GRASSROOTS NETWORKS IN FOUR ASIAN CITIES JOIN GLOBAL STUDY ON POVERTY AND EQUALITY

Sometimes it seems like inequality is baked into the human condition. Never in our long history have we humans achieved a system in which everyone was equal, where all the earth's work and all its bounty were shared equally by all. There have been noble attempts to invent societies or systems of governance or agricultural production which made us more equal, but they were mere blips on a long line of toil and suffering for the many and ease for the few.

Though it's always been with us, inequality is now front and center in the public discourse: much measured, much discussed, much studied, much regretted. But as the big development agencies scratch their heads and draft their development goals to reduce it, inequality just keeps growing. In fact, it grew so much during the pandemic that just eight men, we're told, now own more than half the world's wealth.

For good reason, much of the focus is on economic inequality. But inequality takes many forms, and the poor, who find themselves on the wrong side of these increasingly lopsided equations, often have much subtler ways of understanding how inequality manifests itself in their lives: how and where they live, how they eat and support themselves and how they relate to the cities they live in. They also have ideas about addressing these manifestations of inequality in practical, realistic ways.

Over the past three years, ACHR has jumped into the inequality discourse and taken part in a global study on how the work of urban poor communities and their supporters is showing us ways to counter this growing inequality in cities, on many fronts. Community groups in four Asian cities in the ACHR network took part in the study, and in this newsletter, we report on what they have been doing and how they are making their own pathways to greater equality.

HOUSING byPeople IN ASIA

Newsletter of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights   Number 20, May 2022

YANGON ▶

Poor women who used to be squatters and room renters in the city's peripheral slums have developed a community-led housing model that is showing a new way and forging a path towards collective land rights.

◀ DA NANG ▶

Beleaguered fishing communities in the dynamic and fast-growing city of Da Nang are finding ways to reclaim their heritage and create new livelihoods for themselves as fishing becomes more and more difficult.

◀ NAKHON SAWAN

After almost thirty years of active work, the community network in Nakhon Sawan reflects on changes in the city and their citywide approach to housing the poor.

◀ YOGYAKARTA

The riverside kampungs in Yogyakarta have joined forces with a team of community architects and are using their network power to convince the city to let them stay and upgrade their settlements in the same place.

Community-led development as a pathway to URBAN EQUALITY

'Building community' is not (always) an intuitive process that happens on its own; it results from continuous efforts. Organizations, local leaders, activists, and grassroots groups are often required to take a leap of faith and dedicate time to engage in the processes described throughout this newsletter.

KNOW STUDY: Bringing the work of Asia's urban poor networks into an important study on inequality

As urbanization accelerates around the world, the benefits of development are not spreading evenly among the people who live in cities. Resources are often concentrated by a few powerful groups, while ordinary people are prevented from accessing the same benefits, either because they are excluded from policies or because the systems and authorities fail to recognize them. The urban poor are among the most disadvantaged groups in cities. For them, urban development often means being displaced and impoverished to make way for high-end amenities and infrastructure projects that they can't access.

> Addressing this kind of urban inequality has been named as a priority on various global agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda.

Over the past three years, a global research project called "Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality" (KNOW), has taken a closer look at this growing inequality. The study was led by the Development Planning Unit (DPU) of the Bartlett School of University College London, and it involved a large and far-flung collaboration between academics, NGOs, activists, and community-based organizations around the world. The work included in-depth studies in nine cities in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, in which researchers, local civil society groups, and grassroots networks worked together to analyze their situation and develop new understanding of how their development practices are addressing inequality in various ways. The KNOW study set out to open up a broad discussion about the phenomenon of urban inequality and to identify and showcase pathways that lead to greater equality through development processes that are more participatory, more democratic, and more bottom-up.

When ACHR was invited to facilitate the Asia part of the study, we suggested focusing not on just one or two, but on several very different cities in the region, and then examining how community-led development had worked as a powerful pathway to greater equality in those cities, in different ways. After some discussion, four cities were selected, which provide a wide variety of contexts, political situations, approaches, and histories of community mobilization. *(See next page)*

A timeline of the KNOW study in Asia:

- Workshop to kick-off the KNOW study in Asia in Nakhon Sawan, Thailand: *24 - 26 January, 2019*
- KNOW annual workshop in Havana, Cuba: *25 - 29 February, 2019*
- ACHR and KNOW at the 7th Asia Pacific Urban Forum in Penang, Malaysia: *15 - 17 October, 2019*
- KNOW at annual Indian Institute for Human Settlements conference, Bengaluru, India: *16-18 Jan, 2020*
- KNOW annual workshop (this one held virtually): *22 - 26 February, 2021*
- KNOW final conference (partly vitual) on "The future of urban equality": *7 - 10 February, 2022*
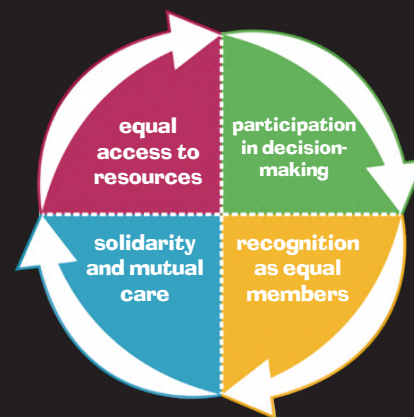
What makes cities equal?

Academics tend to have their own language for describing big concepts like equality, and that language may not always be very easy for ordinary people to understand. But equality is something that Asia's urban poor community organizations know intimately: they wrestle with inequality all the time, in very immediate and practical ways, though they may not have fancy words for it.

Our friends at DPU, though, were determined that the KNOW study would bring the two sides together, and that the experiences and wisdom of people on the ground would refine, inform and improve the academic understanding of what equality actually is and how cities can be made "more equal" than they are.

Here is how the KNOW team at DPU defines urban equality: "a multidimensional experience for urban dwellers encompassing access to income and services, recognition of diverse social identities, and inclusion in decisions that affect them." They go on to describe four dimensions of urban equality, which interact with each other in various ways:

- Access to resources like housing, land, entitlements, services and livelihood.
- Channels to participate in decision-making in meaningful ways.
- Recognition that everyone is equal in societal interactions.
- The existence of systems of mutual support among people.

What is co-production?

One of the big ideas behind the KNOW study is that co-production of knowledge is itself a way of creating greater urban equality. Co-production is a term for a collaborative process of doing things together and including people or groups who may usually be excluded from decision-making. Co-production can help create a shared understanding of people's realities on the ground, and also create common visions for what can be done to fulfill everyone's needs in a city, from the most powerful to the least powerful.

When we talk about "development", for example, an investor may think of skyscrapers, leisure parks and big profits. But when a poor family living in a slum talks about development, they may think of the land they were evicted from to make way for a luxury hotel. Co-producing knowledge about things like development is seen as a way of giving voice to various groups in a city and enabling them to communicate their own perceptions: how they live, what they aspire to, and what challenges they face. Through a co-production process, less-privileged people can connect with each other and feel that their knowledge is appreciated and can play a role in how their cities are shaped. In these ways, the co-production of knowledge is seen as a vehicle for participation, recognition, and access to resources.

A few notes on the four cities:

Different research partners, different strategies, but a few shared principles . . .

The four cities that took part in the KNOW study in Asia include Nakhon Sawan (a bustling provincial capital city in the heart of central Thailand), Yangon (the former capital and largest city of Myanmar), Yogyakarta (an ancient and culturally rich city in Central Java, in Indonesia) and Da Nang (a dynamic port city in Central Vietnam). The research was implemented by different partners in each city, and the goal was for the study to plug into the work already happening in those cities and to strengthen what the KNOW team would call "the local production of knowledge." In all four cities, the KNOW study offered a new opportunity to bring together various actors, including local authorities, grassroots networks, professionals, activists, and students, into a dialogue on equality.

Because they are all so different and because they have grassroots networks at different levels of maturity, the four cities illustrate how different tools, strategies, and pathways can lead to more equitable city-making processes when they are motivated by the same principles of people-centered development. Although all four cities face their own unique political and economic challenges, they all have a few things in common: centralized decision-making structures, accumulation and control of resources by a privileged few, and marginalized poor communities. The teams in the four cities were all eager to learn from each other's experiences in finding ways to greater equality and to greater access to resources, recognition, and political participation.

NAKHON SAWAN, THAILAND

- **Population of Thailand:** 69.80 million (51% urban; urbanization rate: 1.73%)
- **Population of Nakhon Sawan:** 86,000
- **Community network established:** 1993
- **Research team:** In Nakhon Sawan, the study was led by the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network, with support from the Community Organizations Development Institute (a government organization that has been supporting people-driven development at a national level in Thailand since 1992) and Kasetsart University. The research team included Supreeya Wungpatcharapon ("Noot"), Nimanong Jansuksri and Ruangyuth Teeravanich.

YANGON, MYANMAR

- **Population of Myanmar:** 54.41 million (31% urban; urbanization rate: 1.74%)
- **Population of Yangon:** 5.51 million
- **Community network established:** 2009
- **Research team:** In Yangon, the study was led by the Women's Savings and Development Network, with support from their partner NGO Women for the World (which has been working on women's empowerment and community development projects in Myanmar since 2008). The research team included Marina Kolovou Kouri, Van Lizar Aung, Shoko Sakuma and Hein Htet Aung.

YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA

- **Population of Indonesia:** 237.5 million (56% urban; urbanization rate: 2.27%)
- **Population of Yogyakarta:** 423,000
- **Community network established:** 2012
- **Research team:** In Yogyakarta, the research was facilitated by Arkomjogja (a group of community architects and activists who have been working with urban poor and disaster-affected communities in many cities in Indonesia since 2005), in close collaboration with the Kalijawi Community Network in Yogyakarta. The research team included Anissa Hadny, Jasri Mulia and Yuli Kusworo.

DA NANG, VIETNAM

- **Population of Vietnam:** 97.34 million (37% urban; urbanization rate: 2.98%)
- **Population of Da Nang:** 1.12 million
- **Community network established:** 2019
- **Research team:** In Da Nang, the study was carried out by the Da Nang Architecture University (tapping into the work of local academics on heritage and development in traditional fishing villages on Viet Nam's coast) and with the Cham Marine Protection Area Management Board. The research team included Phan Tran Kieu Trang, Vo Ho Bao Hanh and Chu Manh Trinh.

KNOW CITY # 1
NAKHON SAWAN

A bit about the city:

Nakhon Sawan (which means "Heavenly City" in Thai) has always been an important center of transport and commerce in the country's central plains, located at the place where the rivers Ping and Nan converge to form the Chao Phraya River. For centuries, barges and steamboats carrying rice, teakwood, and other goods – and people – would come down those rivers from Chiang Mai and cities up north and stop at Nakhon Sawan before continuing further south to Ayutthaya, Bangkok, and the Gulf of Siam. There is not much river traffic any longer, but the city is now the meeting point for several major highways connecting north and central Thailand and is a bustling trading city and provincial capital.

Today, the city has a population of about 85,931 and is expected to increase by 2.76% annually, mostly with the arrival of rural migrants searching for jobs. The city's housing supply and infrastructure haven't kept up with the increasing population, though.

Like cities all over Thailand, Nakhon Sawan experiences inequality in both physical and political ways, and there have been big problems of the urban poor being excluded from land, services, and resources. Thailand has the dubious honor of being the most unequal of all the Southeast Asian nations, according to some economic metrics. In Nakhon Sawan, this inequality is especially striking in the distribution of land in the city, with the city's poorer citizens being able to access only a fraction of the land for their housing while great swaths of the city's land lie vacant but off-limits and under the control of various national government departments. Even the municipal government has limited power over how this public land is used. Centralized control of urban land is a big structural problem in Thailand, and Nakhon Sawan is a case in point.

Nakhon Sawan is located on a lowland surrounded by hills. Its residents have dealt with floods almost every year and are worried about the impact of climate change on the region.

> **The community-led practice needs not only people's ability to take actions and make changes but also to think strategically and move forward.**

(A member of the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network)

INEQUALITY IN PLAIN SIGHT: 36% of Nakhon Sawan's residents were living in poverty in 1999

Lots of policies have been adopted since the late 1950s in Thailand to address poverty, regulate revenue distribution, and reduce economic disparities between rural and urban regions. As a result of these, the levels of absolute poverty in the country have decreased over time. However, these measures have failed to address inequality, which has risen sharply. According to a survey by the National Housing Authority from 1999, it was estimated that 36.47% of the Nakhon Sawan municipality's population was classified as poor, while 26% of the city's housing stock was considered informal.

