

Baan Mankong in Eastern Thailand

An update on projects underway, as of February 26, 2006



On February 26, 2006, Tom tagged along with a small team from CODI to visit some of the Baan Mankong projects underway in four cities in the Eastern Region - Chonburi, Chantaburi, Rayong and Aranyaprathet. Who was with us in the van?

- **Somsook**
- **Nat**
- **Pi Uan** (in charge of Baan Mankong in the Eastern Region. He is Khun Praserd's brother)
- **Goong** (she is on the Baan Mankong staff at CODI)
- **Panthip** (She is in charge of CODI's information unit, also working on Baan Mankong)
- **Woman name?** A community leader from ???
- **Tom**

The eastern region : (Pi Uan explains)

- There are 8 provinces in the Eastern Region.
- 65 Baan Mankong projects are now underway, and another 20 are about to join
- In these 85 projects, there are about 100,000 people.

"Keeping thin" :

In the entire eastern region of Thailand, there is only one full-time CODI staff in charge of overseeing all the projects in the Baan Mankong program (Pi Uan). CODI does send out community workers and young architects to help communities design their housing and community plans, but only where needed (if there is no local architect or university or NGOs to help). The idea is not to build up a huge CODI support structure, but to bring all the available key local actors in each city into the process, and enable them to take control and ownership of the city-wide upgrading process in their own cities. *The best way to do this is to make CODI's presence and intervention as light as possible.*

Boosting city-wide upgrading links between Thailand and Cambodia :

Pi Uan is trying to develop learning and exchange links between communities in several cities in eastern Thailand and western Cambodia, all of which are trying to start upgrading. Some of these cities are very close geographically, and they have a lot of cultural and language commonalities,

which makes exchange visits easy and cheap. Aranyaprathet, Sa Keo and Trat, for example (on the Thai side) are very close to Cambodian towns like Poipet, Sisophon and Koh Kong)

Back in the survey mode : Getting as many poor people as possible into the Baan Mankong Process. A refinement and expansion of the earlier survey processes. After Baan Mankong has been going for two years, the 200 cities involved in the program are again going back to the city-wide surveys again. There are more actors now who understand why and how.

- **Clear objectives now, not just academic information gathering:** This new set of city-wide community surveys have a very clear objective now - it's not just an academic exercise as in the past, where survey data is recorded in some thick report and then goes on a shelf somewhere to start collecting dust! Nobody knew what to do with all that information!
- **This survey has the purpose of bringing as many poor people as possible into the Baan Mankong upgrading process.** In this way, the survey process works like a people's own system for registering "where the poor people are in our city" and who are the target groups - and it is done by the poor people themselves.
- **The purpose of this survey is to find solutions** - clear, possible solutions to the land and housing problems faced by all these poor people in the cities.
- **Survey covers not just the poor living in established communities, but scattered squatters and room renters :** in the past, most surveys of urban poor only looked at people living in blocks in established communities or squatter settlements. The purpose of these surveys is to find as many poor people as possible, including not only those in communities, but scattered squatters, and poor families living isolated in pockets and in rental rooms. It may not be possible to cover 100% of these poor room-renters, but as the BM program progresses, there may be more and more renters entering into the program, which can be included later on.

Making the city-wide perspective part of every individual community upgrading project : From March 2006, any project presented for approval has to show the overall picture of poor people's housing and land situation in the whole city. This city-scale picture of the process thus becomes known to everyone, and the foundation under which people plan their upgrading projects together - how many communities have been improved, what is the impact, etc. It is important for people involved in the program to understand the relationship between the upgrading project and other upgrading projects in the city.

Decentralization of the approval process for Baan Mankong Projects : The Baan Mankong projects do not have to go to the CODI board for approval. The board has delegated the power to approve projects to a special Baan Mankong committee, which is chaired by CODI's director (Somsook), and includes three government representatives, four community leaders and one NGO representative. The committee meets every month. Last Tuesday (Feb. 21, 2006) the committee met for almost ten hours (09:30 - 8:00), and approved 30 new projects (about 4,000 units). This is a new system in Thailand, in which the board of CODI (a public organization) passes on decision-making power to this committee, which in turn passes on decision-making power to the city-based joint committee, which then passes on decision-making power to the communities, thus decentralizing this central government organization's work and power to cities and to community people.

