

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights is a regional network of groups active in improving shelter conditions in Asia. This profile describes how the Coalition developed and its work in opposing evictions, developing housing projects, linking members and their activities, and training. Its publications are listed at the end. The Coalition has four key strengths:

- * the active commitment of its members;*
- * action orientated activities;*
- * strong support for the grassroots and grassroots organizations; and*
- * decentralization of activities to the members.*

The Coalition is the Asian partner of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC). Previous issues of Environment and Urbanization have described the development and work of HIC and the HIC Women and Shelter Network.⁽¹⁾

1. THE BEGINNING - 1988/90

THE ORIGINS OF the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights date back to the 1987 Annual General Meeting of the Habitat International Coalition. The Habitat International Coalition is a global organization whose membership includes over 200 non-governmental organizations from 56 countries. In April 1987, the HIC Annual General Meeting began to implement a new constitution with a broader decentralized regional structure. The second Board Meeting in 1988 in India discussed the formation of regional groupings to support the organization. In Asia, there already existed some important foundations. The newsletter of the Latin American and Asian Low-income Housing Service (better known as SELAVIP) had helped establish a network of like-minded groups and individuals with a knowledge and appreciation of each others' work.⁽²⁾ Proposals of regional groupings were not new to the NGOs active in Asia. The idea of one controlled by NGO members to meet the needs of their work was greeted enthusiastically.

The next step was to call together key individuals working in Asia to explore the possible formation of a new organization. Seventeen individuals, all of whom had long been active in Asian movements for the urban poor, were invited to a meeting in June 1988 at Karnchanaburi, Thailand. Several other NGO activists were also able to attend the meeting. Groups working in Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea and Thailand were represented.

Prior to the formation of the Coalition, local Asian NGOs had not undertaken coordinated

action. Although there had been some attempts to organize as a region, these had not been based on local or internal needs and little had been achieved. The challenge, as seen by the participants of this first meeting, was "...to set up an alternative international Asian network that can not only represent the fight for basic human settlement needs but can be aware of and also reflect the real wealth and deep human culture within the region through shelter issues."⁽³⁾ The need for and value of the new regional grouping was recognized by those present and there emerged a consensus about the need to prioritize work:

- * the fight against evictions and displacements;*
- * to develop a new perception and acknowledgement of poor people's rights to articulate their needs, systems and aspirations; and*
- * to define and achieve housing rights.*

The declaration in Box 1 was drafted to form the Asian Coalition's founding statement.

At that first meeting, the working style of the Coalition began to emerge. It was agreed that a Secretariat should be established with responsibility for coordination, and the elections for the first Secretary took place. Additional tasks identified as being the responsibility of the Secretariat were network development, general administration, undertaking new initiatives and monitoring/evaluation of the Coalition and its activities. Organizations present at the meeting agreed to be national contact points and to act as a central information point in each country. Responsibility for coordinating work on specific activities (research, evictions hotline, documentation and publication, people's participation

Box 1: Declaration and Founding Statement of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

RECOGNIZING that Asia, which is home to 3,000 million people, comprises a rich diversity of cultures, religions, traditions, languages, and ecologies and an extraordinary wealth of natural and human resources;

CONCERNED that vast numbers of people of this land are systematically and brutally denied the basic human right to a place to live; that the evictions and displacement of the people and their communities, and the appropriation of people's life-sustaining resources suppose a pattern of development based on the interests of a small elite; that laws are framed to legitimize such dispossession of people; that the knowledge and technology systems of this land are dictated by the interests of this elite which views people and their cultures as dispensable; that the cultural wealth of this land is being steadily eroded by the destruction of homes, livelihoods and cultures and the implantation of alien values; that the environment is being ravaged, leading to major disasters and the relegation of people to living in disaster-prone areas; that people's housing needs are manipulated to subject them to inhuman forms of privation; that even the minimal responsibilities of most governments to housing their people are being abdicated to the interests of private capital; and that women, as well as other underprivileged groups in these societies are also subject to patriarchal exploitation and other forms of social discrimination;

BUT RECOGNIZING that people are struggling everyday, in the face of such denial and dispossession to find and retain a secure place to live in peace and dignity; that people's struggles and movements are the fundamental basis for development, sustainable systems of developing and the creation of a new knowledge order, and that this represents a conception of law and rights flowing from the lives, aspirations and cultures of people, who are the wealth of this land, that people's efforts at housing themselves are a profound means of self-expression and of building community, culture and society;

WE, the representatives of professional and community based organizations from ten countries of Asia, affirm our resolve to create a coalition committed to these principles; to articulate and promote the conception of *people's laws and rights to housing*; to put an end to evictions and displacement of people; to define and achieve the housing rights of all; to the sharing of our experiences and knowledge towards these ends; and to the realization of the fullness and wealth of the people of this land.

and intelligence agency) was decentralized to identified organizations who acted as "centres" or regional functional units (later renamed as project focal points as their activities became based around specific project proposals).