A citywide survey from 2008 identified more than 50 slum communities in the urban area of Nakhon Sawan. Most of them occupied peripheral public lands, the riverfront, and hillsides, while centrally located government-owned lands were often left vacant. Tied with this informality is also poor people's limited access to health care, free education, basic services, finance, and livelihood opportunities.

In this complex and highly unequal context, the poor residents of Nakhon Sawan have been organizing themselves to develop self-help solutions to their problems and counter systemic injustices. The Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network, a grassroots organization with a history of almost 30 years, has been at the forefront of this effort, most notably throughout the implementation of the community-driven slum upgrading program Baan Mankong (meaning "secure housing"), launched by the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) in 2003.

How the research was designed:

The research design and process in Nakhon Sawan were guided by two main objectives. The first one was to synthesize the accumulated knowledge from the network's long experience and consolidate learnings that can be carried on in future development processes. The second objective was to facilitate the transfer of that knowledge between the network and other actors and expand their development practices to more communities, to the younger generation of the network, and to practitioners at the national and global level.

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, including direct observation, semistructured interviews, focus group discussions with key members of the community network, and an extensive questionnaire survey conducted in communities that are part of the Baan Mankong program. The guiding questions of the research were:

1 What are the roles of the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network in the process of Baan Mankong and beyond to tackle inequality?

2 To what extent has the implementation of the citywide Baan Mankong housing program triggered change in Nakhon Sawan?

3 How has the principle of co-creation built knowledge and capacities in the city, at both an individual and collective level?

From small upgrading to Baan Mankong:

A brief history of Nakhon Sawan's community-led housing movement . . .

The process of community-led development in the city has taken different turns, marked successes, and reached moments of stagnation, only to come back stronger. Its story goes back to 1993, when a group of low-income women started doing collective savings. In 1995, the Danish government offered them a grant for infrastructure improvements, marking the beginning of slum upgrading. Witnessing their effective organization, a Japanese initiative decided to support the community network with individual loans after the 1997 economic crisis. However, misunderstandings, a lack of transparency, and financial mismanagement led to conflicts, causing the network to become weaker and less active.

Then, the introduction of Baan Mankong in 2003 marked a significant milestone where the government would subsidize infrastructure and offer housing loans to community cooperatives to improve their conditions in the most suitable way for them. With a renewed motivation to address housing through this new channel, the network started regrouping after a period of inactivity. The program employed participation to empower the network members and gave them extensive control over the management of their housing projects, including budgets. Based on the communities' decisions, the upgrading process would range from minor improvements to the complete reconstruction of houses or their relocation to nearby lands if on-site upgrading was not feasible. In this scheme, land use rights would be collective, and if individuals decided to move out, they would sell their house back to the cooperative.

Eager to participate in this program, the community development network began negotiations with the municipality and the Treasury Department, which eventually came to fruition. By 2005, the first two upgrading projects started taking shape on government-owned land. Drawing confidence from this development, the community network moved on to another significant step; conducting a citywide survey of slum communities.

The objective of that survey was to enumerate informal households, document their tenure conditions and the suitability of their lands to be upgraded in situ, and identify vacant lands in the municipality that could be used for further Baan Mankong projects. Building on this work, the community network, local authorities, technicians from the Community Organizations Development Institute, students, and community architects worked together to elaborate a citywide development plan to secure housing for the remaining slum settlements.

All these partners collaborated at various stages to produce designs and management plans for each community's housing project. Throughout this process, the members developed new skills and increased their capacity for coordinating, designing, planning, and construction. Over time, they started addressing other aspects complementary to housing, like social welfare and environmental protection. Of course, the road has not been without obstacles, but each crisis made the community network come together, support its members and their fellow city dwellers, and increase their preparedness and strategic planning.

A housing timeline:

1992: The Nakhon Sawan community women's group is established.

1993: The first women's savings groups are set up in several of the city's poor communities.

1999: The savings network receives individual loans for upgrading after the Asian financial crisis.

2000: The community network becomes active after problems with loan repayments plague many of the savings groups.

2003: CODI's nationwide Baan Mankong housing development program is launched.

2006: Participatory community upgrading planning starts in several settlements in the city.

2008: Policy dialogue with the government leads to the formation of a City Development Committee to support the community-led housing process.

2011: An awful flood puts the community network to the test but also shows their ability to respond.

2013: The network starts working on the Citywide Development Plan and mapping informal settlements with digital tools.

2015: The network starts expanding its scope of work to improve more aspects of people's lives.

2020: Covid-19 crisis comes to the city and opens up new opportunities to demonstrate the network's systems of care and social assistance.

Mapping is a complex process that can reverse the power balance between different sides. It gives communities a deeper knowledge about their city and helps them connect to allied groups.

30 housing projects so far . . .

The people-driven and multi-stakeholder program in Nakhon Sawan has produced 30 housing projects so far, which provide permanent, decent, secure housing and land to more than 6,000 of the city's poorest and most vulnerable families. These 30 projects include:

- **UPGRADING:** 24 projects in which communities upgraded their houses and infrastructure on the same land where they had already been living (5,268 households).

- **RECONSTRUCTION:** 5 projects in which communities completely rebuilt their communities on the same land, with new layouts, new housing, and new infrastructure (752 households).

- **RELOCATION:** 1 project in which 102 poor households from 12 informal communities relocated to new government-owned land, where they formed a cooperative, leased the land collectively, and built new houses and infrastructure.

How has the Community Development Network brought about change in Nakhon Sawan?

1 | Redistributing resources: land and finance

One of the biggest achievements of the community-led housing movement in Nakhon Sawan has been the transfer of land use rights to low-income people. The network's survey in 2008 found that 80% of the municipality's total area falls under the control of central government agencies. The centralization of land ownership and management had prevented the city government from making land available to resolve its housing deficit. Yet, the consistent mobilization of the network and the support from its allies made it possible to convince relevant state agencies to lease public land to community cooperatives for housing upgrading projects. The 30 communities in Nakhon Sawan that have been upgraded so far, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong housing program, represent 60% of the city's urban poor. The Baan Mankong Program has given them access to secure land, housing, and complete infrastructure and allowed people to improve their livelihood, thanks to increased stability, social welfare schemes, and continuous capacity building.

An important element in this community-led housing process has been the practice of collective savings, which promotes mutual accountability and gives people security and better access to finance. The savings groups have had their ups and downs, but there is now a deep appreciation of the benefits of saving. The network also decided to pool welfare subsidies for which only half of the network members are eligible and use them as a collective fund to support everyone in the community. The success of the collective savings is evident in the fact that network members save more every month compared to the average household in Nakhon Sawan, even though their incomes are lower than the provincial average. They also have much lower levels of debt from land and housing acquisition, thanks to the Baan Mankong program's affordability and the well-designed savings system. Establishing a City Development Fund that links all scattered savings groups was another important step to consolidating the savings process and expanding the finance options available to poor communities.

People who used to live in cramped slum settlements, suffering from seasonal flooding and lack of services, got access to sturdy and secure housing. Assisted by community architects, CODI, and other allies, they got together to plan their communities, design and construct their houses and improve their lives.

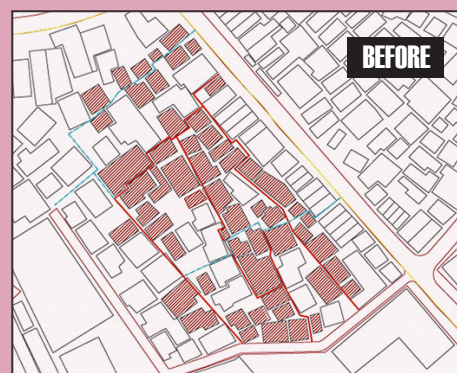# The rebuilding of the Jumlong Wit community:

Nakhon Sawan's first housing project and first crack at internal equality-making

Like all human societies, poor communities have their share of internal disputes and unequal power relationships. Conditions in many slum settlements are characterized by conflicts of interest and unequal distribution of resources. This inequality is often exemplified in their spatial arrangements, where some more powerful community members have bigger plots and profit from them, while others have to squeeze into tiny plots. The process of upgrading and rebuilding these kinds of communities presents a big opportunity to address these internal inequalities and to make a new, more equal social and physical form in the community.

A good example of that potential is Jumlong Wit, an old and dilapidated community of 81 rickety wooden houses built on a patch of swampy land in the center of Nakhon Sawan. The Jumlong Wit community was completely rebuilt after a fire burned down the whole settlement in 2010, and was the city's first Baan Mankong housing project.

After long and difficult discussions, the community members decided that everyone would have the same sized plots in the plans for their newly-rebuilt community. The housing models would differ, though, according to each family's preferences and needs, making it possible to accommodate different family sizes and groupings without perpetuating land inequality in the rebuilt settlement. The people also agreed that there would be no fences between their houses, which was an expression of the trust and bonding that their collective housing planning and decision-making process had cultivated.

BEFORE

AFTER

(above) Before and after plans of the Jumlong Wit community. The success of the Jumlong Wit reconstruction project was an important milestone for the city, and it helped revive people's motivation to actively engage with the community network and rebuild trust in collective organization and savings.

❝ Jumlong Wit is now recognized by the local authorities and by the public in Nakhon Sawan. That makes us feel proud that we are part of the city. ❞
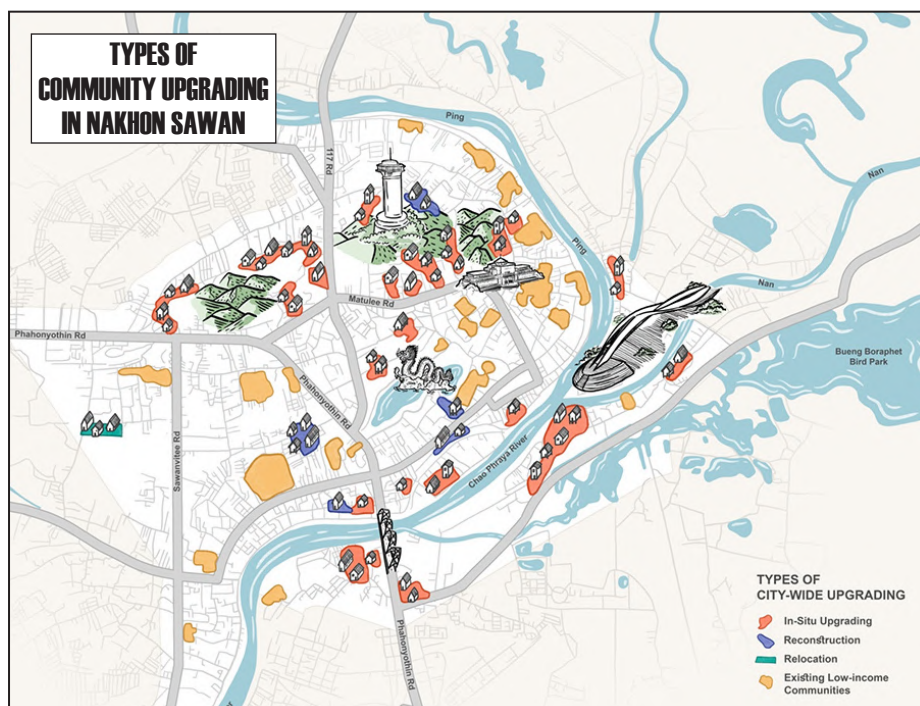
(A member of the Jumlong Wit community)

2   Showing how to be seen and heard

Throughout their long process, network members have been increasingly recognized as experts in their development. Their leading role in producing knowledge is an essential ingredient of their community-led action. This is seen, for example, in the surveys and mapping of informal settlements across the city. In this different approach, poor people come together to think, research, develop plans and implement interventions based on grounded information and ground realities.

The community-led surveying, for example, put several slum communities that had not been officially recognized by the municipality on the map, prompting authorities to rethink their approach to addressing the actual housing demand. Similar actions showing the communities' preparedness and resourcefulness have gradually consolidated the network's role as representative of the city's poor in the eyes of authorities. This has improved relations with the state. As one network member said, "We are accepted now by almost all public authorities in the city. In the past, they didn't' welcome us or even talk with poor people like us."

Besides demonstrating to authorities their capacity to organize, plan and implement housing projects, and manage their financial resources, network members have shown each other what they can do collectively. Despite facing many challenges, their shared experience has empowered them and equipped them with more confidence to develop partnerships and advance their negotiations. In contrast to conventional, top-down approaches, where they would be seen as beneficiaries, they actively lead various processes, which gives them a strong sense of ownership and pride in their accomplishments.

