The idea of this on-going exchange has been to give people from these very different parts of the world and very different political cultures a chance to compare notes on how they have dealt with the problems of rebuilding their lives and communities after a major calamity, and to find ways of supporting each others' struggles in direct, human and practical ways - based on their very real experiences they have gone through.

The tsunami-Katrina exchange, which is a first for many of the groups involved, has been being jointly organized and supported by ACHR, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) in New York and the National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness (NPACH) in USA (with a branch in New Orleans). In the past year, the visits have slowed down, but the communications by e-mail have continued.

1. **First visit Asia to New Orleans, July 2006 :** ACHR's first exploratory visit to New Orleans took place in July 2006, on the way home from the World Urban Forum in Vancouver, where we organized a seminar "Community Driven Disaster Rehabilitation."
2. **First visit New Orleans to Asia, September 2006 :** Just two months later, the first group of Katrina survivors from New Orleans traveled to Asia to visit tsunami-hit communities in Thailand and Indonesia in September 2006.
3. **Second visit New Orleans to Asia, November 2006 :** Another larger group from New Orleans and Gulf Coast communities followed in November 2006, where besides visiting with tsunami-hit communities in Thailand and Aceh, they also participated in a large, regional seminar on disaster reconstruction in Phuket, Thailand.
4. **Second visit Asia to New Orleans, July 2007 :** In July 2007, the first group of tsunami survivors from Thailand and Indonesia traveled to New Orleans to visit several of the friends they had made on the earlier exchanges and to see with their own eyes how a major calamity like Hurricane Katrina is being responded to in the wealthiest, most powerful country in the world. It was during this most recent exchange visit that a public seminar was organized to give a chance for these visitors to exchange their experiences and ideas about community-driven disaster rehabilitation, in a more structured discussion, with some of the New Orleans and Gulf Coast groups which have been involved in the exchange.

SAM JACKSON ("ACTION JACKSON"), who was part of the New Orleans group that visited Asia in November 2006, is an electrician, handyman and ship builder. Sam has been one of the most active figures in the ongoing struggle to reopen New Orleans' stock of public housing - a stock of some 5,500 affordable housing units that were only slightly damaged but were closed and threatened with demolition after the storm and floods hit the city. Sam is a long time resident of one of the public housing projects, the B.W. Cooper Housing Complex, and was among the first group of tenants that won the right to move back in to their apartments, more than a year later. But in recent months, the federal government and the state of Louisiana have made good their plans to demolish many of the city's remaining public housing and redevelop it as "mixed income" housing. Here is a recent note from Sam, who has just set up a new organization called *May Day* to fight to protect the city's stock of affordable housing continues :



Monday, 25 Aug 2008 : Well Tom, as you know, the city is still under corruption and our politicians are going to jail. All the public housing in the city has been destroyed, with no new construction of the big four housing projects. Our homeless problem still exists. Folks are still living in exile from the city. We get no communication from our local government or our national government, and with the president we have now, it's no hope. Well Tom, it's time for a new changes in the grassroots organizations in America, and that's not all. We are the people in and around the world who want justice and our human right to housing and health care. That's what MayDay New Orleans is fighting for in what was left from Katrina & Rita. We must continue the fight here and around the world. Good hearing from you Tom and tell everyone Hello from Sam Jackson, MayDay New Orleans.

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- e-mail : jackson-action@hotmail.com
- More information on the New Orleans struggle : tiffany@nesri.org
- To see a short video about Sam's work follow the following link : www.vimeo.com/1447215 (Password: NESRI)
- For copies of detailed reports on the various Tsunami - Katrina exchanges, please contact ACHR.