Three categories of potential members for the Asian Coalition were identified. "Core members" which were the organizations acting as centres and national focal organizations. "Based members" which were other organizations (and respected individuals) working within the areas of concern to the Coalition. "Related members" - interested organizations and individuals who are not so directly involved in the areas of concern. It was agreed that, while the Coalition would be mainly formed from non-governmental organizations and community organizations,

individuals working on similar issues within government and international agencies would not be excluded.

All those attending the first meeting were asked to give a presentation on the housing rights situation in their region. Those present were moved by the description by John Daly of evictions in South Korea. Evictions were recognized as being a serious problem throughout Asia and their incidence appeared to be increasing. Local organizations felt the need for some form of regional and international support in order to deal more effectively with evictions. The Coalition agreed that evictions should be prioritized as a regional issue and that South Korea would be the first action project. The objectives of the project were to:

- * expose and bring to an end the cruelty and violence of evictions in South Korea;

- * pressure the South Korean government to stop the evictions; and

- * bring the issue of evictions, the denial of housing rights and the impact of market mechanisms on the growing shelterlessness of the poor to the attention of the world.

A fact-finding mission was to be the start of the campaign to improve housing rights in South Korea. The group included a Buddhist monk, a British MP, an Indian judge, the president of the Habitat International Coalition and some members of the Asian Coalition. A large number of groups in Asia came to life to fight against the evictions in South Korea, often with a strong local dimension to add conviction to their case. Through the case of South Korea, the focus on housing rights became clear and did not remain an abstract concept. Many different forms and cases of eviction were illustrated in the campaign.

Following the fact-finding mission, two videos were distributed to all those active in the Coalition; the first was about the work of the fact-finding mission, the second on the housing situation in South Korea. Groups used the video to give presentations to the low-income communities with which they were working. Activities took place in 15 countries throughout the world: demonstrations, letter writing and other activities promoted the issue. There was an international petition to protest to the government of South Korea about their activities and concerned individuals and groups sent letters. Many groups active in housing received a copy of the video and the impact was rapid and significant. For example, at one meeting of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, when a representative of the South Korean government made a presentation on national housing policy, another government representative asked about the reports on the evictions. Box 2 gives more details of evictions in South Korea.

Box 2: Evictions in South Korea

In 1982, it was decided that the 1988 Olympics would be held in Seoul. Although in 1980 the government had announced that there would be no more forceful evictions (since hundreds of thousands of households had been evicted from their homes in the previous 20 years), planning for large scale "redevelopment areas" started as soon as the hosting of the Olympics became a certainty.

Redevelopment entails the demolition of single-storey homes in areas where the urban poor are concentrated. New 12-15-storey apartment blocks are constructed with an average profit of US\$ 412 per square metre. The urban poor cannot afford the new apartments and many move away from the area. Those who do not move away are forcibly evicted by groups of ex-convicts, people trained in violence, and unemployed young men. If the people fight back they are arrested for resisting eviction.

Over the period 1983-88, it is estimated that 48,000 buildings - the homes of 720,000 people - were destroyed under the redevelopment schemes. One community, Chang Shin Dong, consisted of 27 families perched on the shelf of a tall hill not far from the centre of Seoul. Before the redevelopment process began, 1,800 to 2,000 families lived together on an adjoining hillside. That area has now been bulldozed and developed. In Pyeong Wha Chon, a site not far from the Olympic site, 14 families live alongside the new high-rise apartments. They have been evicted five times.

The real logic of the South Korea project was to use the extreme cases of eviction while world attention was turned to the Olympics as a means towards:

- * bringing the urban poor of many different cities in Asia together, mobilizing them in a common action and raising their consciousness of human shelter as a human right;
- * bringing to world attention (in a rather dramatic way) the whole issue of housing in a new light, not as an issue of buildings or shelter but as an absolute necessity and fundamental right for human existence; and
- * through all these activities, to make the ACHR (from the beginning) a Coalition which always leads to and results in action.

SOURCE: ACHR (1988), *Battle for Housing Rights in Korea*, Bangkok.

NGO Profile

Tactically, the choice to focus on evictions in South Korea proved a good start. The idea was strong and simple and there was a clear need to do something. In retrospect, this work was important in establishing a strong beginning to the Coalition. The project was successful and had an impact in South Korea. Two years later, on a review visit, it was evident that there had been changes in policies, with more concern for the urban poor and a large new housing programme.