CHONBURI PROVINCE :

There are now four Baan Mankong upgrading projects underway here. Chonburi is a town of factories, lots of industries in the area, and in the past, the government has established all kinds of industrial parks and industrial promotion schemes to bring industries into the area. But they never thought about the need for housing for all the workers in these factories! So while there are lots of good employment opportunities in Chonburi, there are also lots of slums and people with serious land and housing problems. Typical myopic view of development! But in some ways, Chonburi is a small town, and it's poor settlements have never figured in any national surveys of poor communities. Although the town is full of people with serious housing problems, these settlements have been literally off the map, until the Baan Mankong city-wide survey brought communities themselves into the process of conducting the full survey, so un-known, un-listed communities were "found".

1. Naa-Poo Community

There are about **300 low-income households** in this interesting land-rent community, which was developed by a temple on a few very big tracts of donated land it owns. Most of this is "blind land," with no access to the main roads. This must generate quite a handsome financial return for the temple, what with all these houses.



- **land tenure** : The temple subdivides the land and leases it on year-by-year lease contracts to individual families. The way the scheme works is that people pay the temple 20,000 Baht to move in, and then 500 Baht per year to lease the land. So Naa-Poo has become a kind of catch-all for low-income families scattered in different parts of the city.
- **If you don't stay here, you lose your land rights** : they have a rule here that if you don't actually live on the land, you lose your rights to it.
- **role of intermediaries** : Often with these temples, there are "intermediaries" who help the temple "manage" their land assets. Many Thai temples become very rich in land, as people without children donate tracts of land to the temple, which then has to decide what to do with the land - to use it for purposes of social good, or for purposes of commercial exploitation. This project seems to combine a little of both.
- **houses** : Then, people build their own houses on their leased land - same basic house type, but built at different times. In the front part of the community, single-story row-houses have been developed by the people themselves on 70 or 80 square meter plots, as part of an ongoing project. These houses cost about 180,000 Baht to build. Somsook comments that the whole project looks very much like one of the NHA projects. And indeed, the community leader we speak with says he followed one of those NHA grid-like plans and adapted it to suit this site.
- **infrastructure** : The houses are fine, but there is no infrastructure, no roads or water supply. So far, no support from the local government. People have to buy their water from tankers or informally piped water from nearby houses.
- **graveyard being redeveloped for housing**: In another area nearby, on land also owned by the same temple, a Thai Buddhist graveyard is being "decommissioned" and redeveloped into housing plots on the same system, for poor renters.
- **Baan Mankong possibilities** : *"Now we start the real organization of people here!"* Somsook says this might be a chance to reorient the whole project. Besides using the infrastructure subsidy to develop the community's infrastructure, the upgrading program should also be an opportunity to get the whole community together under a collective long-term land lease with the temple, instead of the individual, short-term leases as now.

2. Nai Kai Community

These two land-rental communities occupy a strip of prime ocean-front land right in town, in Bang Phra District. There are $50 + 41 = 91$ houses in these two adjacent communities, but many have several families staying inside. Some families have stayed on this land for 100 years, but most settled here about 30 years ago. Some people here are fishermen, some earn their living processing crab-meat and crab-shells, and many work as vendors or in factories in other parts of Chonburi.

- **big crab business here** : There is a good business of buying and selling crab-meat here. Even the shells are dried out and sold for other purposes, so we pass big piles of smelly crab-shells drying in the sun, lots of flies buzzing around them.

- **land tenure** : The land in these two adjacent communities is under Treasury Department ownership. People rent the land on individual, yearly leases. Now, the Treasury Department wants to give the land to the Army to build some high-end sea-front housing for high-level officers.



- **land sharing** : The upgrading project will include two adjacent communities, and will involve giving some of the land back to the Treasury Department, for the Army Officer's housing, and keeping the rest for redeveloping the people's housing (**91 units?**) and a small sea-front community park. We didn't see any plans though - maybe not developed yet?

- **Savings**: They've started savings in this community, as a prerequisite to joining the Baan Mankong Project.
- **Rental housing almost always more expensive** : We pass several buildings in the immediate neighborhood which are obviously cheaply-built rental rooms for low-income people. Somsok says that in almost all cases, the combined expense of repaying housing loans and land rent (or land payment) in the Baan Mankong projects is LESS than the cost of renting these bad rental rooms, in most cities. These tiny single rooms (of only 20 - 30 square meters), where whole families often live in very crowded circumstances, with shared bathrooms, rent for 1,500 - 2,000 Baht per month!
- **The old problem of central government control over local land** : The various departments of the central government in Bangkok still have too much power over the country's land - both rural and urban. So various ministries can make up laws as they like and push people around. Because there is so much distance between the local realities on the ground, and the authorities in Bangkok, all kinds of smarmy middle-men and intermediaries appear to take advantage of the situation to lobby, manipulate and make money on people's needs for land.
- **Bang Phra Golf Course** : Just up the hill from the Nai Kai community, we pass the big Bang Phra Golf Course. Many of the caddies here live in communities like Nai Kai and Naa Poo.

