

A New Year update from ACHR

JANUARY 2018

Dear friends,

Now that the rush and the hubbub of the holidays is behind us, and the onslaught of new imperatives has yet to knock us over, it seems a good moment to pause, and send everyone our warmest New Year's greetings from the ACHR secretariat in Bangkok, and to tell you all a wee bit about what's been happening with ACHR.



FIRST, SOME NEWS FROM THE ACHR OFFICE IN BANGKOK:

Somsook tells everyone she's slowing down, and although she does spend less time in the office, she continues to travel a great deal, link with groups, visit communities and cultivate new possibilities on many levels, and also puts in a lot of time and energy into her work in Thailand. Maurice has retired to the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, but continues to help with the ACHR website, while Minh Chau has taken on the lion's share of coordinating ACHR's various programs and projects and being the key communicator. Nat has gone to part-time, to give herself more time to cook her fiery southern Thai curries, but she and Chai continue to manage all of ACHR's logistics and finances, and keep everything going. And after a dryish two-year sabbatical in Portland, Oregon, where he missed everyone and everything terribly, Tom returned to Bangkok in September 2017 and is back at his old desk, gradually getting back into the ACHR swim of things.

THEN, SOME NEWS OF THE PAST YEAR:

We didn't have lots of money last year, and there weren't any new projects or a clear new direction. It was a difficult period, in many ways, but it gave us time to take a few steps back and consider what ACHR's role in the region has been, and could yet be. A few thoughts on this lull from Somsook, from a recent email exchange with Kirtee Shah in Ahmedabad:

"There have been several times in my life when I felt I'd had enough and wanted to stop. But every time I visit communities on the ground, anywhere in Asia, where there are still lots of problems and lots of possible solutions, I see how useful ACHR has been in supporting those solutions – and supporting the groups that invent those solutions. Those groups, I can see, are happy being part of the big ACHR family. It is those groups and those people who make the functions and needs of ACHR clearer. Then I usually change my mind and continue working, even if there may be times, like last year, when we find ourselves waiting for the time when we can play an active role and make active change again. I think that in our work in Asia, we have jumped ahead, and it has become difficult to explain to friends - who are happy to go along with the status quo and at the existing pace - how much more effective and desirable it is when the solutions come from people."

But we kept working and linking things, discussing with organizations, and searching for possibilities, in our humble way. A few notes on the ACHR's activities during 2017:

- **Discussions with possible funders and partners:** Including SIDA, the Norwegian Habitat Committee, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Misereor, UrbaMonde, the Development Planning Unit (DPU) in London, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Crowd-funding, and the Selavip Foundation.

- **Selavip:** ACHR's regional Selavip project, being implemented in twelve Asian countries and coordinated by Minh Chau, is close to wrapping up, with its support for big housing projects, small settlement improvement projects, "Decent Poor" housing support and community-based waste management.
- **CAN:** The Community Architects Network has continued to be active in the region, organizing workshops, giving support to the earthquake housing rehabilitation in Nepal, and providing community architect design support for several of the Selavip-funded housing projects in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. CAN is coming to the end of one funding cycle and is now in the process of negotiating the next cycle of support with Misereor.
- **Community Finance Study:** The two-year people-driven study of community finance systems in five Asian countries, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, was completed, and reports about the study came out in two forms: our own newsletter-style report, and an article in the E&U Journal, to be published in April 2018.

THEN, WHAT'S COMING IN 2018:

Lots of studies! The experience of implementing the ACCA Program in 215 cities, in 19 countries, was our biggest-yet chance to put coalition power and people-power to work in implementing citywide housing upgrading at scale. Many interesting things came out of that experience, and once the program ended and we've had time to catch our breath, there have been several opportunities to look more closely at different aspects of that concrete implementation and to build on the enormous knowledge all that work generated.

- **Poverty lines study:** First there was the study on how community people define poverty and set poverty lines (with IIED).
- **Community finance study:** Then there was the community finance study (with the Rockefeller Foundation).
- **Food security study:** Now we've begun a third community-driven study of food security among the urban poor in three countries: Nepal, Cambodia and Thailand (with IIED). This is a completely new aspect of poverty for all of us, who usually focus ourselves single-mindedly on housing, and the learning curve has been a steep one. Like the earlier studies on poverty lines and community finance, the substance of this study comes not from any top-down academic agenda or theory, but directly from the poor community people who face the difficult task of feeding their families every day of their lives.
- **KNOW Housing study:** The Development Planning Unit (DPU) in London is conducting research into new directions in housing around the world, and ACHR will be helping to coordinate the Asia part of the research.
- **Slum upgrading study:** ACHR will be assisting DPU in another study on slum upgrading.
- **Collective housing study:** ACHR has linked with the Switzerland-based UrbaMonde and the network of housing cooperatives in Switzerland to take part in a three-year study of collective housing models around the world. This project will start in 2018, and will be launched with a regional meeting in April or June, to discuss the project (and other ACHR matters). Our part in Asia will involve surveying and mapping of collective and community-driven housing projects and models around Asia, and organizing training workshops, exchanges, and documenting good projects and processes in handbooks, guidelines and online project databases.
- **Studying the role of the city in promoting housing development:** Another tie-up between ACHR and the "Gold Program" of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) will involve studying the role of cities in promoting housing development and achieving housing rights for all, as part of the drive to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). ACHR will be the representative for the Asia part of that global study. ACHR will also be developing other joint activities with the Asia-Pacific office of the UCLG (UCLG-ASPAC) in the coming years.

But some active implementation also in 2018: In the new year, there will also be more active regional activities and processes, and there will be two or three regional meetings, which will give us all good opportunities to meet and discuss. A few projects already underway, or on the near horizon:

- **Community profiling and mapping in seven Asian countries:** In a recent SDI regional workshop in Mumbai, it was agreed that ACHR would collaborate with SDI on a project to train community organizations and their supporters to do community profiling (which includes citywide slum mapping, and settlement enumeration and mapping) in seven Asian countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal and Thailand). This fast-moving process is being jointly coordinated by Celine d'Cruz (from SDI), Ruby Papeleras (from The Urban Poor Coalition Asia - UPCA) and Minh Chau (from ACHR).
- **New regional project proposal to SIDA:** We have managed to develop some proposals which may bring ACHR back into a more active implementation mode again, in this new year. At the top of that list is a proposal we are now drafting, to give to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). We'll bring a draft concept note to the World Urban Forum February, to discuss with friends from the ACHR coalition there. One idea

is to develop a 3-5 year project to support for citywide upgrading, with a similar package of funding support for small projects, big housing projects, setting up a CDF as the key development and linking mechanism, etc.

- **ACHR to the 9th World Urban Forum in Kuala Lumpur, February 7-13, 2018:** It's time once again for the UN-Habitat's two-yearly World Urban Forum, and since this one is right in our back yard, and since the theme is "*Cities for All: Implementing the New Urban Agenda*", ACHR will be taking part in various workshops and events, jointly organizing one or two networking events (with SDI, UCLG, UrbaMonde, the Huairou Commission and UN-Habitat) and bringing a team of community leaders and key local government officials to describe the kind of people-driven and citywide housing processes they have developed in their cities, which show that "Cities for all" is something that can really happen. The WUF will also give us a chance to take advantage of so many friends being in the same place at the same time to organize several parallel regional meetings, where we will be able to meet and discuss plans and projects and collaborations of all sorts.

And with that, we'll bring this condensed-version of an ACHR update to a close, with all best wishes for all good things to come, to all our friends around the region.

Somsook, Minh Chau, Tom, Nat and Chai