To give continuing impact to the campaign on evictions in South Korea, a regional meeting "A Place to Live: the Asian People's Dialogue" took place in Seoul, South Korea in June 1989. Planning for this regional meeting took up much of the first half of 1989. The meeting brought together 100 participants, including about 70 leaders of grassroots organizations from urban low-income communities throughout Asia. Considerable preparation was required to ensure that the meeting was useful to all. The meeting involved country reports, drama presentations, sharing of delegates expectations, visits to low-income communities in Seoul and discussions of housing and employment possibilities for the different participants. A key component was to divide the 100 participants into five groups for a three-day visit to a low-income settlement. During these days, participants shared their experiences and considered common elements in their situation.

The Coalition's first Annual General Meeting took place immediately after the regional meeting and was attended by over 30 people. It was agreed that the project with South Korea should continue with a stronger emphasis on solutions rather than problems. A number of new ideas were proposed including a regular six-monthly report on evictions in Asia, an exchange of expertise between NGOs working in the region, an analysis of the development implications of projects undertaken by the large agencies and a project on rural evictions. Before such projects could be implemented, funding had to be found.

To ensure close coordination of activities between members, it was agreed to form an ACHR committee made up of those responsible for the activities planned for the forthcoming year. It was also agreed that the Secretary should be elected for a two-year period with the next elections being due in 1990. There was some discussion at this meeting about the desired and required degree of formal membership and structure. Some of the national contact points had found it difficult to coordinate work at the local level with neither a clear membership nor

a clear structure within which to deal with local issues and participation. Moreover, it was already apparent that there might be some tension between the approach of a particular project focal point and the perceived needs of the region. But some participants argued against a stronger centralized structure. They believed that the Coalition needed to recognize the need for diversity, independence of member organizations and flexibility of operation for the success of a regional network. A majority of those present believed that the experience with strong structures was that they excluded members rather than facilitated participation. It was thought that a decentralized and bottom-up approach would succeed in developing trust and understanding between organizations and that the Coalition should continue with its present loose form.

The first meeting of the new committee took place at the end of 1989 in Bombay, India. Many different ideas were put forward to the Coalition. It was agreed that in addition to the projects previously agreed, funding would be sought for two action projects, one in Hong Kong, the other in Ho Chi Minh city (Vietnam). Funding was later obtained for these two action projects, a book on the urban poor in Asia (*A Decent Place to Live*), a newsletter "Housing by People in Asia" (jointly edited and published by the Third World Network and the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights) and a project on rural evictions. The project in Ho Chi Minh City is further described in Box 3 below. The action project in Hong Kong included a fact-finding mission which also visited South Korea to assess changes since the 1988 visit.

Different areas of work began to emerge from the continuing activities of members of the Coalition. National contact points grew in number as more Asian countries became involved. Project focal points, each coordinating a specific area of activity identified by the Coalition, began undertaking their tasks. And regional action projects, the first of which was the South Korea project, began to develop their own momentum. To facilitate these developments, a new organizational structure of the Coalition was agreed in December 1989. This was:

- * an Executive Committee made up of representatives from all project focal points, which meets annually to review the work of the Coalition. It acts as the policy-making body;

- * a Secretariat which fulfils the requirements of the projects and objectives of the Coalition. The Secretariat takes decisions on behalf of the

Box 3: Extracts from the Report of the Fact-finding Mission to Hong Kong

While much of the economic development of Hong Kong might be described as "a poor, even raw form of capitalism", its housing programme is one of few state welfare measures. The government housing programme was started in 1953 and, within 20 years, the state was responsible for housing 44 per cent of the population. Although there have been evictions, in general, these have not been violent.

The worst housing in Hong Kong is in the private rented sector where an estimated 400,000 people live. Government has traditionally avoided responsibility for this sector. The worst conditions of all are those experienced by the cage people who live in dormitories where the cots are enclosed in wire cages to provide occupants with security. The caged cots (six feet by two feet by two feet) are stacked three high in dark, foul smelling rooms in which as many as 130 people may live. The cages are protection against thieves - each person keeps all he or she owns in the cage and locks it during work hours. Cage-living fails almost every imaginable test of human housing. It is grossly overcrowded, dirty, exploitatively expensive, unhealthy, a fire hazard and degrading - especially for the old. Almost as bad are the small boxes or cubicles rented by families. We saw families with young children packed into a space less than six square metres.

Squatters and boat people exist because there is insufficient public housing. While all the squatters spoken to by the mission wished to move into public housing as soon as possible, some had been waiting for over ten years. The government has committed itself to removing all the squatter shacks by the mid- 1990s and rehousing all those currently living there in public housing. There is therefore little incentive to invest in making the shacks safe places to live.

The mission also talked to boat families in a typhoon shelter. The boats shaped like old junks have a living deck of 10 square metres. One mother told the team that her main problems were the children's safety (many have drowned), fire and the smell. The smell of industrial and human waste which is poured into the harbour is over-powering. Fires are started when the seas become rough and kerosene lamps are knocked over.