VIETNAM : National community savings meeting in Viet Tri, August 5

Tran Minh Chau worked with EDNA Vietnam for many years, and was a key person in linking with ACHR during some of the coalition's earlier initiatives in the country. Minh Chau now lives in France with her husband Henri de Reboul (who also works for ENDA on the French side) and little son, but continues to be quite intensely involved in the provincial cities network process from a distance, and travels to Vietnam at least a couple of times every year to assist in the process in different ways. In early August, Minh Chau spent a week in the city of Viet Tri, which has one of the strongest women's savings process in the country, with almost 500 active community savings groups an savings of nearly a half million US dollars. Here are some excerpts from Minh Chau's report on the week in Viet Tri :

1. A pilot upgrading project to create a new working and learning space for the city-wide savings network in Viet Tri : I worked with the Association of Vietnamese Cities (ACVN - our new key partner in the 8-cities savings process), city and ward authorities and the communities to develop a proposal for a pilot housing and community upgrading project that will demonstrate a new approach to solve housing problems for urban poor communities in Viet Tri. We have prepared a funding proposal to support this pilot project and submitted it to the Selavip Foundation. As part of the project, which will become hand-on training-by-doing for the whole city, we will adopt some innovative activities that have been used by communities elsewhere in Asia but may be useful in the Vietnam context, such as community-managed surveys (to identify areas with housing problems and to identify vacant land that may be potential sites for housing) and community-managed planning (for new infrastructure, allocation of land plots, housing improvements, etc.)



2. A call for architectural help with the pilot project : The ACVN, which is our new coordination body of our national community savings and fund network, has a strongly architectural background, and the ACVN is very keen that this pilot community housing process in Viet Tri should be an important training process for other poor communities in the city and for other cities in Vietnam. This pilot project will also push the 8 cities savings and fund network to go beyond its existing limited focus on individual interests and short term savings, and begin to deal with more comprehensive issues of community development, housing and a nation-wide community network for land and housing issues. It may be helpful to bring in ACHR's experiences and good practices in housing for urban poor communities into Vietnam through this project, and we may need some technical help - especially from some young community architects.

3. First city-wide savings group meeting with 148 savings group leaders : I also worked with the city's Community Development Fund (CDF) and the Women's Union to organize a city-wide meeting of 148 savings group leaders and the leaders of 8 wards where most of the city's 500 savings groups are located. In Vietnam, these kinds of workshops are usually organized in very formal ways and conform to strict project-based lines. In this meeting, which was the first large city-wide meeting of the city's savings groups, we tried to loosen things up a little, and make it into more of an informal, horizontal dialogue between women from the different savings groups. Besides strengthening the linkages and learning between the city's many savings groups, the meeting also aimed to push the savings group network to go beyond their existing limits of individual's and group's interests and to work more in on community-wide needs and in more of a city-wide process.

4. 2-year plan for Viet Tri's Community Savings Network : In the first session, the savings group leaders discussed their various community needs, and the six most common were housing, environment, rising cost of living, social problems relate to youth unemployment, savings mobilization problems and group leaders' capacity. In the second session, mixed groups (from different wards) made working plan for how to work together to solve each of these problem, within the city-wide process and efforts. The results of these discussions will now form the basis of the Viet Tri Community Network's strategic activity plan for the coming two years - a plan which has already been submitted to the Viet Tri community network for the next two years (2009 - 2010).

5. Next plans : Another workshop to strengthen the management capacities of 148 savings leaders in Viet Tri will be organized at the end of September, with support from ACVN and ENDA. The important questions for the next activities are: How to link the results of different workshops into a more community cohesive plan which make the CDF network work more effectively? And how the community housing process should start and integrate in this city-wide process in Viet Tri and that could be replicated at national scale? ACVN and ENDA will also work with ACHR to organize a regional workshop (with participants from Lao PDR, Cambodia and Thailand?) in Hai Duong some time in December, for the northern Vietnamese cities: Viet Tri, Hanoi, Vinh and Hai Duong.

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RENTERS DISAPPEARING from PENANG'S HISTORIC GEORGETOWN

The city of Georgetown, on Malaysia's Penang island, was established by the British in 1786 and is still a fascinating amalgam of Chinese, Indian, Malay, Arab, Armenian and Acehnese cultures, with distinctive neighborhoods, a vibrant street life and a historic environment with many fine pre-war houses, shops, religious buildings and civic spaces. Even though Georgetown was made a Unesco *World Heritage Site* several years ago, the city's unique cultural and historic heritage continues to be in deep trouble.

