

COMMUNITY UPGRADING

Improving poor communities is cheaper, easier, better for the poor and better for the city than relocation . . .

In the past five years, over 11,000 families have been evicted from their homes in central Phnom Penh. About two-thirds of these families have been resettled. Some are doing all right at relocation sites they chose and planned themselves. But the latest SUPF survey found that most of these resettled families are living without water, toilets, roads or flood protection in resettlement colonies that are far from jobs, support structures, schools and clinics. Many are having a hard time adapting and sustaining their lives out there. This could be improved a lot.

Of the 569 poor settlements in Phnom Penh today, only a few are on land needed for public purposes like roads, flood control projects or government buildings. The other settlements provide much-needed affordable housing for the people whose hard work underpins the city's economic growth.

What if people were given a chance to improve their settlements and transform slums into beautiful neighborhoods, proud parts of the city? As cities around Asia have learned through experience, helping people to secure their land and improve their living conditions inside the city, rather than chucking them out, is in the best interests of the city, the poor and the whole urban economy.

Asian cities have many good examples of community upgrading, but in Phnom Penh, upgrading is still a new concept. So SUPF and UPDF decided to start creating a stock of local examples of community upgrading for people to see and learn from. Through a broad process of community prioritizing in all seven districts, three communities were chosen to be improved, as a powerful training and learning opportunity, for the poor and for the city.

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COMMUNITY NEWS

A PUBLICATION OF UPDF AND SUPF IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA • ISSUE NUMBER 2, JUNE 2003



“ This city doesn't only belong to the rich. It belongs to all of us, so we should all be involved in improving it . . . Now we have a lot of work to do. We have to sit down and set concrete plans for this upgrading program together. ”

Mr. Chev Kim Heng,
 Vice Governor of Phnom Penh

Housing breakthrough for Phnom Penh's poor : Prime Minister agrees to provide secure tenure and support the upgrading of 100 urban poor communities each year . . .

On May 24th and 25th, 2003, the Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF) celebrated its fifth anniversary with a large gathering in Phnom Penh which drew together over 5,000 poor community members from around the city and from ten other provincial cities, community leaders and their NGO partners from 9 Asian and African countries, officers from local NGOs and bilateral and multilateral aid agencies and representatives from the highest levels of the local and national government.

The event was organized by the UPDF, with support from the Municipality, the Solidarity for the Urban Poor Federation (SUPF) and international groups ACHR and SDI who jointly decided to use the celebration to promote the strategy of on-site community improvement, as an alternative to eviction and relocation of urban poor people to distant resettlement sites. The gathering provided a venue to showcase the hard work poor communities in Phnom Penh have been doing in recent months around community upgrading, and to invite the government to support a concrete proposal from SUPF and UPDF to support the upgrading of 100 of the city's informal settlements in the coming year.



The government's response to this proposal surpassed everyone's expectations. In front of the big gathering at Basaac, the Prime Minister Mr. Hun Sen announced that his government has agreed to the proposal from SUPF and UPDF to support the upgrading of 100 inner-city settlements in Phnom Penh in the coming year and promised to provide secure land tenure to all those settlements.

In cases where communities come in the way of planned civic projects like roads, parks and drainage lines, he pledged the government's help in securing relocation sites that are nearby, close to job opportunities. The Prime Minister even took the people's idea a step further and proposed upgrading 100 settlements every year so that in five years, most of Phnom Penh's poor settlements could have secure land tenure and full basic services.

This is a very important turnaround in poor people's housing development in Phnom Penh. Upgrading is a strategy for improving rather than destroying the city's existing stock of informal housing. The policy announced

by the Prime Minister is an acknowledgement from the highest level of government that Phnom Penh's informal communities provide a much-needed stock of housing for the city's workers which nobody can afford to replace.

A big investment in housing and services has already gone into these settlements, whose central locations and social support structures are vital to poor people's survival, and upgrading the infrastructure and living conditions in these settlements is the cheapest and most practical way of improving the lives of Cambodia's urban poor, while making the city a more beautiful place for everyone to live - both the rich and the poor.

The idea came from people . . .