RAYONG PROVINCE :

In Rayong, one Baan Mankong in-situ upgrading project is already finished, at Laem Rung Rueng, and another project is underway. There are some very serious housing problems in this town, which is also at the heart of a big industrial belt. For such a small town, there are a lot of slums in Rayong.

Gulab Dam Community

(Gulab Dam which means "*Black Rose*" in Thai) : This very poor community of **72 families** began as a hasty and bad resettlement project 20 years ago, when many families were evicted from their old land nearby to build a market, and dumped here by the Ministry of Social Development. There was no planning, no infrastructure, nothing! The land is on the outskirts of Rayong, but within the municipal boundaries.

- **Land tenure**: The people say that at the beginning, someone came and collected a small land-rent from families in the community, but after two or three years, they stopped coming, and people just stayed here without any formal tenure arrangements at all, but not exactly squatters either. The land is still under the control of the Ministry of Social Development. The community is now in the process of bargaining with the ministry to get a long-term, collective lease for the land, as a first step in their in-situ upgrading.
- **This community is not on the Municipality's list of slums**, from the survey they undertook.

- **Houses :** The houses here are loosely scattered, mostly built of scrap wood, plastic, bamboo and tin sheets, and are in pretty bad shape. In the middle of the community are two rows of really grim, windowless houses made entirely of rusted tin sheets, built all at the same time. We learn that these little ovens are the houses that the Ministry originally provided people under the relocation scheme!
- **Infrastructure:** no infrastructure at all here - mucky walkways, only a few pit latrines people have built themselves, no piped water supply. They seem to have metered electricity, though - communal or individual?
- **Savings:** The community has started a savings group, as per the Baan Mankong program requirements, and have now saved a total of 100,000 Baht. They have two kinds of savings groups here: a housing savings group (whose members save a fixed amount of 300 Baht per month) and a regular savings group, which gives members loans for income generation, emergencies and informal debt repayments. One of the leaders tells us that after they started the savings, life was better for them, they talked to each other more, they also have more contact with groups outside the community. In fact this afternoon, there is to be a football match between Gulab Dam and Laem Rung Rueng communities!
- **The community is VERY poor**, and Nat says that they're not sure if the people can afford the Baan Mankong project. The people tell us that there are some people with drug problems in the community. Some say we should throw them out of the community, but the people have decided that evicting them will only make their problems worse. Better to keep them in the community and reform them and take care of them inside Gulab Dam, all together.
- **Who designs the redevelopment - people or the Ministry?** The Ministry seems to retain some power over this community, which began as a relocation project. It now has its own plans for redeveloping Gulab Dam, which includes 8-meter wide roads, and 35 square wah (140 square meter) plots, which are to be leased individually to the families. People negotiate with the Ministry themselves to enter into the Baan Mankong Program, and CODI will support their negotiations and send down an architect to help them develop a good upgrading and housing plan. The people would rather lease the whole block of land as a cooperative, and then develop their own plans for subdividing the land.
- **Grid-like plan or cluster plan?** We are shown the community's first draft reconstruction plan, which they developed themselves. The plan is drawn with white chalk on a blue paper, and is a simple rectangular grid of house plots all in straight lines. Somsook asks why put everything in a line? and proposes the idea of arranging the houses in clusters, around small shared courtyards. One lady says they don't like "that foreign planning" here, and want to build the houses all in a line. So it is proposed to bring the community group to nearby Chantaburi, to see for themselves the beautiful cluster plan development at the Naa Technique project.



- **Haggling over the land lease rate with the Ministry:** The Ministry is asking for 6 Baht per square wah per month (1.5 Baht per square meter), but the people are offering to pay only one Baht per square wah per month (0.25 Baht per square meters), but say they are willing to go up to 2 Baht per square wah (0.5 Baht per square meter per month), which is what the Treasury Department usually charges poor communities nowadays in long-term land lease contracts. **Which means that the ministry that is supposed to support poor people's development is charging 3 times as much for its land as the Treasury Department, which is supposed to maximize income on the nation's land assets!** If they end up persuading the Ministry to lease them the land for 2 Baht per square wah/month, that means each family will have to pay about 70 Baht per month for the land rent.