TYPES OF COMMUNITY UPGRADING IN NAKHON SAWAN

TYPES OF CITY-WIDE UPGRADING

- In-Situ Upgrading
- Reconstruction
- Relocation
- Existing Low-income Communities

Community-managed mapping goes digital in Nakhon Sawan

As network members explained, one of the causes of inequality is that wealthy and privileged investors have better access to information and insights that allow them to influence decisions about the city's development direction. To balance that, the community-led practice needs open and fairer access to up-to-date information on urban resources and members that are aware of what is happening in their city and why.

Community mapping has been an important tool of the network to create a shared understanding of the actual slum situation in Nakhon Sawan. For example, the network conducted a citywide survey and mapping of the city's informal settlements in 2006, to launch the Baan Mankong program in the city. Besides counting every poor family, the survey documented each settlement's tenure conditions and also compiled an inventory of vacant land in the city that might be suitable for future housing projects.

In a later citywide survey, the network introduced some new, higher-tech tools to the process. With training from CODI, community members learned to map using GIS technology, so that the digitized data could be updated and shared more easily. At the same time, this was a good way to engage the more tech-savvy younger members of the network and transfer knowledge and practices from one generation to another, and to expand and diversify the city's urban poor network.

All the data from the survey will be eventually uploaded onto an open-access platform that can strengthen the communities' negotiations in the city. Here's a link to the site: Co-CreateThailand.net

"The community map we made together is very useful. We can show it to the governmental authorities and use it to defend or discuss, especially with the landowner, as we labeled every house number. The authorities don't have a detailed map of informal communities like ours." (A member of the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network)
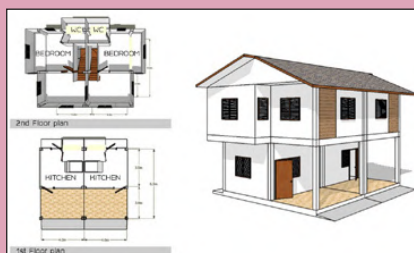
City's first successful land negotiation

The leader of the Jumlong Wit community will never forget the day when a fire spread in their settlement and destroyed more than 100 houses, mainly on the part built on public land. According to Thai law, land leases and occupation rights on public land are no longer valid after a fire. Obviously, this is every informal community's greatest nightmare. Indeed, as soon as the fire was put out, the land was declared a fire zone, and notices were posted forbidding people to re-occupy the land. Overnight, the residents of the Jumlong Wit community lost everything they owned, became homeless, and had to camp in temporary shelters around a nearby lake. But they would not leave their area for good without putting up a fight.

With support from the community network, CODI, and the municipality, they immediately got to work: holding meetings, surveying the affected families, and analyzing aerial images from before the fire. With their survey data as evidence, they could finally petition the central government for permission to stay on the same land. The local authorities agreed on the condition that, within fifteen days, they submit a plan for the reconstruction of their settlement following all planning codes.

Determined not to let this chance slip away, members of the Jumlong Wit community sat together with community architects from CODI to develop a proposal for complete redevelopment. When their submission was approved, it was a huge relief and a reason to celebrate. This outcome marked a massive accomplishment for the whole network showing the power of collective and organized claims to authorities.

> **We've learned the importance of networking that leads to people helping one another. Without a network as a starting point, it would be impossible for us to come together.**
>
> *(A member of the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network)*

3 Creating channels for meaningful participation

As the network's accomplishments, organization, and knowledge have been increasingly valued, new channels have opened for people's participation in Nakhon Sawan's development. Among other things, this has been possible thanks to their restless advocacy and networking. Over the years, the network has established partnerships with various local and national actors and has claimed a seat at the table of negotiations on the city's trajectory.

One of the most crucial milestones in this regard has been the establishment of a City Development Committee. This was an initiative to facilitate the implementation of Baan Mankong projects by bringing together various urban stakeholders, including the mayor, public landowners, ministry-level government officials, academics, and, of course, the community network. By becoming part of the City Development Committee, the poor communities have a platform to participate in discussions on their city's development. Their participation is not limited to consultations, as is often the case, but the network actually contributes to housing and urban development policies and influences administrative and fiscal plans.

Designing and building IS participation:

Participation is not only something that is accomplished when governments are involved. It is an approach that permeates many aspects of the community network's work – including the critical stages of designing and planning their settlements and housing units. This involvement has been the foundation of the Baan Mankong program to ensure that the new housing projects respect people's lifestyles and give them opportunities to adapt their dwellings and facilities according to their needs. The community architects are an important link in this process, translating the communities' priorities, requests, and aspirations into concrete designs.

Along the way, participants equip themselves with numerous new competencies. They learn about planning and how to communicate their ideas through models, maps, and drawings. Many are also involved in the construction and upgrading of their projects, which has the double effect of reducing labor costs while advancing their skills. This high degree of involvement means a great sense of ownership for their communities. Their knowledge, opinions, and requirements are respected, increasing their confidence and perception that they are equal members of the city of Nakhon Sawan.

4 Building the collective spirit

All these experiences of collective engagement have strengthened social cohesion among members of the community network. Years of mobilizing, saving together, securing land, dealing with setbacks, and planning and building housing projects have forged friendships and built a solid cooperative spirit in the communities and in the citywide network. Their systems of solidarity and mutual care have been an integral part of their success. An important premise of the network's work is to expand horizontally, so those systems of mutual care can include more and more communities within the municipality, and more and more low-income communities in neighboring towns and rural areas of Nakhon Sawan Province.

At the same time, the network is expanding to include more and more young people in the network, to cultivate and energize a new generation of community leaders. Many of the key network leaders in Nakhon Sawan are getting on in years now, and they all understand that bringing young people into the community movement is an urgent necessity if the city's community-driven movement is to continue. That's why a new emphasis is being placed on transferring the accumulated knowledge from many years of practice to young people and equipping them with skills that become more relevant to the network's current needs, like digital mapping and surveying tools.

The work of the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network has been recognized nationally and internationally as a powerful example of people-led development. Having overcome many challenges in its long history, the community network has set an example of perseverance, solidarity, and resourcefulness. The community-led housing approach in the city has directly challenged political and social manifestations of inequality, such as under-counting the urban poor and excluding them from accessing land, housing, basic services, and public resources. The network has played an important role in securing people's participation in the development of Nakhon Sawan by using non-confrontational approaches and actively demonstrating the benefits of community-driven interventions – not only for addressing the needs of the urban poor but also for the prosperity and wellbeing of the city as a whole.

> **Living in this new community feels like having a new family. The neighbors have become our sisters and brothers. We can talk about everything, support each other and find solutions to problems we face together.**
>
> *(A member of the Sawan Muang Mai community)*

What has changed for people since they did Baan Mankong projects?

As part of a survey carried out by the network during the KNOW study, some 3,000 members of communities that used the Baan Mankong Program to upgrade their housing were asked about the role of the community network, its impact, and their ideas and hopes for its future. From their perspective, the biggest transformations in their lives after collectively upgrading their housing were as follows:

- Our housing and livelihoods have improved. (76.05%)
- We have stronger cohesion in our community. (52%)
- Our pride and self-esteem have increased. (35.25%)
- We have stronger family relations. (34.43%)
- We have a strong mechanism to support each other. (33.67%)

When the survey teams asked the respondents what they would like the network to focus its work on in the future, this is how they responded:

- Increasing the welfare program and community funds to better address the needs of the poorest, the elderly and the network's core working group of community leaders.
- Improving the working process to cope with different problems and situations by establishing a better monitoring procedure for the network.
- Initiating more communal activities and supporting more affordable housing projects in low-income communities in and around the city.

The collective spirit is really put to the test during the Covid crisis

When the pandemic reached Nakhon Sawan, the city started shutting down. Markets and businesses were closed, and street vending was constrained, leading to reduced income and unemployment. The network began working right away to respond to people's needs. They handed out cash assistance from their city development fund and distributed rice to needy households. They also started monitoring each community's situation and linking the community data with the city's health agencies.

As the pandemic continued, the network started focusing on long-term relief. Livelihood programs were introduced for people to work from home, and community kitchens were set up to feed out-of-work network members and other poor families. With support from CODI, the network launched four coordination centers to manage relief responses and mediate between communities and authorities. Community gardens were also planted in several housing projects so that people could grow their own vegetables and sell the surplus to earn a little extra income.

"While government agencies were still trying to figure out their rules and regulations, we decided to be the first ones to take care of our people. If we had chosen to wait for the government, our people would have starved to death." *(A member of the Nakhon Sawan Community Development Network)*

CONTACT:

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And for more information about CODI's work over the past 30 years, please visit the English language part of the CODI website: **www.en.codi.or.th**

KNOW CITY #2
YANGON

A bit about the city:

Yangon is Myanmar's former capital and largest city, concentrating a population of more than five million. While Myanmar is one of the least urbanized countries in the Southeast Asian region, Yangon's growth has been picking up quickly, bringing tremendous physical, social and economic changes. After decades of authoritarian rule and a pretty isolated economy, the country's ruling generals agreed to a transition to a quasi-democracy that started in 2011. Despite many limitations, this step meant increased freedom for Myanmar's people - including the more widespread arrival of the Internet and telecommunications that were previously only accessible to the super-rich.

With liberalization came reforms to bring the local economy up to speed. The quick way to do that was to encourage foreign investment and accelerate real estate and urban development projects. Undeniably, this meant an overall improvement of infrastructures (like roads and electricity), new services, and new employment opportunities that have somewhat improved many people's living conditions. However, most of the recent developments targeted the emerging middle and upper classes, and the benefits of these projects have been captured by a few already privileged groups.

Because of that, inequalities have become even sharper, and the space for marginalized communities to access basic rights is shrinking. This shows clearly in the way land is managed, with the state and influential businesspeople having every law and policy on their side to acquire large plots of land – often without compensation or arranging resettlement of those displaced. At the same time, it is almost impossible for the poor to access even the smallest plot of urban land in formal ways. Even worse, poor squatter communities still face arbitrary evictions, despite expectations that the democratically elected government would terminate this old and violent practice. So, not only are the poor stuck in the same status; they are being pushed out of their areas to make space for industrial, commercial, and tourism-linked projects.

Poor people often settle in very precarious locations, like riverbanks, near railway tracks, and around factories.

When women were put in the same room as people with authority, they couldn't make their voices known. They were in the room to make tea. This is why we have our rule: When we plan to do community development work, we need to make women's groups first.

(Van Lizar Aung, Director of Women for the World)

YANGON HOUSING SUPPLY: Half a million people have no choice but to live in informal settlements

The presence of informal settlements in many corners of Yangon is very much related to the state's deficient housing supply. After decades of neglect and a very narrow focus on producing housing for civil servants, Yangon faces a significant housing backlog and has a population of close to half a million 'informal' dwellers inhabiting roadsides, flood-prone riverbanks, and unsafe industrial zones. Although low-cost housing programs exist, the supply is not really affordable, and often in remote locations. The paradox is that even though many such apartments are left empty because people cannot afford to buy them, the government continues to build social housing complexes following the same recipe. This growing housing and spatial inequality is most visible in Yangon, especially in peripheral townships, where high-end resorts, malls, and golf courses exist side by side with impoverished slum settlements and overcrowded hostels accommodating migrant workers.

In this context, the KNOW study looked at alternative approaches to housing and development as a pathway to a more equitable city. Specifically, the research concentrated on a community-led housing practice with over a decade of history. The objective was to understand the changes that people – women, in particular – have experienced as a result of joining this bottom-up process and, at the same time, document the evolution of community-led housing from being an unsupported, 'activist' practice to becoming part of the public housing supply and opening channels for change at the city scale.

How the research was designed:

The focus of the KNOW study in Yangon was "change". The research compared people's conditions in their previous settlements with their experiences since joining one of the participatory housing schemes. This analysis allows us to understand how various aspects of their lives transformed, how the "original" and government-assisted community-led housing are different, and how the evolution of these collective processes leads to distinct results in people's experience and perception of equality. Considering the important step in Myanmar's community-led housing movement and all the efforts that preceded it, the research tried to answer the following questions:

1 How do community-led housing practices contribute to the reduction of social and political manifestations of inequality in Yangon?

2 How are the conditions of recognition, redistribution, and political participation expressed in this alternative housing model?

3 What are the communities' perceptions and experiences around the dimensions of equality, and what challenges or limitations do they face?