There have been a few scattered community upgrading projects in the past. These projects have been small, but they have proved that even with so many problems, poor settlements can be improved and people themselves can manage the improvement work themselves. This new policy to upgrade 100 settlements offers a chance to scale up this settlement improvement to become a city-wide process. This is only possible because of the hard work poor communities in Phnom Penh have already done and the strength they have built over the past ten years through organizing, saving, surveying and carrying out all kinds of development activities. 200 communities are now linked together in all seven districts as part of SUPF, and have saved over 300 million Riels in their community savings groups.

The UPDF was set up in 1998 to provide a new, collaborative support system for the

city's poor. The UPDF has worked to help people work together at a larger scale and to find solutions to problems they face, while linking with local and international organizations for joint projects and mutual learning. UPDF has given loans to 3,800 households in 145 communities totaling US\$ 611,825 for housing, land and income generation - all these loans are managed by the urban poor themselves.

In the past year, the joint City Development Strategy (CDS) project has explored new ways that the city can develop so that rich and poor can live side by side. As part of CDS, there were studies, surveys and consultations and finally a pilot on-site community upgrading project at Ros Reay. Ros Reay project showed that comprehensive upgrading by community people can be a cheaper and more practical alternative to eviction and relocation. At the big gathering on May 24th, many other SUPF communities presented



their on-site community upgrading plans, drawings and models and thousands of community people and government officials had a chance to see these ideas and learn that community upgrading isn't a strange concept fallen from the moon, but a cheap, just and widely-accepted strategy for transforming informal settlements into beautiful and healthy neighborhoods.

Ros Reay : Phnom Penh's first experiment in 100% people-planned and people-constructed comprehensive settlement upgrading is inaugurated on May 25



Most community upgrading projects are done by engineers and contractors. The Ros Reay project shows that upgrading isn't something mysterious or expensive, but can be done by local people themselves, simply, cheaply and effectively.

The 72 tightly-packed houses in Ros Reay are part of a large neighborhood of over 1,000 households behind the French Embassy, most settled here in 1979, immediately after the Pol Pot period. Ros Reay has had flooding problems during the rainy season, so building a drainage system was the community's first upgrading priority. Because Ros Reay was chosen by SUPF to be the first pilot comprehensive upgrading project, the community became a lively classroom of training-by-doing, where every step of the process became learning for the whole federation and the whole city.

The first step was to survey and map the settlement, which community people did themselves, with groups of 'upgrading apprentices' from communities in other districts. On the map, they plotted all the houses, trees, water points and problem areas, and used this to discuss what needs improving. Once they'd decided what improvements to make, they estimated the costs and drew up a budget, which was agreed upon in a city-wide meeting in January 2003. Municipal officials and community people from around the city attended the ground-breaking ceremony,

where the first \$500 handed to the community was matched by \$500 in cash contributions from community members. They set to work the next day, dismantling the fences to enable the lanes to be straightened a bit and to make room for laying the underground sewage and storm drain system, which involved enormous labor. Each family was responsible for digging the ditch in front of their house. Even pregnant women pitched in, and



BEFORE UPGRADING : Here is a photo from 1999 of the main road in Ros Reay. During the rainy season, there were serious flooding problems and people had to walk through ankle-deep muck to get home.

people returning from day jobs dug by lantern-light into the late night, under the energetic guidance of Ros Reay's leader, Keo Yin, whose husband, a construction subcontractor, provided technical assistance with slopes, pipe sizes and manhole design. The lanes were then paved with concrete, trees and flowering shrubs were planted along the lane-edges and the houses and fences were freshly painted in white, blue and green.



AFTER UPGRADING : And here is a photo after the underground drains have been laid, the road completely concrete paved and the houses have been repainted and decorated with small planting strips for flowers and trees.

What did it cost?

- **US\$ 3,600** - Laying the sewage and storm-drainage network and constructing 53 manholes.
 - **\$ 7,100** - Concrete paving of lanes (339 m) with half-meter planting strips at sides.
 - **\$ 100** - Planting 122 trees.
 - **\$ 1,200** - Repairing fences, painting 57 houses, 39 fences.
- \$ 12,000**
 (Total cost of upgrading project)

US\$ 167 per household

Who paid?

- **Labor :** approximately 2,200 person-hours of labor, all provided by community members.
- **Technical help :** A community member with contracting experience designed the system, set levels and supervised construction.
- **Budget :** \$ 500 cash contribution from community members and \$ 11,500 grant from ACHR.