Much of Georgetown's old city was tenant-occupied. The practice used to be that tenants would pass on leases to their families, and as long as rent was paid, there were no evictions. But the rent control laws which protected these tenants and kept rents low offered no incentive to owners to maintain their property, and the buildings deteriorated. Middle class residents gradually left Georgetown for the suburbs, leaving a core of mostly poor residents. Before the repeal of Rent Control, there were 60,000 tenants living in the city, of which the poor comprised at least 25 percent. While rent control put a damper on the development of new housing and led to deteriorating living conditions, many feel it saved Georgetown from the wrecker's ball. While other cities in the region were bulldozing their historic cores and putting up parking lots and sky-scrapers, Georgetown's pre-war building fabric remained pretty-much intact, and its traditional residents along with it. Trouble began in the 1980s when developers began buying up whole rows of pre-war houses, and using every means to get rid of the old tenants - court cases, forced eviction, thuggery - even arson. Residents slowly began being pushed out of their houses.



Then in January 2000, the rent control act was repealed and all hell broke loose: rents in the area shot up overnight, evictions quadrupled and old buildings started being pulled down. Evicted people have had a hard time finding affordable alternative housing. And as residents are being driven out, the city is fast losing its charm. Penang's famed Campbell Street, once crowded with late-night shoppers, is now deserted by 7pm, and Georgetown is turning into a hotchpotch of high-rise, old and new office buildings, haphazardly thrown together.

Gwynn Jenkins is an Australian anthropologist and conservationist who has been involved for more than a decade in the struggle to save Georgetown - both its historic houses and its tenants. In 1998, she made an in-depth study of two streets in Georgetown to understand how inner city tenants lived and worked and what impacts the repeal of rent control might have on their lives. Gwynn also worked with local tenant groups to develop alternative proposals for social housing in the city - some of it to be purchased by the government and some to be sponsored by the state government if the landlords agreed to renovate and kept their original tenants. Neither of these ideas worked out and more and more of Georgetown's tenants were evicted. *Here is an update from Gwynn :*

(August 25, 2008) We now have a socialist government in Penang which wants to help with the situation in Georgetown, but it has no idea what to do. Since the UNESCO listing, landlords are offering their properties for sale at ridiculously high prices, undermining the stability of the remaining inner city communities. Throughout the city, there are many empty, run-down houses which would be ideal for converting into social housing, but most of them are owned by absentee landlords or being held on to speculatively, by owners who don't care and won't fix them up or sell them except at a very high price. One or two of the historic building owners I work with have consciences and I am trying to persuade them to restore their properties and keep some of their tenants. In one case, the tenants are a small group of carpenters and their families, and I want to try to persuade the owner to restore one of the many houses in the compound for these carpenters and employ them on her project. In another case, six adjacent houses are threatened with eviction as a boutique hotelier wishes to take the houses over. The landlord is wavering - he was one of the good guys during the rent-control repeal and didn't throw everyone out - I think he would keep his tenants if there was some sort of government compensation to be offered him.

There must be ways to restore historic Georgetown in ways which allow the community to stay! Perhaps renovation into social housing using government subsidies? Perhaps some kind of private/public/community partnership or investment sharing package? Perhaps an NGO or non-profit company could be set up to buy derelict houses, restore them and rent them out at below-commercial rents to original tenants, with funding support from the government?

Gwynn is working with ACHR and with local groups in Penang to organize a regional workshop (in December 2008?) to bring together community groups and professionals from several Asian cities who are dealing with similar issues being faced by traditional and poor communities in historic city centers, with Georgetown being the workshop's focus case.

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MORE COMMUNITY UPGRADING NEWS from NEPAL :



COMMUNITY UPGRADING IN KATHMANDU : (September 2, 2008) I would just like to update you on what is happening with the upgrading of the riverside squatter community at Sankhamol, in Kathmandu. We have had a few meetings with the Sankhamol community people and with representatives from UN Habitat and the Department for Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC). DUDBC appreciated the design options prepared by Nad and we are moving ahead making that design as a base plan for development.

Lumanti is planning to hire a local architect to continue the kind of work that Nad initiated and to work with Sankhamol and other communities, helping the people to understand technical part of the housing processes and develop their

ideas. DUDBC has requested some budget from the government to support the development of low income housing in Sankhamol, but this is not yet confirmed, since the new government will be presenting its first budget in about two weeks.