The research involved interviews with some 40 housing project members, from the oldest to the most recent ones, to understand the small and big transformations they have experienced since becoming part of this collective process. Another way to capture their perceptions about changes in their lives was through participatory photography. Around 20 members took pictures of scenes or objects that showed the most meaningful achievements that have been possible for them, thanks to the community-led housing scheme. Participants eagerly shared photos of their houses, families, and activities or snapshots from their daily lives *(see page 12, right column)*. Besides that, several media were reviewed, including online newspaper articles and social media posts, to see how government officials, journalists, and the general public talk and write about the projects and their participants. Finally, sharing plenty of time with the communities and participating in various events and activities from everyday situations to special occasions was just as important to understand the dynamics, energy, and changing confidence of the community members.

From saving collectively to owning a home:

Yangon's community-led housing model emerged in 2009, in the aftermath of the devastating cyclone Nargis, when a small civil society organization called Women for the World started responding to low-income communities' calls for better access to housing. Taking inspiration from the methodologies of other countries in the regional ACHR network, Women for the World guided low-income women through a process of participatory development. With time, different tools and practices were adapted to the local context, progressively integrating the communities' learnings and experiences.

(above) This is the site for the first low-cost housing with collective tenure on government-owned land, marked with a sign reading "Yangon Regional Government - Community-led housing project".

1 MAPPING & SURVEYING COMMUNITIES

The first step of this long journey was to mobilize women through the process of surveying and mapping informal and low-income communities. Besides gathering valuable data for advocacy and negotiation with authorities, these procedures presented an opportunity to familiarize more people with the concept of collective development.

2 SAVING COLLECTIVELY

The next step – and in many ways the foundation of this approach – was the establishment of collective savings groups. Women have been trained in accounting and financial management, and, in turn, they taught hundreds more women, slowly expanding this practice to more and more disadvantaged communities. Eventually, the savings groups became their own organization, called the Women's Savings and Development Network, and have been working in tandem with Women for the World to support various collective development processes.

3 BUYING LAND & BUILDING HOUSING

Once the community groups had enough savings to be eligible for loans from micro-finance institutions, they would collectively purchase tracts of inexpensive agricultural land and build their simple, low-cost houses on it, in very tight layouts, with basic infrastructure. The women are involved in every aspect of the design of their new settlement's layout, and in the management of the construction, infrastructure development and long-term maintenance and improvement.

4 CONTINUING TO DEVELOP

This people-driven process does not stop when the construction of the housing and infrastructure is finished. Community members continue to work collaboratively for years to develop and implement their collective community management systems, improve their livelihoods together, gradually expand and upgrade their dwellings, improve their living environments and make their settlements more green and more sustainable in the face of climate change.

Big breakthrough in how land is managed

Even though the housing projects are well established, two obstacles prevent them from being legal:

- First, there is no legal framework yet in Myanmar that provides for collective land tenure except for high-rise luxury condominium developments.

- Second, the land the women have bought is classified as agricultural land, and according to legislation, all farmland belongs to the state.

This meant that the transfer of land use rights between individuals was not permitted for a long time. Even though it was recently allowed, the process is complicated, expensive, and almost inaccessible to poor people. As a result, the settlements have been in a legal gray zone from the beginning.

There's good news though: after seeing the achievements of low-income communities to address their own development needs, the Yangon Regional Government announced in 2019 that it would adopt this community-led methodology as part of its public supply of low-cost housing. The government then committed to provide land and urban services at no cost for building another 1,000 housing units during the pilot phase of the Mae Myit Thar project (which translates as "Motherly love").

From 2009 to 2019, a total of 11 projects accommodating more than 800 families were implemented in Yangon's peripheral townships, following the same core idea, slowly grafted with better tools and procedures:

Pan Thazin
30 houses

Pyit Tine Taung
64 houses

See Sein Shin
140 houses

Bawa Pan Tine
83 houses

Moe San Pan
59 houses

Taw Win
120 houses

Khit Thit May
88 houses

San Thit Sa
96 houses

Hnin San Pan I
69 houses

Hnin San Pan II
29 houses

La Min Eain
58 houses

During the pilot phase of the Mae Myi Thar project in 2019-2020, another 1,000 houses were built:

Shwepyithar
574 houses

East Dagon
296 houses

South Dagon
147 houses

What has the process of making collective housing made possible in Yangon?

1 Getting housing, services and savings

The most pivotal change for people taking part in this community-led model is to access secure, decent housing. Their modest homes are larger, safer, and brighter and designed to be easily upgraded with simple construction techniques. Sooner or later, people build extensions to have more space for the family or their business, they paint their houses in different colors, and upgrade them with various materials, according

> **I am happy when I hear my kids tell their friends that we don't live in a hostel anymore but we own our house.**
>
> *(Ko Naing Gyi, Mae Myit Thar housing project in Shwepyithar)*

to their wish and capacity. This chance to take roots has already been a vital stepping stone to addressing other aspects of their individual and collective development.

Compared to their previous conditions, their access to urban services varies; some communities have managed to access municipal services like electricity, but most continue to rely on self-help solutions. In many housing projects, residents have constructed their own drains and paved their roads, and they have communal or individual water pumps, although water quality varies from location to location. The way municipal services are delivered in these projects is not only a matter of being recognized by the city; the municipality has been slow to bring services even to more formal parts of the city because of the lack of resources and technical expertise.

Another important change has been people's access to finance thanks to their organization into savings groups, improved financial literacy, and management skills. They have access to low-interest loans from within their savings groups, but they also benefit from the citywide savings network, which extends support to its members in times of need. The value of savings is not only reflected in the monetary benefits people have to cover for healthcare and education costs or invest in their businesses; much more than that, collective savings is a tool for continuous mobilization, trust, and shared accountability.

"Even if I win the lottery I will not leave this housing. Here is my home, here are my friends, here I have fresh air."

"Owning the land collectively gives us security; no one will sell or pawn the land so we don't have to worry."

2 Having a good place to work and earn

Community-led housing members also have more favorable conditions in place to perform home-based income-generating activities. Even though some people reported experiencing disruptions in their employment right after joining the housing projects – usually due to an increased distance to their previous job – most have been able to bounce back and either find work in their new neighborhoods or capitalize on the opportunity to set up a small business in their homes. From tailoring workshops to motorbike repair shops, convenience stores, and even a tattoo studio, people have been populating their settlements with various services and could stabilize their livelihoods.

When they were living as squatters or room renters, people didn't have conditions at home that were favorable to working from home. Their rooms were usually very small; there was no space around the house, and they often dealt with complaints from the house owner or neighbors about the smell or noise that came from their various household activities: cooking curries, making fish paste, sewing or keeping animals. During the lockdowns and curfews of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially, having the option to earn from home was lifesaving for many women in the housing projects.

"I used to be afraid to talk in public. Once I overcame that, I realized that we all are in the same boat."

"We poor people want to live like everyone else. We might not be able to afford this alone, but as a group we can."

> ❝ Previously, we never had time to talk to each other, everyone was busy and struggling. Now we help each other, we talk about our problems; this is a relief. ❞
>
> *(Ma Wah Wah Myint, Hnin San Pan I housing project)*

3   Being recognized from outside and within

Besides accessing resources and services, another important transformation in people's lives has been the recognition they have gained from being part of this initiative. The fact that the regional government saw in this community-led approach a model worthy enough to integrate into its public response to affordable housing speaks volumes. Rightly so, the members of the earlier housing projects take pride in this accomplishment because it has been the fruit of their years-long efforts to prove the capacity and knowledge of ordinary people in addressing their own development.

Their work inspired new measures that would have been unthinkable otherwise, like free government-owned land for the implementation of community-led housing projects. Until then, collective land ownership was not possible for this kind of residential development; yet communities, their support organizations, and authorities came up with the title 'community common land'. Although this title is pro-visional, there is hope that it will eventually be adopted into urban and housing policies.

This emerging recognition has started being reflected in small changes in how government officials talk about the projects and their members. A small but meaningful symbol is that the word "squatter", or *kyu-kyaw* in Burmese – translating to "invader" – is occasionally replaced with the word "people". On the other hand, it seems to be more difficult to get the general public on board with this mentality due to the long-standing stigmatization of the urban poor as criminals. Nevertheless, the small victories are essential for the progress of recognition.

Besides the more favorable attitudes of authorities, people have drastically improved their self-perception. As former squatters or renters, many had internalized negative stereotypes that they were incapable and unworthy. However, seeing how far they have come – on their own strengths for the most part – gives people a sense of accomplishment and pride. This self-recognition is just as important as the formal endorsement by the authorities because it means a change from within; an understanding that they have every right to be treated as equals. Also, since the community-led housing model is an explicitly women-led initiative, the process has contributed to improving the women's status, at the very least, inside their communities. They are seen as capable leaders whose voices matter, which is a significant and necessary shift for a more equitable future.

> ❝ People's behaviors to-ward us are different now. We don't have electricity or water yet, but we have the right to get them. Now, I can finally be peaceful. ❞
>
> *(Ma May Ye Mya, Mae Myit Thar housing project in South Dagon)*

Notes on the art of making friends with the local authorities

The residents of the very first community-led housing project, called Pan Thazin, recalled facing a lot of mistrust and dismissal from the local authorities when they first established their settlement. "They thought that we could not contribute anything to the ward." This small community of 30 families was disproportionately burdened with the expectation to 'prove themselves' as productive and organized dwellers that contribute to the city – more than any of the following projects.

In this unfriendly climate, they saw an opportunity to turn that unfair perception around. When the ward leader asked all ward residents to contribute some money for the main road pavement in the district, the women responded that they only needed a bit more time. For a couple of months, they painstakingly saved whatever they could, added a donation from Women for the World to their pot, and finally went to the ward office to offer one million Kyat (which was around $1,000 at that time). "Our community contributed more than any other group!" explained one member proudly.

This action did not go unnoticed, and since then, the Pan Thazin residents have been much more involved in activities, events, and meetings at the ward level and have earned the recognition of their fellow neighbors and leaders. This relationship may have played a role in the successful claim of this community to connect to the electricity network – something that has not been a given in other housing projects.

For the most part, housing project members have taken the implementation of infrastructure in their settlements upon themselves. The 'community development fund' from their collective savings and funding from small grants have made it gradually possible to pave roads, install water pumps and build drainage systems. They discuss together and plan their interventions, purchase materials, and contribute their labor for these projects.

Poor informal dwellers in the city are deprived of the right to vote because they don't have a legally registered address, and that means they don't have all the documents to register to vote. The democratic government's promises to address that have not delivered fruits yet.

4 Having a seat at the table

Stability and recognition create better conditions for community members to participate in decisions that affect them, whether those decisions be in the political sphere or in everyday situations. Two significant prerequisites for that are people's improved access to information and increased confidence to raise their voices. Access to information is facilitated through the continuous people-to-people exchange: in their weekly savings meetings, during all kinds of activities, and even through social media during pandemic times. The topics of discussion in these gatherings range from internal challenges or achievements within their settlements to new government policies or upcoming development projects that may threaten squatters with eviction. All this collective discussion increases awareness and citywide solidarity.

All the various development activities that people in the network have participated in over the last ten years have equipped them with many skills and increased their confidence. Many women described how they used to be afraid to speak in public because of the cultural notion that the appropriate way for women to carry themselves was to keep silent. The same women have taken the stage to talk about their projects in various settings, including in front of government officials, local and international academics, practitioners, and other organizations. Some of them have participated in exposure trips abroad and have described their projects and practices to other communities facing similar problems. People are increasingly vocal and capable of making direct requests to authorities based on realities on the ground. In these ways, the network is paving the way for structural reform.

The UN-Habitat's Yoma housing project in Yangon:

QUESTION: Do the collective and community-led parts really matter?

In 2016, soon after Myanmar's transition to a more democratic government, pressure from international organizations to address the shelter needs of Yangon's poorest families led to a new housing project. Under the lead of UN-Habitat, and with funds from the Japanese government, a

new housing project was developed, called Yoma. It was conceptualized as a "community-based" project. The Department of Urban and Housing Development offered land in Yangon's Dagon Seikkan Township to construct the medium-rise apartment blocks, which accommodated 180 families. The residents would be allowed to stay in the apartments for free, for 30 years. Women for the World was asked to identify and mobilize the recipients and support the setting up of savings groups, according to their well-known methodology.

What made this project different from typical public housing schemes was that it encouraged the participation of residents in the development stage and that the apartments were not being sold or rented, but were being financed by a bilateral organization. This seemed like an extraordinary opportunity for some of the city's poorest and most insecure squatter and room-renting families. A few years after the project was finished, though, the poorly-built blocks were already deteriorating. Many residents ended up leaving the project and moving back to their old neighborhoods.

Why so little enthusiasm for this secure housing?