SOURCE: ACHR (1990), *Urban Poor Housing Rights in South Korea and Hong Kong*, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Bangkok.

organization as long as these are not in violation of the objectives; and

* project focal points and national contact points. Each project is organized around a project focal point which is a member organization of the Coalition. The project focal point is responsible for contacting and involving as many relevant organizations as possible in the region, disseminating materials regarding the project and coordinating its work with the Secretariat. Funding received for the project is transferred to the relevant focal point. National contact points are responsible for work within each country. If they believe that a more formal organization will facilitate their work, they can develop this form themselves. The national contact group model is best exemplified by Japan. Japan-ACHR

involves some 20 active individuals and groups, many of whom are working with minority groups suffering from discrimination. They have strong links with the university and some of the students are also active within Japan-ACHR. Contact with the students will hopefully be constructive in developing their interest in the problems of low-income communities in Asia and ensuring their continuing professional commitment to support these people.

In effect, three broad categories of "members" have evolved within the Coalition: close contact, active but less contact and the mailing list. These categories complement the formal structure outlined above. Within most countries, there are three to five organizations which fall into the first two categories. In some cases,

NGO Profile

there is tension between the work of different NGOs within the same country and, therefore, it is sometimes difficult for them to work together. For this reason, the Secretariat sends out general information on a regular basis to all those who express an interest. Nevertheless, the Coalition supports the continual decentralization of activities to contact points within each country (generally more than one) and believes that it is neither practical nor constructive to only have a single centre, i.e. the Secretariat, to service the needs of the region.

There is at least one close contact organization in each country and in some there are more; for example, in the Philippines there are four. These groups receive all letters and reports produced by the Coalition. The close contact groups are formed by those who are active within the organization. It is not that they are asked to be special members or that they themselves request this status; rather these groups emerge by showing a continuing interest and participation in the activities of the Coalition. Personal contacts are maintained with the 50 to 60 other groups which form the next level of members.

There is no formal membership system as such - individuals and groups do not join or leave the Coalition. To formalize the contacts which organizations have with the Coalition may increase a sense of identity but to create such a structure immediately excludes those who remain outside.

II. REVIEW AND CONSOLIDATION 1990-91

AT THE BEGINNING of the third year the first issue of *Housing by People in Asia* was published (jointly by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights and the Third World Network). This newsletter describes the work of the Coalition and its members; in particular, it seeks to "...document the work of grassroots Asian and groups which are struggling to find a place to live in often very oppressive societies."⁽⁴⁾ Another project undertaken at the beginning of this year was a consolidation of groups and individuals working in the field of low-income human settlements development throughout the world (although predominantly in Asia). In 1991, there were some 500 different groups in Asia on the Coalition's mailing list. Closer contacts were maintained with 50 to 100 of these. A further 30 core members were regularly involved in activities.

Eight major roles and functions were identified from the Coalition's work to date.

1. As a pressure group and for crisis intervention in specific problems. Actions taken include the fact-finding missions and regional campaigns.

2. Information distribution. This happens at all levels from providing ideas for community organizations to sharing experiences at the committee to internationalize members' understanding of the major forces affecting the urban poor.

3. Creating regional space for experience-sharing and exchange among groups, particularly the grassroots and NGO groups.

4. Providing professional consultation for groups in need.

5. Coordinating with related agencies, international or local, especially with regard to regional activities.

6. Reaching out and trying to involve as many active groups in the region as possible. Developing the work of local organizations as required and developing and strengthening links between them.

7. Trying to support the grassroots struggle for housing. Helping to strengthen and develop the processes which enable people to develop their own capabilities in the housing process.

8. Researching and creating acceptable regional references on this work and issues for organizations and people in the region.

The review also drew the following conclusions:

1. The most serious problems concerning people's housing rights and large-scale evictions in South Korea and the inhuman conditions in Hong Kong were dealt with by two of the first regional action projects. The mission to South Korea was fortunate in that it coincided with a democratization process in the country. A second assessment mission identified changes both in government housing policy and in general attitudes to the urban poor.

2. Following meetings organized by and through the Coalition, there has emerged a new kind of grassroots solidarity among groups active in the region.

3. During the first two years, the first 19 participants who attended the inaugural meeting have grown to 807 organizations and 209 individuals who are all part of the Coalition's network of contacts.

4. The Coalition is recognized by international organizations and by major agencies. Publica-

tions from the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights are widely distributed and well-considered.

5. The activity in Ho Chi Minh City in only a year old but already there is a change in government attitudes and a willingness to recognize that community based improvements may be a preferable form of urban development to high-rise apartment blocks.

