



Block Binh Dong

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • APRIL 2021

It's not easy to find an example of a collective, community-driven housing project in Vietnam, despite the country's socialist ideology of everything being done by "the people." But here is an authentic one that was built by a community of very poor riverside squatters, in the provincial city of Tan An, in southern Vietnam. The city authorities had been wanting for years to address the people's miserable housing conditions, but had no budget for relocating them. So instead, they let the people design and build their own houses and played the role of project facilitator, and the results showed everyone a new way.

- Project Block Binh Dong
- Location Block Binh Dong, Ward No. 3, Tan An City, Vietnam
- Size 20 households
- Finished 2013
- Type On-site reconstruction of old squatter settlement on public land, with permanent individual land use rights, and space made to add five more vulnerable families evicted from other parts of the same ward.

CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

The city:

Tan An is a small city in southern Vietnam, just 60 kms to the southwest of Ho Chi Minh City, in the Mekong Delta region. Tan An is the capital of Long An Province, and is divided into nine urban wards and five semi-rural communes, with a population of about 200,000. During the French colonial period, Tan An played a part in France's plans to map and exploit commercially the "unknown lands" in the Mekong Delta, and became an important trading and transport hub, with the region's major highways and the Vam Co Tay River passing through the city. During the American-Vietnamese war, Tan An was used as a military and air base for the American army in southern Vietnam. Although Tan An's status was upgraded from a town to a city in August 2009, that coveted status is belied by the city's poor infrastructure, especially in the semi-rural communes around the periphery, where the city's development plans have not yet reached, with unpaved roads, dilapidated houses and lack of drainage and sanitation infrastructure.

The CDF Network and ACVN in Tan An:

In 2000, ACHR and the NGO ENDA-Vietnam began collaborating with the National Women's Union in a number of cities to strengthen community-based savings groups and set up city-level community development funds (CDFs) to link these savings groups and expand their development activities. The CDF network, which started in five cities, had an initial focus on livelihood activities and very small community upgrading projects. ACHR's ACCA program (which was implemented between 2008-2014), gave a big boost to the national community savings and CDF process, helped add many more cities to the network (including Tan An) and supported an active program of national meetings, workshops on savings and funds, exchange learning visits between cities and the involvement of young community architects.

The ACCA program also helped the CDF network to begin tackling the more complex and more urgent issues of land and housing. Vietnam faces many of the same problems as other Asian countries of fast urban growth and increasing numbers of urban poor households being without secure land or decent housing. The government has many projects and programs in poverty reduction, but they are scattered and loosely coordinated and have not been very effective. The ACCA program supported the development of housing projects in several cities which demonstrated an alternative housing redevelopment process, in which the residents were the designers and doers in developing healthy, secure, affordable new neighborhoods, in collaboration with their local authorities.

In 2007, as the ACCA program was beginning in Vietnam, ACHR and the CDF network forged an important new partnership with the Associated Cities of Vietnam (ACVN), a national union of 113 towns and cities, which helped to facilitate the sharing of ideas between cities and began promoting community savings and community-driven upgrading as key aspects of its work in its member cities. ACVN worked in close collaboration with the CDF network, the Women's Union and ACHR to implement and scale up the community-driven development process in Vietnam. With this national linkage between cities already in place, when a process worked in one city, it could spread easily to other cities.

And that is what happened in Tan An. When Tan An became part of the CDF network in 2010, the city had almost no experience with the kind of community-led and bottom-up development the ACVN and ACCA program were promoting. The ACVN's first step was to send its team of young architects to work with the local Women's Union to survey the city's poor communities, help start savings groups in many of the city's poor and informal communities and begin to bring those scattered communities into a network of mutual support and learning.

The collaborative survey that was undertaken in Tan An in 2011 found 36 informal communities in the city, with more than 1,700 poor households who were living in dilapidated housing without even the most minimum basic services and no land security. Some of these settlements were squatters on public land, along canals or within graveyards, and some were scattered across swampy bits of wetland along the Vam Co Tay River, where many of the families were fisherfolk who had lived there for generations, staying part of the year on their boats (when the fish were running) and part of the year in make-shift shacks built up on stilts near the river (when they worked odd jobs in the city to make ends meet).

The community:

One of those riverside communities was in Block Binh Dong, where fifteen low-income households were living in run-down houses that were loosely scattered on public land along the edge of a canal. The whole site flooded frequently, with the changing tides. During the rainy season, the people's houses would be flooded up to the knee for days on end, and the water was badly polluted with solid waste and feces from the crude pit latrines which were the community's only sanitation option. Although they had lived there for

generations, the people had no residential books and were considered by the local authorities to be squatters. Without these formal residential papers, they could not access municipal services, and had to pay people living in neighboring residential areas three or four times the official municipal rates for informal water and electricity connections. Besides this small community in Block Binh Dong, there were other vulnerable families living in similar circumstances, but in isolation, scattered across other parts of Ward Number 3.