Talking with some of the women revealed some possible answers to that question. There was no sense of collectivity, and this was the source of many problems. Soon after joining the project, most people dropped out of the savings groups; since their houses were already paid for, they saw no benefit in saving. But without savings, the new residents had no funds for maintenance, and people started bickering with each other about who was responsible for the fast-deteriorating buildings. The project's remote location, in the periphery of the city, also meant increased commuting time and expenses, and many lost their jobs after moving to Yoma. Some left the project to be closer to their workplaces, and others preferred to go back to squatting and then sublet their Yoma apartment for income. Others said they were unhappy with their apartments, and although they had been consulted about the designs, they hadn't really understood the plans. Community mobilization stopped once the residents moved in, problems arose and led to conflicts and disputes, with people complaining about their neighbors' behavior and the state of the common areas.

Despite its good intentions, the Yoma housing didn't really show a viable way to house the poor, because it failed to recognize the role of people, not only in designing the project but in carrying the new community forward. Without building people's capacity, collective accountability or collective leadership, the project turned out to be not much different than conventional public housing.

> **We share the fruits, vegetables, and greens that we grow in our community gardens among all the members of our housing projects and sell them to the families living here at the most affordable price possible.**

(U Soe Lwin Oo, Mae Myit Thar housing project in East Dagon)

5 Looking after each other in hard times

The many troubles that have been unfolding since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic have put the communities' preparedness to the test. Yet, their resourcefulness and systems of care that are already in place have kept them much more stable and secure than other poor communities that aren't organized. While the authorities were trying to figure out how to support people in need, network members were already developing their own responses.

Many started planting communal vegetable gardens to provide food, while some started growing plants in front of their houses. People trade their surplus produce for other things they need or sell their vegetables to each other at low prices. Residents have sometimes organized events to cook together and offer meals to every household. Several women started making cloth masks to distribute to their neighbors, and some learned to produce disinfectant and bar soap, to use at home or to sell. Community leaders also took the initiative to buy oxygen tanks with their collective savings to support those suffering from Covid-19. People have shared whatever they had with each other: time, money, resources, and emotional support, and this has helped them to survive. The long experience of working collaboratively has imprinted the idea in their minds that doing things collectively is vital for their well-being.

Participation without citizenship?

What it means to be a citizen in Myanmar is highly complex. It's tied, among other things, to a person's housing situation. One persistent obstacle in people's participation is that most members of the housing projects continue to lack official documentation. This limits their representation at both the local level (if they are excluded from administrative roles) and at the national level (if they aren't eligible to vote).

There is hope, though, that increasing collaboration with the government will open up new solutions to the paperwork' issue. Despite that, within their settlements, people have set up their own administration systems with support from Women for the World, and have committees in charge of various aspects of the community's life. Not least, project members are actively engaged in the design, planning, implementation, and maintenance of their communities, which guarantees a strong sense of ownership and self-determination at the local scale.

"This housing is for the poorest people. We had many problems when we lived in informal areas. We lived in fear and faced discrimination all the time. Before, people didn't want to help each other. Now everyone is willing to support and form a community together."

(Ma Su Hlaing, Mae Myit Thar housing project in South Dagon)

Notes on the connection between community-led housing and equality . . .

The stories and reflections that people tell show that Yangon's community-led housing model has brought about far-reaching changes in their lives. These changes are not only evident when comparing their previous conditions as squatters or renters and their status since joining one of the housing projects. They are also apparent in the incremental accomplishments of this collective development model, which started as an unsupported practice, trying to stay below the radar, and became an accepted part of the government's housing policy a decade later.

At the same time, there has been a big expansion of savings groups across Yangon and other parts of the country. That means more and more organized communities will have the resources to access land, housing, and other services one day. Even though the stigma against the poor persists in Myanmar, the increased visibility of these communities and their remarkable trajectory is slowly but consistently challenging the negative stereotypes and helping enlarge their network of allies. All this would not have been possible without the principles of collectivity, grassroots leadership, and the solidarity that has been cultivated among people through this community-led housing practice.

There's an old Burmese proverb that goes, "The day will not break for a hen's cackle. It will only break for a rooster's crow." This supposedly means that change, or anything significant at all, can only come from men. The women leading this housing process in Yangon, however, have turned that dumb proverb upside down.

CONTACT:

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KNOW CITY #3 YOGYAKARTA

A bit about the city:

Yogyakarta – which is the name of both a city and a region – is located on Java Island. It is surrounded on three sides by the province of Central Java and the Indian Ocean to the south. The region of Yogyakarta is divided into four regencies (Sleman, Bantul, Kulonprogo, and Gunungkidul) and one municipality (Yogyakarta City) and has a combined population of just under 3.7 million people.

Yogyakarta is a key economic hub in the country and served as the capital during Indonesia's independence struggle. After winning independence from Holland, Yogyakarta was granted the status of a "special region" and was allowed to retain its hereditary Sultanate, even as the country formed a democratic republic. This "special status" makes for some particularities in how the region is governed, and some of these present opportunities for improving residents' lives, while others are creating obstacles for them to access rights and resources.
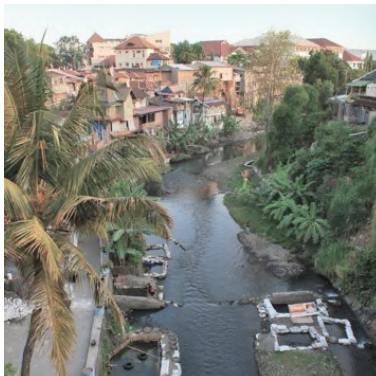
One of the peculiarities of Yogyakarta's governance system has to do with the way land is managed. That "special status" means that large tracts of land in Yogyakarta continue to be under the Sultanate's ownership, despite reforms that have brought about some reorganization of land rights and governance. The land system offers some opportunities to secure land for affordable housing and development projects with the sole approval of one central authority. But that centralized approval system poses some risks, given the increasing competition for urban land and the conflicts of interest that are at play in deciding how land is used and who profits from it.

As a result of this status, Yogyakarta has been granted a special fund, in addition to the nationally-distributed budgets, to support Yogyakarta's decentralization process. There has been a lot of criticism of this fund, which is called in Indonesian "*danais*". Resources from the fund have been disproportionately allocated to prestige projects like the renovation of city landmarks rather than being used to reduce poverty among the city's residents.

It is estimated that 40% of all land in Yogyakarta belongs to the Sultan, although this number could be even higher. Many riverbank communities reside on Sultan's land, often without titles but with some kind of informal tenure agreements.

Big question in Yogyakarta:
Who benefits from urbanization and development?

Like other cities in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, Yogyakarta has been going through rapid urbanization and development that have brought about big transformations in the city's landscapes and communities. As one of the country's most culturally rich cities, thought to be the cradle of Javanese culture, Yogyakarta's economy depends heavily on domestic and international tourism. The other main industries contributing to the city's revenue are its higher education institutions and agriculture in the outer regencies.

All these economic factors have fueled the city's development, and the Yogyakarta region usually scores high on the Human Development Index – a statistical system developed by the UN to measure the quality of human development in a certain place, based on indicators like average income, life expectancy, and education levels. Yogyakarta's score usually ranks second only to Jakarta's.

Despite the economic growth and falling poverty rates over the past decades, Yogyakarta has seen an increase in inequality. This means the poor are getting poorer, and the rich are getting richer, and the gap between the two is getting wider. On that point, the city doesn't get such an admirable score: statistics place Yogyakarta at the very top of the inequality index in Indonesia.

The trend toward increasing inequality is also reflected in consumption patterns in the city, where the lowest-earning 40% of Yogyakarta's population is responsible for only 15% of the total consumption in the city. While the government has put a lot of effort into studying the city's poor, its primary strategy for "eradicating poverty" has been to provide healthcare and education, and distribute social welfare payments to a list of the poorest families drawn up by the government. As elsewhere, that kind of one-dimensional, cash-based welfare support does little to address the root causes of poverty or to alter long-standing inequality.

The KNOW study in Yogyakarta focused on a network of poor and informal communities, called Kalijawi, which has been working with Arkomjogja, a group of idealistic young community architects to demonstrate how community-based approaches to development and poverty alleviation can be more effective.

How the research was designed:

The Kalijawi Network and their supporters in Arkomjogja decided it would be strategic to use the KNOW study to strengthen their advocacy by reflecting on and analyzing the network's experiences since it was founded in 2012. Many of the communities in the network face the threat of eviction in the name of disaster risk reduction or because of increasing competition for land in the city. So a central objective of the research has been to influence policies in the city to give Yogyakarta's urban poor communities the right to stay and to get support to upgrade their settlements. The city's land management system continues to be the biggest obstacle for the urban poor, so the communities and Arkomjogja also used the study to build solid arguments for people-led and people-centered development, by taking action to demonstrate how to improve their housing and environments on the same land where they are already staying. This "action-research" in Yogyakarta was guided by the following questions:

1 How can the collaborative process between Kalijawi and Arkomjogja provide opportunities to contest urban inequality in Yogyakarta?

2 What structures, strategies and mechanisms can be developed to address the social and spatial isolation of informal communities in the city?

While addressing these questions, the study aimed to shift the role of the communities from being the "object" to becoming the "subject" of the research. Using a participatory approach, Arkomjogja and the communities designed their action-research to accomplish three things:

- to empower the Kalijawi network through co-production of knowledge, strategies, and plans.
- to advocate for policy changes with newly-collected evidence from "action".
- to strengthen networking and partnership with diverse urban stakeholders and allies.

The research sought to understand the processes and achievements of the communities and the challenges they continue to face. That involved a lot of focus group discussions with members of the Kalijawi network, interviews (in-person and by zoom) with community leaders, and various activities that facilitated the exchange of experiences among different stakeholders. The teams from Arkomjogja and Kalijawi also engaged in a lively dialogue with academics, students, civil society groups, and representatives from various government departments at local, regional and national levels.

Inequalities along the riverbanks

The poor in Yogyakarta live in various parts of the city and on various kinds of land. Many live in informal settlements ("kampungs") on the banks of the city's three main rivers: the Code River, the Gajah Wong River, and the Winongo River. Even though the existence of these communities – some of which have been there for decades – is known to the municipal authorities, the city's development and strategic plans do not include them. It is as though these communities were invisible.

At the same time, the city's spatial planning and planning regulations have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the riverbanks as crucial buffer zones to allow municipal crews to maintain the rivers and protect the city against floods. In a watery and flood-prone country like Indonesia, the management of rains and floods and the flow of huge quantities of water is a matter of life and death and is considered to be an important task of the government. Yogyakarta's efforts to manage its rivers and riverbanks are part of a national strategy to "normalize" the management of rivers that flow through the country's major cities. The problem is that many of these waterways are lined with informal settlements, which are blamed for polluting the water, illegally occupying public land, and making the flooding worse. So "normalizing" the rivers usually means evicting those riverside settlements and demolishing their housing.

The national strategy to "normalize" the rivers works quite differently, though, when more affluent and powerful people in the city set their sites on land along the city's riverbanks. Many hotels, for example, have been built on Yogyakarta's riverbanks to accommodate tourists and business people. These commercial projects have not faced the same scrutiny the riverside kampungs have. Even as citizens, environmentalists, and water management specialists have raised the alarm about the impacts of these construction projects on the city's ecology and water crisis, the hotels continue to be built. The developers often disregard the regulations and carry on with their planned projects without fear of facing prosecution or being fined. The number of hotels in Yogyakarta almost doubled from 2015 to 2016.

"JOGJA IS NOT FOR SALE" This is how Arkom's director Yuli Kusworo described the people's sentiments about the rapid development of their city: "In 2013, Yogyakarta reached a record high in new developments. Many Hotels were established. Many Malls were built. But in that year, the people of Yogyakarta experienced these changes differently. They worried about their city turning into something different. They worried that globalization might erase the city's culture and history. They worried about their life."

The high cost of being poor . . .

Another aspect of inequality the study looked at was the amount people in the city pay for basic services. When families living in informal settlements are considered to be illegal and denied access to municipal water supply and electricity, they have no choice but to buy these services informally from neighboring houses or businesses – usually at hugely inflated rates. On average, a poor family in Yogyakarta spends almost three times as much on public services ($26 per month per family) as a middle-class family does ($10 per month per family).

Mixed messages from the city government:

Three rivers, but two different ways of dealing with riverside kampungs . . .