CHANTABURI PROVINCE :

As we drive along the highway to Chantaburi, we can see the purple-colored Cardamom Mountain range looming in the distance, across the Cambodia boarder. In Chantaburi, after the first Baan Mankong Pilot project at Naa Technique, there are another five Baan Mankong projects underway.

Process in Chantaburi given a push by two young architects : Originally, two young Bangkok architects, Baan and Tuh, came down to Chantaburi and helped launch the upgrading process with a city-wide survey and the design of the city's first pilot at Naa Technique. Originally, the city-wide upgrading committee that was set up did not have any representation from the Municipality. While the design process in the Naa Technique Community was very strong, the architects were not so strong about developing political relationships in the city, and establishing a good balance between all the local actors in that constituency, to carry the Baan Mankong process forward, with people being the driving force. Eventually the two architects got frustrated with the messiness of this local political balancing act, and quit.



Problems of central government control over land in Chantaburi and other Thai towns and cities: There are very SERIOUS problems of land in Chantaburi - why? Because a lot of the land in the city is owned and controlled by public agencies (such as the Treasury Department, State Railways, Ports, Land Department, etc), while the municipal government and local people have no control over how it is used - and therefore no control over the larger urban land use in their urban areas. This leads to all kinds of confusion and problems.

In theory, government ownership of land ought to provide some kind of balancing mechanism to market forces, and enable land to be kept aside for much-needed social and environmental purposes, and in order to ensure that land-use is more just, more equitable. But in practice, public land (especially public land under the ownership of various central government departments and agencies) is increasingly being used for commercial purposes over any social or environmental purposes. This "control at a distance" also leaves a lot of room for manipulation and profiteering and gangsterism around how this land is used, involving a host of middle-men and agents and land mafia, many probably having political connections in Bangkok. It also means that a lot of this much-needed public land lies unused.

It is now the clear policy of the Government of Thailand to strive to get "maximum returns" on state-owned land - which means the huge tracts of publicly-owned land in these cities are being auctioned off to the highest-bidder for profit-oriented commercial developments, while these cities are in such great need of land for truly "public" purposes, such as parks, play-grounds, green areas, low-income housing, schools, museums, health-care facilities, etc. Some cities are worse than others - the same problem of huge, undeveloped tracts of public land exists in the cities of :

- **Nakhon Sawan**

- Songkhla
- Sisaket
- Surin

Not just Thailand! And elsewhere in Asia, many of countries that were former colonies (especially British colonies) such as **India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka**, this same problem exists of central government control over huge tracts of land in towns and cities. Here too, this government control over land should enable the government to make land-use in cities more just, more equitable. But the systems of governance are not up to providing this balancing force, and justice and public good is almost never the final effect of land-use decisions.

1. Naa Technique Community

This is a relocation project of **70 households** from squatter areas in Chantaburi, which got together and bought two pieces of adjacent "blind" land for a cheap rate, and redeveloped their houses there. This was the city's pilot Baan Mankong project, and is a real beauty. The Bangkok architects Tuh and Baan came and worked with the people to develop a beautiful layout plan in which the houses are arranged in clusters around common courtyards that have been landscaped and planted with trees. There are also several house models, many of them designed along more traditional lines, with the living space up on stilts, and the shady area beneath left open for activities in the heat of the day-time. The project was inaugurated by the Prime Minister on 2 August, 2005.

- **New road into the land:** we travel over a brand new, very proper concrete road which the Provincial Authority has built to access the land, which had originally been "blind land" (no road access to the site - partly why the land was so cheap). The people have planted trees all along this road.
- **Project has pushed land values around here up and up:** We're told that since the road was installed and this very popular housing project was completed, land values in the area have more than doubled! In these ways, the poor acted as homesteaders, bringing development and investment into neglected corners of the city. (or in this case, on the outskirts of the city). The people purchased this land for about 100 or 120 Baht per square meters, back when it was a remote and inaccessible hinterland. Now the rates for selling land have more than doubled.
- **No need to use the full infrastructure subsidy of 68,000 Baht per household:** If communities can get their local authorities to chip in to the infrastructure development in and around the community, it can help reduce the project costs, and save budget for other projects. If the



cooperative is strong enough to leverage this kind of assistance - like here, the community managed to persuade the sub-district authority to invest a lot in this 2-km long concrete road into the site! This is also a longer-term partnership building strategy. **Somsook calls this "The power of people to draw down development resources and to get allies."**