But DUDBC and UN Habitat are both positive about the possibility of making Sankhamol a pilot for the city in upgrading the many squatter communities that line the Bhagmati River in-situ - that is the greatest strength of the work so far. A more vigorous design development exercise will be carried out with the Sankhamol community for the upgrading project in the next few weeks.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT IS A COALITION GOVERNMENT LED BY MAOISTS : The Ministry for Physical Planning and Works, however, is not under the Maoists' control, but under a different party now. Mr. Krishna K.C., the enthusiastic Maoist official that Somsok met with last year, is not leading Bhagmati River Integrated Development Committee, so there is some uncertainty now about how the riverside slum upgrading proposal will move ahead.

COMMUNITY UPGRADING IN BIRATNAGAR : We are initiating another very interesting slum upgrading program in the provincial city of Biratnagar. We will be working in more than 80 small communities with the program and reaching about 3,200 households. The program will be formally launched in mid September, and will be implemented in a joint partnership between Lumanti, the municipality and the communities.



FLOODS IN EASTERN NEPAL : One of the Eastern districts in Nepal, Sunsari, has been facing a serious flood that has made about 50,000 people homeless. Currently it is the relief phase and many organizations are pouring into Sunsari to support the people. We are trying to build links with like-minded international aid agencies and NGOs to work on the longer term recovery phase, drawing lessons from the community-driven rehabilitation work done by communities affected by the Asian tsunami, with support from ACHR and CODI.

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UPDF THINKS AHEAD AFTER 10th ANNIVERSARY :

During the three months since celebrating its tenth anniversary, the UPDF has organized a series of workshops to give various groups a chance to sit together, reflect on the big event, review what the UPDF has accomplished and discuss what they would like to happen in the future. The first meeting, held in the southern Cambodian coastal town of Koh Kong in July, brought together 100 community leaders from around the country. Then on August 27-29, another meeting was organized in the Southeastern town of Svay Rieng. This smaller meeting of UPDF's core working group brought together 15 UPDF office staff members and community volunteers, several key community leaders from the national savings network, representatives from ACHR, CODI, Development Innovations Group (DIG), the Municipality of Phnom Penh as well as some local NGOs and provincial officials from Svay Rieng Province. The agenda for the meeting was to review the achievements of the UPDF over the past ten years, assess the organization's position at the present time and plan its strategy for the coming five years.



NEW SUPPORT PARTNER for UPDF: This meeting in Svay Rieng was part of a "capacity-building" project for UPDF that is being supported by the *Development Innovations Group's* Urbis Program, which is carrying out capacity building programs in several cities around Asia, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Earlier this year, DIG has supported UPDF with a variety of "capacity building" activities including the preparation of "how to" manuals on savings, video and television films, a bilingual Khmer / English UPDF newsletter and newspaper stories. DIG also supported the setting up of the UPDF's new bilingual website. In May, DIG also collaborated with ACHR, SDI and IIED to support the UPDF's tenth anniversary celebration. But as we're all learning as we go along, "capacity" isn't something abstract that you can build in isolation. For UPDF, that capacity has to be based on meeting the directions and demands that are set by the larger community process UPDF supports and the larger political realities UPDF operates within. And that's what these workshops in Koh Kong and Svay Rieng were all about: getting the larger group of actors to lay out their ideas and convey their "demands" to the UPDF's core working group. Here are a few of the interesting reflections from the Svay Rieng workshop, as described by ACHR's Maurice Leonhardt :

TEN YEARS' ACHIEVEMENTS : The reflection on the UPDF's achievements over the past ten years included a review of the eight of the UPDF's most important initiatives, implemented in close collaboration with Phnom Penh's poor communities :



- **Community savings and credit / network building**
- **Community / City information, surveys**
- **Linking with authorities, Sangkat (sub district) Mechanism**
- **Housing / land purchase / land tenure**
- **Income generation**
- **Community upgrading**
- **Community / sub district welfare**
- **Green communities / environmental improvement activities**

BIG IDEAS : The meeting reaffirmed the UPDF's core strategy of allowing the urban poor themselves (through their community savings groups) to directly plan and implement these various development programs, and on linking the people's movement with all levels of government and other urban actors. The most significant change in Cambodia's poor community movement has come with the establishment of the UPDF, which is an entity that has some legitimacy and has been able to support the people with different kinds of programs - from housing and land to income generation to district loans, etc. The UPDF - which is an established institution now in Cambodia and an institution that poor people trust - has opened up a big space for communities to develop their own solutions to problems they face. In particular, the UPDF has played an important role in introducing new urban poor housing options in Cambodia by demonstrating through actual practice and pilot project a range of practical and feasible alternatives to the impoverishing practices of evicting poor communities from the city or relocating them to distant resettlement sites.