The riverside kampungs in Yogyakarta illustrate how inequality works in other ways too. The city's 30 riverside communities have experienced dramatically different levels of support or hostility, depending on which river they live along. The Code River, for example, passes through some of the more central parts of the city, and the government has assisted communities on that river with a variety of social programs, basic services, and support for upgrading and re-blocking. No such help has been offered to kampungs along the other two rivers. Most Kalijawi Network members have not been included in the government's poverty alleviation schemes, on the grounds that most of them do not have land certificates and that their houses are encroaching over the river and should be removed.

Such hot and cold messaging can cause disputes between communities and deepen people's sense of injustice. Some Kalijawi network members had also complained that when government budgets were allocated for small improvements in their settlements, those improvements were designed by outsiders, built by contractors, and were seldom what the communities really wanted or needed. In the process, those top-down interventions ended up constraining the community's decision-making power and freedom to set the course of their own development.

This uneven treatment extends to kampungs on other kinds of land too. Here is how Bu Surati, a resident in one of the city's railway kampungs described her community's strategy for avoiding eviction: "I am very grateful that my kampung wasn't evicted like the neighboring kampung was. Although both are located on railway land along the tracks, our kampung was spared. Why? Because we keep the environment clean, and we maintain the community infrastructure."
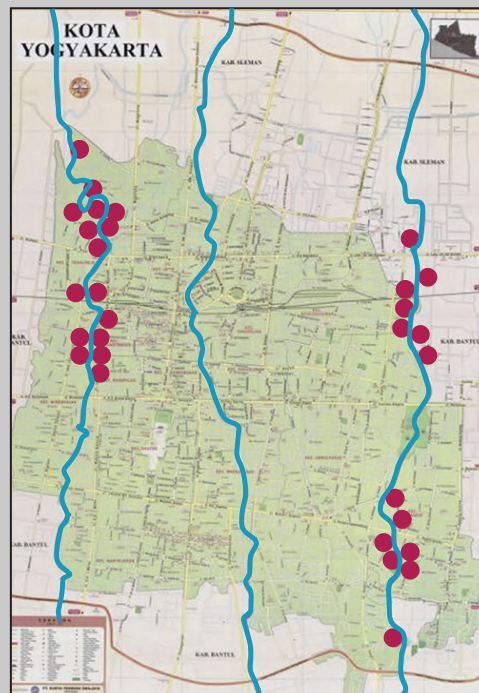
Kalijawi Community Network:

Young architects help bring together Yogyakarta's precarious kampungs . . .

Arkomjogja was established in Yogyakarta in 2010 with the goal of mobilizing communities and supporting their development strategies through design and architecture. Since then, Arkomjogja has expanded its operations to many more cities across the country, where they have built local teams of community architects and professionals who support post-disaster reconstruction, access to land and housing, and strengthening the livelihoods of low-income communities.

In Yogyakarta, they started by surveying and mapping informal settlements in the center of the city which occupy different kinds of land: riverside squatters, communities on "Sultan's land", communities renting private land, and squatter settlements on railway and public land. From the beginning, the explicit goal was to use the survey and mapping process to link these vulnerable communities (many facing evictions) together into a community network, to build stronger cooperation between the communities and the city government, and to promote a more collective and more community-driven model for solving problems of poverty and insecure housing in the city.

During the course of that initial survey, five riverside kampungs showed a lively interest in joining the process, and Arkom helped them to organize themselves, start women's savings groups and draw up detailed settlement maps to identify common problems. That was the start of the Kalijawi Network. The maps that the community people developed became the basis for identifying and planning a first round of small projects to upgrade common infrastructure and amenities (supported by ACHR's ACCA Program), based on each kampung's priority needs: the projects included paved walkways, improved riverside embankments, bamboo community centers and tree planting along the riverbanks.

Gradually, the process spread to communities in other areas of Yogyakarta, and the Kalijawi Network grew. Later, Arkom and the community network used a $40,000 grant from the ACCA Program to seed a city-level revolving loan fund for housing, which gave its first round of loans to savings group members in some of the riverside squatter settlements to improve their houses. Eight years later, the fund is still going strong, and some 300 savings group members all regularly contribute to it, combining their resources to address a variety of household and community needs.

The network used the infrastructure upgrading projects and housing improvements to show the municipal government an alternative strategy for improving these riverside settlements and to negotiate for the right to stay on the government land they already occupied, in cooperation with the local government's plans to solve the problems of riverside kampungs in the whole of Yogyakarta.

Mapping Yogyakarta's kampungs

The survey found and mapped 30 informal communities along just two of the city's rivers, where 1,693 poor households (5,779 people) lived in dilapidated and insecure conditions: 16 on the Winongo River and 14 on the Gajah Wong River. The survey collected information about the land ownership in all these settlements:

- 13 communities are on informal land
- 3 communities are on land belonging to the Sultan
- 9 communities rent private land informally
- 3 communities are on municipal land
- 2 communities are on disputed land

Using ARCHITECTURE as an entry point to build grassroots capacity . . .

Arkomjogja has found ways of engaging with the communities by using design as an entry point and a powerful change-making tool. Their participatory workshops have helped community people to create a common language to express their needs and ensure that whatever they develop actually addresses those needs. Arkomjogja has also offered training to communities on the innovative use of local materials, like bamboo, and various alternative construction techniques. Through the process of collective planning and construction, many people from Yogyakarta's poor settlements have learned new skills, made their houses and infrastructure stronger and safer, saved money on frequent repairs, and found jobs using their newly acquired skills.

"We had good experiences learning about bamboo with the architects. For a long time, we used plain bamboo to build simple houses. Now we know that by treating bamboo with certain materials, we can get a better quality of building that is stronger and more beautiful." (Prih, a coordinator of the community builder's team)

How has Kalijawi helped poor communities negotiate to stay where they already are?

1 Showing possibilities by making change

The number one priority for Yogyakarta's riverbank communities is getting secure land and housing – in the same place they already live. Kalijawi and Arkomjogja have pursued that goal through the implementation of community-led projects to improve infrastructure and housing, having only limited donor funds to work with. By organizing themselves, mapping, surveying, and preparing plans, some communities have managed to purchase small plots of land and collectively establish new settlements. But most communities have made negotiating for secure tenure in-situ the first step in their efforts to upgrade their houses and infrastructure.

These community-led initiatives have faced many obstacles though, mostly related to the way land is administered and managed in Yogyakarta. This underlines the need to reform the system so that low-income communities can successfully secure land and address their housing problems. In the meantime, members of the Kalijawi network and their allies continue to develop strategies for accessing land with collective tenure and for designing and planning their future communities with better environments and living standards.

The establishment of women's savings groups in communities that are part of the Kalijawi network has brought about big improvements in people's ability to access flexible finance. Collective savings is a familiar practice in the Indonesian culture, derived from the principle of "*gotong royong*", or mutual help. By putting aside a small amount each day, as little as $0.14, savings members build up their own common fund, from which they take loans for health care, education, housing improvements, or other household emergencies and expenses.

With support from ACHR, the Kalijawi network also started a Community Development Fund in 2014. The fund operates as a shared resource and gives low-interest loans for both individual and collective projects. The fund has been an important tool which the communities control themselves and which helps them to undertake many collective projects like paving roads, building shared toilets or repairing community centers.

Housing by people is this country's default setting

Community-led housing is sometimes billed as an "alternative" approach to housing. But it's important to remember that vast majority of low-income housing has always been built by the people who live in it. Arkom estimates that some 80% of Indonesia's low-income housing stock has been designed, built and financed by ordinary people without any design degrees or professional expertise – and most often without any building permits or land titles either.

Nobody would pretend that all this self-built housing is without problems. But it represents a huge investment by the poor, in the face of terrible obstacles, and constitutes an enormous development force. When that force is brought together into more collective forms of self-built housing, it makes it possible for people to make housing that is cheaper, better and more likely to create communities which provide people with so much more than shelter: security, friendship, protection, legitimacy in the city.

BEFORE: Mr. Supar's riverbank house in Kampung Ciptomulyo had become very dilapidated over time.

BEFORE: The unpaved roads of Kampung Ledok Gajah Wong made it difficult to move around the settlement.

BEFORE: The ragged edge of riverside kampungs like this one was fuel for the city's efforts to evict the people.

AFTER: The house was fully upgraded, with help from the community architects and a loan from the community fund.

AFTER: The road pavement and new drainage made the settlement more accessible and less vulnerable to flooding.

AFTER: This is what the community looks like after the kampung people built their own paved riverside walkway.

> 🙶 In the past, my village was labeled as a slum. Garbage piled up everywhere and sanitation was poor. After my friends and I gained knowledge about healthy environments, we did community mapping. Now, all residents have an awareness of keeping the environment clean. 🙷
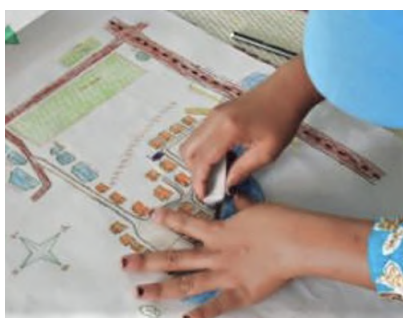>
> *(Bu Susielah, a kampung resident)*

2   Mapping their way toward recognition

Another important aspect catalyzing change in the status of the Kalijawi has been the increasing recognition they have gained – both from the city authorities and from each other. By mobilizing scattered families along the riverbanks to map informal settlements, kampung residents started becoming more aware that they faced similar problems and were not alone in trying to address them. They recognized themselves as a group with shared interests, whose united voices can increase their leverage to negotiate with the state rather than dealing with their challenges individually.

This realization has informed their advocacy strategies and strengthened their motivation to work together toward solving their problems. For example, after many discussions, the network members decided it would be strategic to generate new knowledge about the conditions of each kampung and use that as evidence, as a base to develop their own proposals, and as an advocacy tool when they are ready to reach out to authorities and other partners.

Indeed, various teams got to work and started mapping and collecting data that depict the realities of kampung dwellers more accurately and highlight other aspects that are so often neglected in conventional survey processes. One of the outcomes of such engagement has been the establishment of criteria for tenure security from the perspective of dwellers in order to expand the narrow focus of authorities on land titles. These criteria include housing, land rights, social and institutional networks, access to services, the condition of the settlement and environment, infrastructure, and location. They also show that there is a lot more going into people's perceptions of security than simply having a few paper documents.

"Gotong royong" means working together

An essential ingredient of these collective processes has been the kampung communities' mutual care and support systems. Deeply embedded into the Indonesian culture, the principle of gotong royong and togetherness have been essential in forming and consolidating the Kalijawi community. Gotong royong has its roots in rural villages of Indonesia, where people relied on each other's unconditional help to deal with agricultural and communal works. Next to promoting cohesion within the network, this idea of 'mutual support' or 'working together' has strengthened citywide solidarity with Yogyakarta's informal dwellers, beyond the boundaries of individual kampungs.

The threat of eviction has united the communities and made them very persistent in continuing their collective activities. Their shared goal is that they and many other poor communities across their city can have secure access to their lands and more freedom to improve their living conditions. Previously marginalized women-led groups have made important steps to bring change through their networking and advocacy strategies with the support of their allied organizations. Their collaborative approach has started setting precedents for inclusive spatial practices, which must be integrated with the vision of future Yogyakarta.

In Ledok Gajah Wong kampung, the community members decided to upgrade their road network and started by mapping the existing conditions, planning their intervention in detail, and organizing how to finance their project. Finally, they agreed that everyone would contribute one full day of 'gotong royong' each week to carry sand from the river to pave the road. By working together, they managed to upgrade 30 road meters each day and finish their upgrading project within mere weeks!

3 Participating in city-making

People's political participation has also seen substantial changes, both within their community and on the city scale. The Kalijawi network promotes a non-hierarchical structure. Each kampung selects one or two community representatives or leaders and a secretary, who join a network-wide meeting each month. The community members within each kampung have regular internal meetings, while the entire Kalijawi network membership gathers once a year. During these gatherings, people discuss pressing matters, share news about their initiatives and make network decisions democratically.

This culture of self-administration is in sharp contrast with typical top-down decision-making. Resettlement programs in Yogyakarta, for example, are invariably rolled out without any involvement of the communities who will be affected by them, and that often leads to all kinds of troubles. Years of being on the receiving end of that kind of top-down planning have made the Kalijawi network determined to be more proactive and develop their own proposals collectively for how they would like to upgrade and reblock their settlements. That way, when it comes time to negotiate with the city, they will have plans which carry the support of the entire network with them. The process of preparing alternative plans and then negotiating with those plans has equipped poor communities in Yogyakarta with many new capacities, like planning and designing skills and knowledge about how to integrate innovative features and sustainable materials in their houses and communal facilities.