The same review also identified five areas for improvement in the coming years. First, most funding for regional projects is obtained from private voluntary organizations in Europe. There is a need to identify more sustainable forms of funding obtained from within the region. Second, the Coalition needs to develop a greater number of activities involving grassroots groups. Maximizing grassroots participation is difficult and although this has been a particular focus of the Coalition, more work is required. Third, international processes remain important. It should be clear that the objective is to bring the issues and actions of housing rights by the people of Asia to the international agenda in order to help influence the direction of development within the region. Fourth, the question of

ACHR's structure and working relations between the different active groups needs to be further explored. An acceptable balance between independent focal points and common regional goals and directions needs to be discussed and agreed. Forms of membership and methods of accountability also need to be explored.

III. CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT - 1991/93

ONE OF THE projects proposed to the Coalition in 1990 was the Ho Chi Minh City project in Vietnam. Some informal contact had previously been made with this city through the UN Commission for Asia and the Pacific and a number of members felt that this was an important initiative. The Ho Chi Minh City project involves the Coalition in providing assistance to community leaders and municipal staff in a low-income community of several hundred families. When adopting this project, the Coalition's major objective was to demonstrate an alternative model to develop and improve housing for low-income

Box 4: Hiep-Thanh, Ho Chi Minh City

Encouraged to come up with a name for their community, the 250 households in the settlement in Ho Chi Minh City decided to call themselves "Hiep-Thanh" which means "combined strength". Through study visits and community workshops, a situation has been created in which a new leadership has emerged in the settlement. People had never been exposed to the concept of self-reliant, community based approaches; they were only familiar with government provided, top-down housing and settlement schemes.

In March 1991, the Hiep Thanh community completed seven standpipes in the area - the first development need prioritized by the community. Community leaders negotiated a loan from the city authorities for the construction costs. A water management committee was established to collect fees from the users and manage this community resource. The Committee set the price of water at half that charged by local vendors. This price is sufficient for the tap management committees to repay the loan, cover maintenance costs, and make a small payment to the families who collect water and contribute to the newly established community development fund. Road improvements have been planned by the community and future developments include the production of building materials and loans for income generating projects.

There has been an immediate response from municipal officials and staff from non-governmental organizations working in the city. All are interested in learning more about what has become known as the "Hiep Thanh approach".

SOURCE: Hosaka, Mitsuhiko (1991), "An ACHR Activity in Ho Chi Minh City", ACHR internal document.

NGO Profile

communities. The project is seen very much as a pilot action project to stimulate a more community focused approach to urban development throughout the city. Through such a demonstration, the Coalition hopes to secure changes in policy. It has promoted experience-sharing within the city and throughout the region and members have made occasional advisory visits. In this work, the Coalition has realized another role, in addition to their campaigning approach (see Box 4).

At the Coalition's Annual General Meeting in 1992 (held in Manila), there was further debate on the structure of the organization and the relative autonomy/accountability of the different components. It was agreed that more autonomy would be given to the individual action units to enable them to undertake projects themselves.

Four major activities were undertaken during the fifth year of the Coalition: a regional action programme in the Philippines, the completion of another book, *Housing the Poor - An Asian Experience*, the continuation of the Ho Chi Minh City project, and an exploratory visit to Cambodia plus an extension visit to Vietnam. In addition, plans were made for a major new training project for the region, while publication of the newsletter continued, and there was another regional community exchange programme between India, the Philippines and Thailand.

a. Regional Action Project in the Philippines

The regional action project in the Philippines focused primarily on a study of eviction within the country. The project was different in direction from the fact-finding missions previously undertaken by the Coalition in South Korea and Hong Kong. There were four main components. First, a local group undertook a study of the eviction process looking at 46 recent evictions. Second, after the interviews and meetings, two follow-up groups were formed: one to provide technical and professional advice to those threatened with eviction and the second formed from young architects to support the community development of 66 areas in Quezon City (which is within Metro Manila) designated for priority development. Third, there was a national meeting and an international fact-finding mission by the Coalition. This coincided with the presidential elections and was intended to highlight housing issues during the campaign. Fourth, a

book and television programme have been produced to further publicize this action research project.

b. Community Exchanges

A community exchange programme took place in June 1992. This was incorporated into the regional action project looking at evictions in the Philippines. Groups from Bombay and Bangkok visited Manila to exchange experiences of community life in the city. The groups in Manila then returned the exchange to each of the cities. The community exchange programme developed from previous experience in the UN Committee for Asia and the Pacific. During 1987/88 there had been several exchanges of community women within the Asian region. There was some enthusiasm within the Coalition for continuing this work but uncertainty about how to proceed. It was after long discussions that the exchange which took place in 1992 was agreed upon. It is hoped that the recently agreed training programme (see below) will further support a community exchange programme.