FUTURE PLANS : In planning for the future, UPDF staff members and community network representatives discussed how to strengthen and expand these eight key programs, and how to expand the UPDF's work to cover all the provinces in Cambodia. This expansion will from now on be linked with UPDF's new partner organization, the National Committee for Population and Development (NCPD), under the Council of Ministers.

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SEMINAR on ASIAN URBANIZATION organized in HAWAII :

Three people from the ACHR's circle - **Arif Hasan** (from OPP / URC in Pakistan), **Celine D'Cruz** (from SDI and SPARC in India) and **Somsook Boonyabancha** (from ACHR and CODI in Thailand) traveled to Hawaii in August (August 10-13) to take part in a seminar entitled "The Urban Transformation in Asia: Policy Implications of Decentralization," organized by the East-West Center, in Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. Here is a little information from the East-West Center's seminar publicity :

The East-West Center is launching a new seminar series that will examine the current trends and implications of rapid urbanization of cities in Asia from a broad systems-wide approach (political, economic, social). The seminar series will bring together government and non-government organizations, including elected and appointed city officials, urban planners, civil society representatives, and urbanization experts from Asia and the U.S. to discuss work already underway in the public and private sectors in preparing cities in Asia to effectively cope with the dramatic growth in the region, and to exchange ideas on policy options and implications, new perspectives, best practices, tools and strategies for managing the urbanization process and its consequences, long-term strategic visions, proactive political leadership, commitment to bold plans, and the ability to reconcile divergent interests for the common good.



The year 2008 marks an unprecedented transformation in the history of human settlements, as more than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas. By 2015, twelve of the twenty-two mega cities projected to develop worldwide will be in Asia, and by 2030 Asia will account for more than half of the world's urban population-2.66 billion people out of a total global urban population of 4.94 billion. This transformation is redefining peoples' lifestyles, employment, welfare, housing needs, and social interactions. It is creating new power relationships in organizations and government, altering the geopolitical landscape. The extraordinary growth of cities in Asia has been pivotal to expanded economic development and increased wealth in the region. But it is also changing the social fabric and culture of the countries-exacerbating poverty, slums, and environmental degradation in the urban agglomerations and peri-urban areas. Policymakers at all levels must respond to both the challenges and opportunities of urbanization in order to maximize its potential to improve the quality of life for all citizens.



The inaugural seminar (August 10-13, 2008), entitled "**The Urban Transformation in Asia: Policy Implications of Decentralization**," will examine current trends of urban growth and decentralization and the policy implications for Asian cities. As urbanization and economic growth in Asia have increased, so have political and administrative pressures to decentralize government decision-making and transfer service delivery from central government to local government. National governments in Asia have recognized the political and financial benefits of decentralizing; and decentralizing policies of Asian governments are placing urbanization issues at the local government level with the expectation that these governments will play a more active role in managing urban development and financing urban services.

The challenge to both national leadership and local governments across the region is to approach decentralization policies and processes consistently and systematically by developing strategic approaches that fit country conditions, but that also benefit from regional and global lessons of decentralization. This approach requires substantial investment in strategic planning, institutional development and capacity building, and management and financial systems development. While progress with decentralization has been encouraging, fundamental problems remain-many countries are caught in an "institutional" limbo between the dissolution of old, top-down service-delivery mechanisms and the emergency of still-weak decentralized structures. In many instances, local governments are being asked to undertake greater responsibility for raising public money to provide infrastructure and services, implement fiscal discipline and accountability, and provide opportunities for stakeholder decision making. These local governments, however, often lack the resources and power to fulfill their new responsibilities.

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