The city authorities had for many years intended to address these housing problems in Ward Number 3, and their only idea was to resettle the families to new residential areas. But those plans never went anywhere, because neither the city nor the residents had the financial resources to pay for resettlement.

Initiating the project:

After many discussions within the community network in Tan An, and with the local authorities and the ACVN team, an agreement was reached to make the upgrading of the Block Binh Dong community a pilot housing project to show the whole city a more collective and more community-driven housing redevelopment alternative approach. After the project was approved for support from the ACCA Program, a three-day workshop on the theme of "*Community participation in planning and housing construction*" was organized in March 2012 to begin the process, and to introduce this new approach to solving the housing problems of the urban poor to the local government and local people.

The workshop was organized by ACVN, in collaboration with the Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture. The main participants in the workshop were the 15 households living in the community in Block Binh Dong, and several other vulnerable families living in the ward, along with the local authorities from the ward and city. They were supported by representatives of the Asian Community Architects Network (CAN), a group of young architects from ACVN and participants from several other cities in the national CDF network - Ca Mau, Soc Trang, Vinh and Hai Duong.

Instead of making a series of formal presentations, like in most seminars, the architects tried to catalyze a conversation about planning alternatives by getting everyone involved in the planning right away. They used a big print-out of the cadastral map of the public land in Ward No. 3 as a base, and the families in the community then started moving small pieces of colored paper - which represented their houses - around the map. With the facilitation of the young architects, the people sat together and began to collectively discuss, for the first time, how they would like to live together, what kind of houses they'd like to live in, and where each family would like to be on the reorganized land.

Many factors informed the people's decisions about how they'd like their new community to be organized, including how long they'd stayed there and what kinds of friendships and family relationships had become important, after years of working together to deal with the flooding and other problems in the community. The people decided that families related by blood or by friendship would stay together, and families who'd stayed the longest would have the most desirable plots fronting the main lane.

The architects helped to put all these ideas and decisions together into a preliminary community layout plan. In that plan, 15 households would stay in the same general location and rebuild their houses in a new layout, while five squatter households facing the threat of eviction in other parts of Ward No. 3 would join the project, bringing the total number up to 20 households in the project.

During the workshop, the local authorities and people from Tan An also listened to presentations about success stories in two other cities where poor communities had redeveloped their dilapidated housing in the same place, with support from the local government and ACCA. The housing project in Block A in Vinh, for example, was the first case in Vietnam where the residents of an old, run-down collective housing block had rebuilt their houses on the same site, even though the land plots were "sub-standard." Another similar project at the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing block in Hai Duong happened soon afterwards, and brought the community-driven housing model to another city. The presentations about these housing projects - which had only recently been completed or were still in process - emphasized the active role of community and the support and policy facilitation from the government and the authorities.

After the workshop, an action plan was agreed upon, with tasks for everyone:

- The 20 members of the new community began gathering their financial resources and managing them collectively by forming a savings group, in which they agreed on a reasonable minimum weekly amount to save for housing, based on people's incomes.
- Using the preliminary plans from the workshop as a starting point, the team of ACVN architects continued to work with the community people to refine their housing plans and develop different options, in order to make the most efficient use of the land and to create public spaces for community activities.

- ACVN worked with the community network in Tan An to set up a citywide jointly-managed Community Development Fund (CDF), to receive the grant funds for the project from ACHR's ACCA Program.
- The Tan An city government assigned its Urban Management Office to assist the project with official matters, including helping the community apply for the public land to be allocated to them and to set the terms of use, and helping the community get legal municipal electricity and water connections.
- The Ward Number 3 officials later co-signed the contract with the local contractor whom the community had chosen to help build the heavy parts of the project, and helped to monitor the construction process.

The community and the Ward No. 3 officials submitted their final housing plans to the Long An Provincial authority in May 2012, and five months later, in October 2012, the project was approved. A year after that, the project was finished, and was inaugurated in a gala celebration on World Habitat Day, in October 2013.

Support groups and partners in the project:

- **The Tan An Municipal Government** and the **Ward No. 3 Authority** gave permissions to allow this first-ever community-led housing redevelopment project to happen and provided the land for free.
- **The Network of Community Savings Groups** in Tan An supported the community with a \$40,000 housing loan from the City Development Fund (CDF) they collaboratively manage.
- **The Women's Union of Tan An** supported the savings process and promoted a people-led housing model.
- **Associated Cities of Vietnam (ACVN)**, a national union of 113 towns and cities, partnered with ACHR and the CDF network to implement the ACCA program in Tan An (and 15 other cities) and helped to promote a more community-driven housing model in Vietnam's urban development.
- **Architect Le NH Nga** ("Nga"), who led the team of young architects working with ACVN, helped facilitate the participatory design of layout and housing in Tan An.
- **ACCA Program** (2008-2015): The Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) was a 5-year program of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) that supported a process of citywide and community-driven slum upgrading in 215 Asian cities, in 19 Asian countries (including 17 cities in Vietnam).

LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

Land tenure and legal status:

Under Vietnam's socialist system, all land is collectively owned by the people, and is administered on their behalf by the government. That's the official line. But the government can grant, lease or sell the rights to use land, and a land use rights certificate is practically the same thing as permanent land ownership. Before the housing project, the 20 families living in Ward Number 3 did not have any papers which gave them legal rights to the public land they occupied and were considered to be squatters, even though many had lived there for generations. In the course of negotiating the terms of the housing project, the Long An Provincial Authorities agreed to allocate the land to the 20 families, for free, with each family getting individual land use rights. Once they had their land use rights documents, the Ward Authority gave each family a household registration book (*Ho Hau*), and each person in the community got an official ID card. Now they are all legal residents in the area, with full rights to send their children to school and access public services.

PROJECT FINANCING

Project costs and who paid for what?

Land: Since the land was provided free by the provincial government, there were no land costs in the project.

Infrastructure: The cost of laying paved lanes and storm drains, and making a community playground and open space came to about US\$ 9,000, which works out to \$450 per family. These infrastructure costs were partly financed by a US\$ 2,700 "small project" grant from the ACCA Program, and a \$4,545 contribution from the municipal government. The rest (about \$1,800) came from people's own collective savings and contributions.

House construction: The 20 single-story row-houses in the Block Binh Dong housing project are all a little different, and cost between \$1,954 and \$2,700 to construct, depending on the size and details. The houses were financed by two sources:

- **Housing loans from the CDF:** The 20 families all took individual housing loans from the city-level CDF of between \$900 and \$1,600 per house, repayable in 60 months (5 years) at 6% annual interest. The total amount borrowed from the CDF was \$28,409
- **People's own savings and resources:** \$19,318 (average \$960 per house)

Support from Government:

Both the ward-level and city-level governments in Tan An played an important and unconventional facilitating role in the housing project at Block Binh Dong, and that support was crucial to the project's success. The problem of how to provide decent, affordable housing to the city's poor had been a concern of the local government for a long time, but the only solutions they knew about - top-down relocation or full redevelopment - were not possible because of lack of resources. In the new approach which was piloted in the Block Binh Dong project, the city government didn't have to spend anything from its own budget, but could still solve the housing problems of one of the city's poorest and most vulnerable communities in a short period of time - just 17 months. They could do this by adopting a more collaborative approach and tapping the enormous development energy of people themselves by making the community the center and key driver of the solution-making. The city has learned a new way to solve difficult housing problems and wants to expand this pilot project to the whole city. They have already prepared for new projects.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Design process:

In the six months after the Long An Provincial Authority gave its approval for using the land for housing, the 20 families in the housing project worked with the young architects in an ongoing series of workshops to refine their housing layout plan and to design houses which they could afford. The young architects from ACVN and a team of architecture students from the university in Ho Chi Minh City helped the people to design the layout and houses. and did so in ways that were quite different than the way most architects practice. Instead of using their technical expertise to create the solution by themselves and then convincing the people to agree to it, this group of community architects came to community in Block Binh Dong to listen to people's aspirations and desires, and to help them solve difficult issues only when requested, being willing to change the alternative plans as many times as necessary to come up with a plan that the community people were really happy with, which met their real needs.

In the course of this participatory design process, the people agreed on four key design strategies to reduce housing costs:

- Use a single story row-house type, to lower costs by sharing foundations and common walls between houses.
- Re-use as many materials salvaged from the old houses as possible (doors, windows, timber and roofing sheets).
- Draft the construction contract in such a way as the contractor provides only the skilled labor, while the community people themselves will provide all the unskilled labor and purchase all the construction materials collectively, in order to get bulk discounts.
- Use one collective water meter for the whole community supply, but with individual meters in the houses and a collective system for collecting monthly water payments internally.

In May 2013, the community signed a contract for the construction with a small local contractor they had found and negotiated with themselves. The Ward authority co-signed the contract and helped monitor the construction, which was managed by a community set up by the community. In late May, the whole community got together to help clear the land for construction, and work started right away. It took about 90 days to construct all twenty houses.

Just one year after it began, Tan An's first-ever community-driven housing project for low-income people at Block Binh Dong was inaugurated in a joyous celebration on World Habitat Day, on October 7, 2013. It was a rainy day, but a marquee was put up in the middle of the new community to keep everyone dry, as they listened to the sweet words and happy speeches, cut the red ribbon and sat down together to a proper southern Vietnamese seafood feast.