The main problem for ACHR in expanding this work is in the different approaches used by different groups in the region in their relations with communities. While there is a priority to strengthen the community among many members of the Coalition, this is not the objective of all members. And there are many different ideas about how to strengthen communities and many different contexts within which this work is undertaken. For example, there are cultural differences between the Asian countries which mean that what is an appropriate response in one context is not the case in another. In South Korea, for example, the communities are highly politicized. The reaction of other political forces also influences the work which NGOs can undertake. The general social and political context defines and constrains the roles of all the groups involved. There are also different ideological positions among the members of the Coalition. Some believe that the community should play the leading role in the development process, while others do not think that this is possible. Some members are more committed to people's process than others. Different members have developed different working styles and have evolved different relations with communities of urban poor.

It was agreed to respect this diversity. Rather than intervening in communities, the role of

other members should be to share and contribute. In some projects, there is much enthusiasm by many different members to participate but this can create more problems than it resolves. People everywhere, including at the community level, are part of a process. Sometimes the community gets "stuck" and needs support to continue but it is often hard to judge how to intervene successfully. As important as intervening successfully is to wait until you are asked before you go in. It cannot be assumed that communities have problems. While some active within the Coalition argue that it should be a major actor in supporting the process of people's organizations throughout Asia, others believe that it is not legitimate to start work on this level as a major objective.

c. Ho Chi Minh City Project.

Further developments took place at the project in Ho Chi Minh City. One hundred of the 250 families located in Hiep Thanh are now under threat of eviction. Rapid urban development has increased the demand for inner city land. The Coalition believes that it should continue its role in working with the community and liaising with the government. In general, the response from the government has been positive. There is an on-going debate within the Coalition about the best way in which to strengthen the community organizations within the country and the relative roles of groups such as the Coalition compared to those of national NGOs. There is an overall willingness by the Coalition to continue the work in Ho Chi Minh city. But there is no clear consensus about whether or not the Coalition should try to do more or less work within Vietnam. Some believe that the urban poor within different cities in Vietnam will soon be exposed to the kind of development pressures which have influenced other Asian cities in past decades. It is felt to be the responsibility of the individuals and groups involved in the Coalition to learn from these experiences and to use this information. There is a real fear that large-scale privatization of land will soon take place with the disruption of low-income settlements.

d. Training Programme

During 1992, members of the Coalition developed an extensive project proposal to provide training and advisory services to a large number of its members. The proposal involves three major activities:

- * project based training courses which will allow people from other countries to have access to the activities and experiences of various well-established improvement projects;

- * skills development training which will allow international participants to train in areas such as environmental health programmes, establishment and management of cooperatives; and,

- * support for young professionals to enable them to have work experience in low-income urban communities.

Each training course will be the responsibility of a different member organization within Asia. Four courses are planned for the first year: in Surabaya (project based, on the Kampung Improvement Programme); in Manila (skills based, community organization); in Bangkok (project based, land-sharing); and in Hyderabad (skills based, technical aspects). The programme will continue for four years. Funding has recently been obtained for the proposal and its components will be realized in the forthcoming years.

IV. THE COALITION'S WORKING PRACTICES

CENTRAL TO THE development of the Coalition has been its methodology and working practices. Members recognize that different cultures have different ways of working and resolving the same problem. Approaches drawn from other cultures may work but often there are problems in the implementation of non-familiar approaches. Establishing a strong regional structure which constrained what Coalition members could do was not felt to be a constructive method of working, particularly in the initial formative years. Moreover, the active groups interested in participating in the Coalition were working with the urban poor and had developed a methodology appropriate to their work. Central to the philosophy of their work was the essential contribution of the poor in identifying their own needs and in developing the strategy needed to resolve them. None of the organizations thought that it was legitimate or effective for outside organizations, however well-meaning, to take control. The role of NGOs was to act as a catalyst and a support - proposing possible ideas, suggesting new forms of organization, but trying to create a situation in which they could respond to the specific needs of the community as identified and prioritized by them. The work of such NGOs only becomes meaningful if it has a pos-

NGO Profile

itive impact on the life of the people or achieves structural change. An appropriate structure for the NGOs' own Coalition needed to accept the same essential truth, **that the important actions are taken by those at the bottom and therefore that the decision-making structures must be those which facilitate their involvement at all times.** Above all, structures should not be such that those at the top can exploit others - the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights has been built on such principles.

In Asia (as in all regions) there are different political cultures, ideologies, methodologies and working practices - all of which make it difficult to centralize a process. If action is allowed to emerge, actively bringing together different groups to participate, learn, give their knowledge and work together, then the action will become a powerful means of reconciling differences and building up regional solidarity by working together.

The procedures chosen by the Coalition are those which, its members believe, maximize the involvement of members. Any member can propose a new project at the annual meeting. The meeting discusses the project and if everyone agrees to the project in principle the member who proposed the idea is asked to prepare a proposal. This is sent to the Secretariat who distributes it to members. After further amendment it is forwarded to funding agencies. Once a project has been agreed, a coordinator is identified, generally drawn from the group which originally proposed the theme for the project. The role of the Secretariat is mainly in the initial stages with further help as needed.