- **Taking care of their own:** Nat shows me a Thai-style wooden house that the community members chipped in to build for an elderly, destitute woman who was not able to afford to build her own house. It is a really lovely house, surrounded by flowering shrubs and birds in cages, at the edge of the community, with an open gallery upstairs overlooking the rice fields and mountains in the distance. Everyone chipped in to build this house, providing labor, materials and cash.
- **Many visitors :** Today, when we visit Naa Technique, there are two big groups from other Chantaburi cooperatives, which are now preparing their own Baan Mankong upgrading plans. Naa Technique has been a perfect pilot project - it is much visited, and has inspired many groups to see that this program is real, that this is possible, and that they can redevelop their housing and land tenure also. As a result, many communities are starting their savings groups and registering their cooperatives, in preparation for joining the Baan Mankong program.
- **Meeting and lunch in the community center :** In the meeting, there are discussions about the land problems in Chantaburi and Trat, where most squatter settlements are on public land. In the Eastern Region, at least 30 communities have serious problems of land.
- **Everyone wants to be right here, near Naa Technique:** one unexpected problem has emerged. So many people want to relocate to land near Naa Technique, rather than try to stay in their old land! People even come asking if they can put a down-payment on a new unit, as if this were a commercial private real-estate development! That's how attractive this project is to people! But the idea is to redevelop in-situ as much as possible.



2. Soi Amon 1 Community

This is another Baan Mankong relocation project, just down the road from Naa Technique. This is a much larger development of **280 units** (named for their former community in town). When we visit, big trucks are bringing loads of soil for raising the level of the land (formerly farm land), and bulldozers are smoothing it out - it's a HUGE track of land, surrounded by farmland. They have set up a marquee and site office, where there are plans for the new community, photos of the conditions in the old squatter settlement, and financial figures, etc.



3. Chumchon 10 Community

This inner-city squatter settlement of **382 houses** (300 on one side of the street, and 82 on the other side) are planning a "*land readjustment*" upgrading project under Baan Mankong. They have stayed here for 30 or 40 years. The land is under Treasury Department ownership, so they will negotiate a collective long-term lease for the land, probably at a rate of about 2 Baht per square wah per month (0.5 Baht per square meter per month). The reason why this is not simple on-site upgrading is that the government has plans to build some kind of sports stadium here, and so the people will have to readjust the land to make room for the stadium. Lots of recycling activities along the road - saa leng carts, sorting of plastic, paper, bottles, tin, steel, etc. The plans are still being worked out, although the project has been in discussion with the Treasury Department for a long time.



Resettlement can often be a more reasonable alternative in these smaller towns, with their cheap land and smaller distances : In these smaller cities, where it can often be quite cheap to buy some private land than to lease public land, relocation becomes a more viable option than negotiating long-term leases on the public land the communities already occupy. Not always, but often. Plus, it's much easier to search for land in smaller towns like this, and the distances are less, so even plots on the outskirts of town are not far from jobs, schools, markets and employment opportunities. Like here in Chantaburi, you can buy land that is not too far away for only 500 Baht per square wah (125 Baht / square meter).

ARANYAPRATHET PROVINCE :

This is a border town, just across the frontier from Poipet in Cambodia. There is a big market in this town, where lots of small traders from Cambodia come across to sell goods from Cambodia, China, Burma and elsewhere. In this city, a lot of the land where squatter and land-rental settlements are located is under the control of the State Railways of Thailand - *one of the more difficult central government agency landlords!*

- There are a total of 10 poor communities in Aranyaprathet
- Most of these communities are in big blocks of land under State Railways.
- Four communities are now in some stage of planning their Baan Mankong upgrading projects.

1. First pilot upgrading project at Borivenda Community : This is a big land-rental community on State Railway Land, covering several parcels of land, with about **2,000 families**, all of whom want to upgrade their communities in-situ, with long-term collective lease. This project has been approved "*in principal*", which means the land issue is not resolved, and people are still negotiating with the State Railway Authorities about the long-term lease on the land. Two years ago, people rented this land for about 47 Baht per square meter, per year. Now they pay 50 Baht per square meter per year. That works out to about 8,000 Baht per year per household. That's very high! And still the Railways want to raise the rent higher! There is a lot of low-lying land in these areas, where people experience bad flooding. In keeping with its national policy of "*maximizing revenue returns on all state railway lands*", the railways have plans to increase the rent it charges to the poor households living on its land in Aranyaprathet.