Project timeline:

- **2010:** Tan An becomes part of the national CDF network, with support from ACVN and Women's Union. Savings starts.
- **2011:** First citywide survey of informal settlements in Tan An finds 36 poor communities, with 1,700 households.

- **March 2012:** Joint workshop to explore upgrading of informal communities in Ward 3. Block Binh Dong identified as the pilot community-driven housing project for Tan An, with ACCA support.
- **May 2012:** CDF in Tan An is set up, with funds from ACCA.
- **May 2012:** Community and Ward 3 submit upgrading plans to Long An Province for approval.
- **October 2012:** Land is approved by province for upgrading and relocation in Block Binh Dong.
- **November 2012:** Layout planning and house design process starts, with help from young architects.
- **May 2013:** Construction work starts, takes just 90 days.
- **October 2013:** All 20 houses are finished. Project is inaugurated on World Habitat Day.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

This case study was written in April 2021 by Ms. Tran Minh Chau (at ACHR) and Mr. Le Nhu Nga (who worked with ACVN on many of the collective housing projects supported by the CDF Network in Vietnam).

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PHOTOS



The city of Tan An is just an hour's drive from Ho Chi Minh City, in the Mekong Delta Region, which is one of the most watery parts of the country. The Vam Co Tay River flows through the center of Tan An and has provided a livelihood for fisher folk for centuries.



The 15 families in the old community in Block Binh Dong were considered to be squatters on public land along a drainage canal.



The whole area flooded frequently, from rising tides and during the rainy season, when flood waters would stay for days on end.



These photos show the kind of housing and environmental conditions that made the community in Block Binh Dong one of the poorest and most vulnerable in the city. But neither the city authorities nor the people had the resources to do anything about these problems.





Once the intervention by ACVN and the ACCA Program began in Tan An, and the Block Binh Dong community was identified as a possible first upgrading project, a workshop to discuss the idea was organized in March 2012.



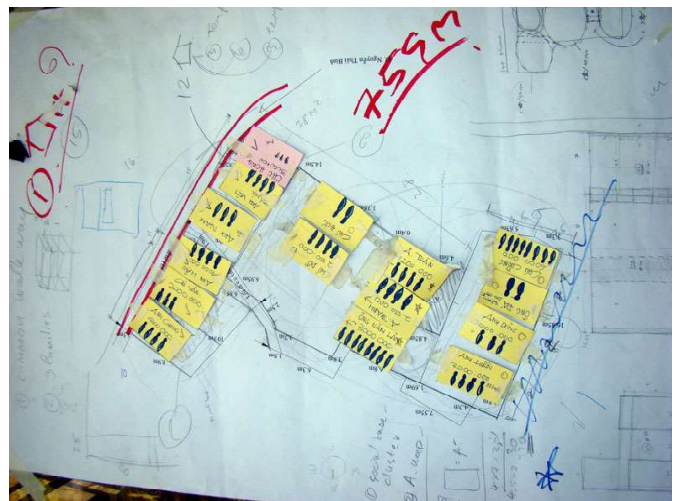
The young community architects helped the people to find their houses on the map and begin to understand what problems a redevelopment project could address.



The technical team in the workshop included teams of community architects who were working with ACVN, some architecture students from the university in Ho Chi Minh City, and some other visiting architects from the Asian Community Architects Network. With all that help, what could go wrong?



The architects cut out rectangles of colored paper to represent the houses of each member of the project, and the people then moved around those papers on a cadastral map of the area, to try different layouts and to find which families they'd like to live with in the new plan.





Once the layout plan was finalized and submitted to the Provincial Authority for approval of the land, the next step was to clear the parts of the site where the newly organized community would be built. Some areas were already built on, and others were like a jungle.



The people in Block Binh Dong decided to hire a contractor only to provide the skilled labor and oversee the more difficult parts of the housing construction. The people provided all the labor, and they purchased and managed the building materials themselves.



Here is what one of the single-story row-houses looked like when the construction was almost complete, before the internal finishes.

Two young community members painted a cheerful mural on the side of the community center, in preparation for the inauguration.



▲ A couple of photos which show what the finished houses looked like. Each one is a little different, to accommodate different needs and different sized families, but they all occupy a plot of 40 square meters.



▲ Two young friends enjoying the chair swing that has been put up at the edge of the playground in the center of the community.

▲ The ribbon-cutting ceremony at the gala inauguration of the project, which was held on World Habitat Day, on October 7, 2013.



▲ More photos taken during the October 2013 inauguration ceremonies and feast to celebrate the completion of the Block Binh Dong housing project, with all sorts of distinguished guests from the local government and from various support organizations and neighbors.