The Coalition works on this structure of delegated authority. Once it has been agreed that the concept of a project is acceptable to the Annual General Meeting, a group is formed of those interested in taking it forward. Sometimes responsibility is given to a group of members, sometimes to one member. The individual or group is then responsible for running the project and making all decisions in respect of the project. The advantage of this method is that it minimizes the need to secure the agreement of all those active in the organization. Such agreement is often difficult and may result in only "lowest common denominator" projects being approved. It is also time consuming and divisive. However, while the structure of the Coalition maximizes activity, diversity and local responsibility, there remains a problem with accountability. Members sometimes find it difficult to live within a structure that enables other members to follow their own paths in the name

of the Coalition. There are some which have become frustrated and disillusioned with this structure.

At the beginning, this form of structure was hard. The methods of community organization differ greatly between the different groups active in the Coalition. Activities, priorities, language, methods - none are consistent across the countries of Asia. But gradually over the last three years these problems have lessened. Increasingly, members have come more easily to understand each other and each others' methods of working. The decentralized structures used by the Coalition have increased members' opportunities to learn from each other and this has resulted in members rapidly gaining mutual understanding. On many external issues, the different groups in Asia have similar views and priorities; however, on internal issues there is a greater diversity of opinion.

At present, the main problem with the current structure is that it is very loose and flexible and this impacts on all its work: on the Secretariat, on project coordination and on meetings of the Coalition. It is important that individuals in the Coalition do not abuse their position by using this flexibility to become increasingly powerful in the organization. Meetings are vulnerable to being "hijacked" by one or two individuals. People can bring up whatever projects they would like to propose to the group. These are discussed to assess the general reaction. In general, participants are very polite. Where there are reservations about a project, or feelings that it should not be developed, these are expressed tactfully. In some cultures, more forceful approaches are used. Individuals used to these cultures may continue to pursue the project, raising and debating the issue when a majority of those present at the meeting would prefer to focus on other items on the agenda, which they consider to be more important. Finally, the structure gives a lot of discretion to the individual coordinators of ACHR projects. On occasion this means that projects develop in ways which may not be the choice of most members. To overcome this problem, the Manila meeting of the Coalition (1991) decided that, in future, several members would collectively organize projects in order to better represent the diversity contained within the Coalition. A charge of 5-10 per cent is now added to project costs to cover the additional costs of project development.

Crucial to the successful introduction of this strategy has been trust. The Coalition benefited from two factors. First, the newsletter of the

Latin American and Asian Housing Service (SELAVIP) had been in existence since the late 1970s. This newsletter circulated information about groups working in low-income housing and communities throughout Asia and Latin America. The newsletter allowed those active in Asia to already have an initial understanding of the work of other groups in the continent. Second, some experienced individuals in Asia, who already had a lot of mutual respect for the work of each other and the organizations within which they were active, committed themselves to supporting the Coalition and immediately provided an atmosphere of trust within which the work could develop further.

The motivation for forming the Coalition was to develop activities at a regional level. Local activity can do a lot but there are limits. The development process in the Third World is sometimes much bigger than that which can be appropriately tackled by local groups alone. Housing alternatives have regional as well as local implications.

As its level of activity has developed, the Coalition has been placed under increasing pressure to act as a regional representative. Multilateral agencies have an increasing interest in NGOs but do not easily coordinate with individual organizations. There are advantages of a regional Coalition for such organizations. However, as the primary focus of individual members is to facilitate their own work together, with strategic interventions in the region on regional projects which have been prioritized, there is little interest in undertaking a regional representative role as a major objective, although from time to time it is inevitable.

There is sometimes misunderstanding about the work of the Coalition from groups who are not yet involved in its activities. Some groups approach the Asian Coalition for funding; it is explained that the Coalition is not a funding body. If there is interest in developing the project into a regional activity, then the Coalition will circulate the proposal to potential funders.

At the first meeting of the Coalition in 1988, some reservations were expressed about the group becoming a part of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC), for fear that this might inhibit the development of the group and link it to a formal, well-established structure at too early a stage. The name "Asian Coalition for Housing Rights" was chosen in preference to HIC-Asia. Nevertheless, the group saw itself from the beginning as a regional member of HIC and it has facilitated the work of HIC by acting

as a regional coordinator. The Secretariat maintains close contact with HIC's staff.

V. STAFF AND FINANCE

THE COALITION IS currently staffed by a Secretariat of four people: the Secretary, two assistants and a part-time accountant. Additional help has also been recruited for specific projects as required. The decentralization of many projects to those active within the Coalition has allowed staffing to be kept to a minimum. Where necessary, additional staff working on specific projects are based within the groups coordinating the project.

In the first months, pressure of work made it difficult to find the time for fund-raising and money was borrowed from local organizations committed to the work of the Coalition. The first project, the fact-finding mission to South Korea, was supported by Northern based private voluntary organizations including MISEREOR, CAFOD and CEBEMO.