All these skills have played a role in opening up new pathways for political participation. One of the main motivations behind the mobilization of the Kalijawi network was to have a say in the implementation of government programs. Having been excluded from decisions that profoundly affect their lives, the network aimed to invent new spaces for participation in city-making practices through collective action.

Over time, Arkomjogja and Kalijawi have cultivated links with various stakeholders in the city to bolster their advocacy efforts, particularly for land issues. Not all these connections may lead to tangible results, but Arkomjogja and the communities have succeeded in forging a good working partnership with the local Development Planning Agency (BAPPEDA). The team has also contributed periodically to policy development with the Yogyakarta Regional Planning Agency and helped establish a multi-stakeholder committee responsible for dealing with housing issues in the region.

A space for the community:

Building a bamboo community center with Kampung Ciptomulyo

When the residents of Kampung Ciptomulyo sat down with Arkomjogja to discuss how to improve their settlement, they decided that the thing they most needed was a community center. With a small grant that they used as a revolving fund, they bought a tiny plot of 6 x 8 meters on the riverbank from one of the community members. The community architects at Arkom helped them design a small shelter and brought in some bamboo "experts" to supervise the construction and train the local people in building with bamboo. The residents of Kampung Ciptomulyo chipped in all the labor to cut the construction costs of the beautiful pavilion, which is now in constant demand. *"Before we had a community center, we always had our meetings on the street. It was very uncomfortable, especially on rainy days. Now we have a community center for our ceremonies and other activities. Children can learn together and we can have our savings meetings there."* (Sumiyati, Kampung Ciptomulyo)

Using the collective force of the network to deal with the Covid pandemic

Women from the Kalijawi network prepared food to donate to people in need during the pandemic.

They also produced traditional medicine with herbs and ginger, to get some income while helping others.

Arkom prepared info-graphics with instructions on how communities can protect themselves.

CONTACT:

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KNOW CITY #4
DA NANG

A bit about the city:

Situated on the coast of Central Vietnam, Da Nang is the country's fifth-largest city and a "Class-1" municipality with a population of more than a million people. Over the last two decades, Da Nang has experienced explosive urbanization and economic growth, which is evident in its well-developed infrastructure and the improving living standards of its residents. The government has an extensive social welfare system that targets low-income households, with loan schemes and subsidies, vocational training, scholarships, and job creation programs.

All these programs have contributed to a poverty rate that has fallen dramatically from 9% in 1997 to 0.5% in 2016. That's much faster than the national average, and you can bet statistics like that are paid close attention to in socialist Vietnam.

Large-scale development projects, a booming real estate sector, and the expansion of the services sector have all attracted many migrants from other areas of the country to Da Nang. Those projects are all part of the city's goal (according to its 2030 Master Plan) of becoming the socio-economic center of Central Vietnam and a major hub for services, transit, culture, science, and tourism.

The vision for Da Nang is to become a "Second Singapore" and a "Smart City," and when you look at photos of the skyline, you can see what they're talking about. Tourism plays an important role in realizing that vision, and investors have been busy filling Da Nang's coastline with resorts, nearly half of which are five-star luxury hotels.

A city in transition:
Poverty declines, but inequalities persist

There are many positive aspects of Da Nang's extraordinary development, but the city faces many new challenges that have been brought about by rapid urbanization, population growth, and increasing pressure on natural resources and urban infrastructure. The aspiration to become a modern and high-tech city has required big changes to be made to accommodate all that new development. Large areas of agricultural land have been converted into urban uses in the process. As a result, Da Nang's agriculture and fishing sectors have declined substantially, dropping from 9.74% of the total economy in 1997 to just 1.68% in 2017. On the other hand, the industry and service sectors have seen substantial increases.

Tourism, in particular, has been a key element in Da Nang's development and city planning, but it also brings its own challenges. While tourism has been one of the main drivers of the city's growth and continues to account for a considerable portion of its annual revenue, the hotels, restaurants, transport systems, and amenities that cater to all those visitors have created environmental problems and wreaked havoc on the city's ecosystem and on the livelihoods and heritage of its traditional coastal fishing villages.

How the research was designed:

Unlike the other cities in the KNOW study, Da Nang didn't have an already-established community network. So the study was used as an opportunity to mobilize the low-income fishing villages into some kind of a network. The analysis of secondary data (from government-produced documents, newspapers, and magazines) revealed that information about Da Nang's fishing villages is limited, fragmented, and outdated. Because of that, the research aimed to gather and organize different bits of information from different sources about Da Nang's fishing villages, focusing on their potential and their indigenous knowledge and unique history. The research allowed the fisherfolk who took part in the study to discuss their own situation together and identify resources that may be able to help them preserve and develop their surroundings, which are under serious threat. The research was guided by the following questions:

1 What is the current status of Da Nang's fishing communities, and how has urbanization impacted them?

2 What local assets and resources could help them address their livelihood needs?

3 How would fishing villagers contribute to and be included in the city's development strategies?

4 And what is the role of networking in building capacity and strengthening fishing communities?

The "action research" began with a quick assessment of the fishing villages, consisting of field visits with university students and documentation of coastal life through photography and sketching. Interviews were conducted with fisherfolk and their families, to understand different dimensions of their history: their life stories, their patterns of living, and the changes in their settlements. The study also looked at the material heritage of these villages (including things like architecture and traditional craftsmanship) and at their intangible aspects (spiritual, religious, and customary practices). Mapping was used not only as a tool for data collection but also as a means for interacting with different stakeholders, strengthening connections between fishing families, and giving them new skills.

An important part of the study involved linking the Da Nang fishing villages with fishing networks farther down the coast, in Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces, which have successfully developed community-based tourism enterprises. The exchange of knowledge and experiences between these communities of fisherfolk in the region triggered lots of new ideas for livelihood development among the Da Nang fishing communities.

Da Nang's fishing villages: Livelihoods lost through the process of urbanization and resettlement

Da Nang's fishing villages have been an integral part of the city for a long, long time. Some of them date back to the 14th century. But in the past few decades, these once-prosperous and bustling settlements of fisherfolk (and some farmers too) began experiencing tremendous changes that came with accelerating development. Investors and real estate companies wanted their seaside land for their businesses, and to get it, they either drove the fisherfolk out of the area or blocked their access to the sea. Clusters of fisherfolk houses began disappearing and being replaced by fancy hotels and commercial buildings which cater to the large flocks of tourists who visit the city each year. Later, large numbers of fishermen were resettled by the government to social housing complexes in remote locations, losing their livelihoods, their connection to the sea, and their vital networks in the process.

The research revealed that along Da Nang's coast, 16 fishing villages were still there. Mapping the boundaries of these villages, at the peak of their prosperity and at present, showed the level of decline in these communities. Most of them had shrunk substantially, and many of their long-term residents had been scattered across the city. In the remote urban areas where they were resettled in medium-rise apartments, many had no choice but to take up new work and find jobs in factories.

That transition from fishing to factory work and other jobs hasn't been smooth, though, and many ended up giving up their new jobs. In the villages that are still there and have weathered these heavy development forces so far, residents fear that, sooner or later, it will be their turn to be evicted and resettled since more and more pieces of coastal land are earmarked in the city's plans for various projects. In some cases, people are resettled even when the development plans are still uncertain, and the cleared lands remain vacant for months or years.

Some wistful notes from the resettlement file . . .

Through interviews, discussions, and visits with fishing families, a series of "Memoirs of the fishing villages" were compiled during the study in Da Nang. Here are some excerpts from interviews with families who had been forced to leave their villages and were resettled to social housing blocks:

Being provided with a house to live in and to keep out of the rain and storms makes life less hard, right? "I'm extremely happy. Fishermen don't have to rush to evacuate when a storm comes ashore, and property loss is somewhat reduced. Having a house to shelter in from the rain and the sun is a fisherman's dream. Many people cannot manage to build a house for their family, even if they work their whole life. But as you can see, moving inland to settle down means being far from the sea and far from the boat. As a result, many end up giving up fishing and finding a less difficult job."

Many fishing families settled in their new apartments but soon realized how difficult it would be to continue to fish from an apartment complex. Now, only a few particularly loyal fishermen still go out to sea. "The apartment is very far from the sea. How can we look after the boat?" Another resident wondered, "How can we make and repair our nets? How can we make jam or dry fish in the sun?"

Many problems come up during the early phases of resettlement from the coastal villages to apartment blocks. But gradually, people start getting used to things and build new habits of living and working. Everything returns to its order. Maybe life becomes more stable and peaceful that way. Ms. Quan's family is one of the hundreds who moved to one of the newly-built apartment buildings. Now that she is old, she can no longer keep up her fishing profession. Her whole family was involved in it, and even when she got married and started her own family, she continued on the same path.

Is there still a place for fisherfolk in Da Nang?

As if the troubles from resettlement weren't enough, the fisherfolk's position became even more vulnerable after the People's Committee of Da Nang announced a policy in 2016 to reduce the number of small fishing vessels and restrict "near-shore" fishing by 2020. This policy covered the traditional round basket boats, which are a distinct feature of the region. The purpose of the new policy was supposedly to limit pollution, prevent over-fishing, and encourage the modernization of the fishing sector.

The predictable consequence of that policy was the devastation of the livelihoods of more than 2,000 people in Da Nang, who were suddenly deprived of their jobs and life work. Low-income fisherfolk who rely on traditional fishing equipment and techniques lacked both the capital and the technological savvy to engage in industrialized offshore fishing, so they were left with reduced income, or no income at all.

At the same time, young people are no longer encouraged to take up fishing, meaning the decline or disappearance of future generations of fishers. Due to all these factors, the fisherfolk population has dropped significantly. With the exception of Tho Quang village, which accommodates 1,400 families working in offshore fisheries, the number of fishing households in the other villages ranges between 3 and 160.

The sea has raised generations upon generations in Da Nang's coastal villages. Fishermen have sailed thousands of miles catching fish, which is brought to the morning market and then ends up on the plates of many of the city's households. Along the shore, women and men mend their nets every day and prepare supplies for each trip, children chase fish traders down the beach, and aunts and uncles make delicious fish sauce.

How are Da Nang's fishing villagers trying to preserve their livelihoods and traditions?

1   Documenting what survives and what's gone

In the challenging and rapidly changing context of Da Nang, the KNOW team started mobilizing the fishing villagers to take some action to protect their livelihoods and precious culture. Having chosen heritage as an entry point to reach out to authorities and other potential allies, the communities started carefully examining their villages, surroundings, and landscapes to identify what is dear and meaningful to them. Initially, some doubted the value of doing this, but they soon started seeing their own communities with new eyes.

The fishing villages have plenty of religious buildings that have survived resettlement policies and demolition. Some of these buildings are centuries old and contain the imprint of the city's history on their walls, pillars, and decorated roofs. The architecture students helped uncover the stories and legends behind these architectural remnants – pagodas, shrines, and temples – and to document them with photographs, sketches, and technical drawings. All these materials have been collected in a book that describes the architectural qualities, construction techniques, and symbolic meaning of these places to fisherfolk.

The villagers' traditions and their beliefs about their relationships with the sea were also collected and made into a memoir, in which students acted as story-collectors and scribes to record the stories of the people they met. Diving deeper into these fisherfolk stories was conceived as a way to empower the communities, strengthen their connections, and promote their own recognition of their important heritage. These materials from the study are the foundation of a living archive about the fishing communities, from the past to the present, and will be an significant testament to their history in Da Nang.

Centuries-old heritage under threat . . .

Resettlement and the restructuring of people's livelihood strategies also pose a profound threat to the rich heritage of Da Nang's fishing communities. Social connections are disrupted, the physical fabric of many villages has been slowly disappearing, and several religious buildings have been relocated or demolished. Along with these, the preservation of local knowledge, untold stories, cultural values, and traditional crafts are threatened with erosion.

The celebration of traditional festivals has also changed compared to the past, both because of communities' scattering and their deteriorated financial situation. One example of such cultural richness is the Fish Worshiping Festival, an annual event to pay homage to generations of fisherfolks' ancestors and enter a new season with confidence and good luck. Despite the hit that the fishing villages have taken from the recent restrictive policies, the Fish Worshiping Festival is kept alive by people from the remaining communities, although on a smaller scale.

Da Nang's basket boats:

A lesson in how to catch fish and outsmart French colonialists at the same time

The history of the *thung chai* (or *thuyen thung*), or "basket boat", goes back to the French colonial era in Vietnam, when Da Nang was a small fishing town. Da Nang was where the French fleet landed in 1847 and began seizing the country, which they would keep under their control for more than a century after that.

As the story goes, when the French arrived in Vietnam, they began levying taxes left, right and center – including a tax on the ownership of fishing boats. Most of the poor Vietnamese fishermen who depended on boats for their livelihood could not afford to pay the taxes, so they invented a new type of boat: the "basket boat." That way, when the French bureaucrats showed up to collect the boat tax, the fishermen who built them could argue that these were not boats at all but baskets – and therefore couldn't be taxed.

Their crafty plan seems to have worked, and ever since then, these round basket boats have been a feature of the landscape of Da Nang and other coastal areas of central Vietnam, lying scattered across beaches and (more recently) ferrying tourists around.

Young students from several universities of Da Nang came to the fishing villages - some of them visiting these places for the first time - and talked with men and women of different ages, who, in one way or another, share deep connections with the sea and are part of the city's identity.

2 | Mapping the villages, past and present

One of the first things that the study aimed to do was come up with some evidence about the slow disappearance of the fishing villages. Not many things would be more telling in such a case than putting the village boundaries on a map to show that much of the land they used to occupy has been repurposed. Without many official records about the presence and size of the villages, the research team and the residents set out to map their villages from memory. The eldest fishermen and village leaders gathered during workshops to map the villages as they used to be at their peak some 30 years ago. They also visited individual households, showed them the maps, and asked the people to contribute what they remembered from these older times. For comparison, students and fishing village residents also traced the present boundaries of their communities, highlighting the significant shrinking that they have undergone.

Villages in the past

(above) In this map, which shows the fishing villages around 30 years ago, Da Nang's coastline is lined with an almost continuous line of villages, which supplied the city with much of its food.

Villages today

(above) This map poignantly shows how much reduced Da Nang's coastal fishing communities are today, with just 16 villages left, and most of those occupying much less land than they once did.

The fisherfolk's villages may be gone, but some of their shrines are still there

Many, many things have been lost in these fishing villages, and many things will never be the same. But the study was an opportunity to invite the fisherfolk to tell stories about the things that are still there - including some of the ancient temples and shrines where the fisherfolk worship. A few tidbits from the inventory:

(above) According to the elders, during the reign of King Tu Duc, markets and shops in the Hoa O fishing village were quite prosperous. But one night, the market caught fire, and all the thatch and bamboo stalls burned to the ground. In the midst of the fire, someone saw a woman holding a fan, bursting into laughter as the fire destroyed the market. The story quickly spread that she was Ba Phuong Chao, and she was punishing the villagers because they hadn't built a temple for her. So, after that terrible fire, the villagers built a temple to worship her, and to this day, they believe she decides whether a business will fail or prosper.
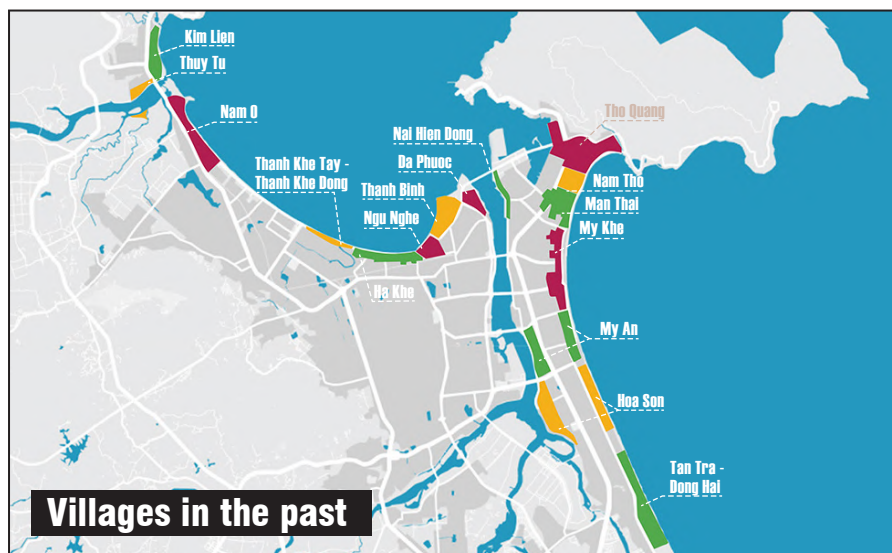

The temple of the Homeless Souls in Thanh Khe village is a place to pay homage to the people lost at sea.

This mausoleum in Nam Tho village is dedicated to the worship of the whale, the protector of fishermen.

Canh Duong is one of the oldest fishing villages in Da Nang, with a long history of settlement and development. The road stretching from the Ancestral Temple to the coast is decorated with fresco paintings that depict scenes of the daily life of fisherfolk in this beautiful corner of Da Nang.

3   Connecting with friends across the region

The municipality of Da Nang has started paying more attention to community-based tourism, but their understanding of the concept seemed a little narrow to the study team. Da Nang's People's Committee, for example, proudly approved two projects under the umbrella of "community-based tourism" which would involve the fishing villagers. But the role of local people in these projects was limited to their providing the workforce, while investors and private companies would decide how the projects would work and take home all the profits. Even though villagers taking part in these projects would get some income for a certain period of time, the projects didn't provide any long-term solution to their livelihood problems. As the research team discussed, these are typical examples of projects that are for them but without them.

To explore some better possibilities, the KNOW study brought villagers, students, and officials on a study tour to the neighboring provinces of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai, where a more genuine form of community-based tourism has already been established and was thriving. The participants visited Cham Island, Be Island, and Go Co village, and they learned many things from that exchange. New perspectives opened for the fishing communities in Da Nang to incorporate livelihood improvements, coastal preservation, and ecotourism into their development plans.
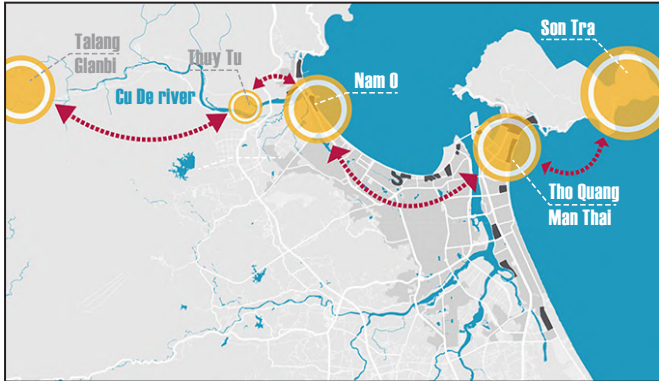
The authorities who came on the trip also started understanding the value of local people leading the design and implementation of the community-based tourism initiatives. The added value of community-based tourism lies in people's deep knowledge, insights, and relationship with their environment. These are things that offer unique and much sought-after experiences to travelers and visitors.

People in the host communities in Cham and Be islands and Go Co village generously shared their experiences and explained how they had been using their collective force to improve their livelihoods. They explained that they had set up "Marine Protected Area" management boards to organize local communities and coordinate with local authorities to preserve their coastal ecosystems. Through this engagement, they had also participated in numerous capacity-building programs and had a platform to voice their problems and ideas with other city actors. Some communities established cooperatives to manage collective gardens and initiated waste management programs. All these insights underlined the importance of genuinely integrating community people into the tourism model, not just as bait for tourists, but also to enable disadvantaged communities to boost their incomes and preserve their culture, traditions, and environment at the same time.

The story of a legendary fish sauce from Nam O Village

One of the trademarks of Nam O, the oldest fishing village in Da Nang, is the famous fish sauce named after the village. The production of "Nam O Fish Sauce" has a very long history in the region. While small-scale makers of fish sauce are gradually being replaced by big industrial producers, a few dozen families in Da Nang continue to make a living by producing fish sauce – like the families that still makes the beloved Nam O Fish Sauce. There are now many people who are set on not letting this knowledge and heritage be forgotten.

Da Nang is on the way to becoming a smart, modern, and industrialized city, yet the fish sauce makers in Nam O village still have the patience of other times, when it took months or years for the mixture of fish and salt to ferment and do its magic.

To understand the fastidious care that goes into a bottle of good Vietnamese fish sauce, listen to how specific the requirements are for the salt that is mixed with the fish, as described by one of Nam O's fish sauce-makers: "The salt must come from Khanh Hoa, Quang Ngai, or Binh Thuan. The salt grains must be white, large, old, sunny, and not affected by rain. Then it should be brought back and dried in the courtyard for five to seven days, to remove all the bitter water. Then that salt should be put in a distillation jar for a few years before it's ready to be used to make fish sauce." This ancient tradition of fish sauce-making, which has been passed down from generation to generation, is finding ways to stay alive, even in these fast-changing times.

4   New livelihood strategies for the villagers

Once they had a good dose of inspiration from the exchange with the community-based tourism network down the coast, and once they had identified and celebrated the assets in their own villages, the fishing communities began working on strategies to improve their livelihoods and develop their lives and villages. A series of participatory workshops organized by the research team gave them a chance to brainstorm with other stakeholders. The workshops culminated in a plan of action for piloting community-based tourism in Da Nang's fishing villages.

Two clusters of two fishing villages each (Nam O - Thuy Tu, and Tho Quang - Man Thai) will become part of a broader tour along the Cu De river and Da Nang's coast, connecting other touristic attractions all the way from Talang, to the northwest of the city, to the Son Tra peninsula.

Four villages were selected to start some community-based tourism initiatives. The four villages were selected according to criteria like the population of fisherfolk in the area, the presence of culturally important practices, and the extent to which various traditions and local knowledge had survived in that village. After hours of mapping, discussing, and brainstorming, a proposal emerged to connect two village clusters and launch a more comprehensive tour of the region along the Cu De River for tourists. The idea was that various services and activities could be offered to visitors, like home-stays, guided trekking, visits to local restaurants and souvenir shops selling traditional crafts. Before doing this participatory research, people talked only about the shortcomings of their villages, but after reacquainting themselves with their culture, history and traditions, they saw that they had many assets to work with. The villagers are carefully planning their tourism activities with sensitivity to environmental issues, promoting a culture of "zero-waste" and doing whatever possible to rehabilitate the marine ecosystem.

Even though the villagers may not have all the resources they need to set these plans in motion right away, meaningful steps have been taken. The close engagement with local authorities has yielded positive responses from officialdom to the proposed developments in the villages. There have been other breakthroughs too. After realizing how badly the policy was affecting the livelihoods of hundreds of small fisherfolk, the People's Committee decided to suspend the policy that restricted near-shore fishing.

The government's approval of the people's community-based tourism plans has broadened their network of allies to include universities, businesses, civil society organizations, and media – all of whom are assisting the villagers now in many ways. These various forms of support are evidence of improved recognition of the fishing communities and an acknowledgment that they have much to offer the city and should have a seat at the table. By including the fishing communities in the decision-making processes and facilitating the preservation of their natural and cultural landscapes, the benefits of the city's economic and tourism development can reach those who have been ignored and make an equitable city.

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And for more information about community-based tourism in Da Nang and its surrounding region, please visit the following website, soon available in the English language: **www.cen.dau.edu.vn**

A note on fishermen and fisherwomen . . .

There is a lot of talk of "fishermen," but the role of women in the culture, economy, and heritage of the fishing villages should not be underestimated. It is true that it is more common for men to go to sea, fishing and fighting the waves, but the women have plenty of work to do on land: carrying all the equipment back and forth between home and the shore, mending the nets, preparing the food and water needed for each fishing trip. It is the women who wait for their sons, husbands and fathers on the beach, ready to collect the day's catch and rush to the market to sell it. It is the women who keep track of all the money and all the logistics. And it is the women who take care of their families while their men may sometimes be away for weeks, months or even years at a time. The relationship women have to the sea is just as deep and complex, even if they don't spend their lives on the boat.

"At that time, the happiest thing to me was just seeing the family boat return safely to see my husband and children." (Ms. Nguyen Thi Tin, a resident of Tho Quang village)

The real transformation . . .

❝ Housing projects are a way of addressing micro-level inequities in existing slums, where people have unequal land, unequal housing tenure, different incomes, different status and different degrees of poverty. The power structures that exist in informal communities are never equal. These deep inequities are not something that can be solved simply by some technical housing design. The idea is to transform those communities so that they emerge in a new, more equal form, where besides good housing, everyone has security, everyone has a place and everyone has a say in the community. This is the real transformation, the real upgrading. **❞**

- Somsook Boonyabancha, ACHR

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More on the KNOW study :

A lot of wonderful reports, video films, booklets, and other lively documentary materials were produced by the teams in the four cities (and in other KNOW cities around the world too). All these materials, and more information about the global KNOW study, can be accessed from this site:
urban-know.com/achr

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