In general, finance has never been a serious problem for the Coalition. There are several organizations willing to support its work. Whilst not all the proposals sent to funders have been accepted, it has not been difficult to maintain a high level of activity. The main funders are EZE, MISEREOR, Bread for the World, Christian Aid, CAFOD and SELAVIP. Different agencies have different concerns about the Coalition. For example, Bread for the World queried whether another structure was really necessary. MISEREOR was anxious to ensure that individual member organizations were accountable to the Coalition. At present, the different activities of the Coalition require about US\$ 180,000 each year.

The legal status of the Coalition was first as the international project of the Human Settlements Foundation, a group working with those facing eviction in Bangkok. This status arose because the first Secretary of the Coalition was previously working as Secretary General of the Human Settlements Foundation. It was a difficult and lengthy process to register an international group in Thailand and, therefore, it seemed preferable to register it through an institution which was already established. However, immediate problems were apparent with too close an association with one NGO. The Coalition did not necessarily want to be seen as only working on the issues which concerned the Foundation. Therefore, at the end of 1989, the Coalition

NGO Profile

established its own offices and a separate identity, and has since registered as an independent foundation in Thailand.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

DURING THE LAST five years, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights has become a regional forum and contact point for many different kinds of organizations. In addition to the projects which have been initiated, supported and undertaken by its members, it has represented its members at various international meetings and networks such as those of the UN Development Programme, UNCHS (Habitat) and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. It has also become a centre for information. As well as its own publications, the Coalition maintains and distributes a directory of government and non-governmental organizations active in the region.

Through its members, the Coalition has maintained a considerable level of activity throughout its first five years. It has raised the issue of evictions in Asia through highlighting conditions in a number of countries. Most of the regional action projects have focused on evictions and the right to housing. Through a number of workshops and exchange programmes, it has promoted the sharing of experiences by those living in low-income communities. It is hoped that the new training programme will offer an opportunity to develop and expand this work. In a number of situations, the Coalition has been able to offer an alternative model of housing development to that promoted by the state. In addition to the project in Ho Chi Minh city, support has been given to the People's Dialogue in South Africa and an exploratory visit has been made to Cambodia.

There remains a great need for structural change in urban management and development processes in Asia. It is evident that existing government policy, institutional arrangements and privatization do not tackle existing problems effectively and also result in increasing problems in issues of urban land, housing, infrastructure and other aspects of the urban environment. The scale and severity of the problem is increasing.

There also remains a need to strengthen and develop the managerial skills and capacity of both grassroots organizations and NGOs. Asian community organizations and NGOs are good at demonstrating problems and confronting the

state but they have been less successful in developing processes for creating constructive change and demonstrating alternatives. They need to develop more effective skills and capacity to enable them to respond directly to the needs of the people in an appropriate and effective manner. The present political situation in most Asian countries is very different from a decade ago. In most countries, governments are not dictatorial regimes that people have to confront but are clumsy democratic systems which require, from NGOs and the grassroots, new techniques involving negotiation and information skills plus the expertise to develop new partnerships.

As a regional organization, the Coalition plays an important role in promoting new ways for the people's process to access international agendas and, at the same time, create international space for the exchange of ideas and knowledge on issues of people's housing thus creating greater impacts for local change. It is necessary to have regional focal points to act as links and bridges between dispersed groups in the region. Through promoting common activities which unify the groups and by exchanging information, organizations better understand their context within the process of development. They also gain understanding and experience of how to act and promote certain policies and issues together. Through these structures, the dispersed activities can become a meaningful source of change.

Notes and References

1. "NGO profile - Habitat International Coalition" (1990), *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 2, No. 1; "NGO Profile - HIC Women and Shelter Network" (1991), *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 3, No. 2.
2. "Supporting shelter improvements for low-income groups - an interview with Jorge Anzorena" (1993), *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 5, No. 1.
3. "Action for NGOs Habitat International Coalition in Asia" (1988), Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, page 5.
4. "Editorial comment" (1990), *Housing by the People*, No. 1, page 2.

List of Publications

- Newsletter *Housing by People* published approximately every six months.
- *Fact-finding Missions to Korea and Hong Kong*, published in 1990 and 1991, respectively.
- *A Decent Place to Live* by Denis Murphy, 1991.
- *Housing the Poor - An Asian Experience* by Fr Jorge Anzorena and Francisco Fernandez, to be distributed in mid-1993.
- Directory of urban-poor associated organizations and contacts in Asia, Europe, the Americas and Africa, distributed in 1993.
- *The Urban Poor - Land and Housing* by Denis Murphy, 1993.

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights
P O Box 24-74
Bangkok 10240
Thailand

Tel: (66 2) 538 0919
Fax: (66 2) 539 9950