

FINDING DEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES EVEN IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

As with almost any disaster, natural or man-made, the Covid pandemic has heaped its troubles and ill effects with disproportionate ferocity upon the poor. While the better-off have salaries, insurance policies, savings accounts, pensions, entitlements and assets to draw on when earthquakes level or floods inundate or fires sweep away, the poor have none of those protections and can be left with nothing in a moment.

The Covid pandemic, and the public health and economic meltdowns that came with it, is no exception to the rule. This disaster left most of the poor around the world - especially in cities - without work, unable to earn and without the means to meet their basic needs or even feed their families. Their crowded and poorly-serviced living conditions and limited access to health care made them doubly vulnerable to the virus.

Meanwhile, governments, development institutions and aid agencies have geared up with some large-scale programs to address the Covid pandemic and its repercussions. But very little of this aid has reached the poor communities most at risk, who suffer the effects of the virus and the lockdowns most existentially. And when some assistance has reached them, it has been spotty, ill-directed, temporary and insufficient. So as with most disasters that affect everyone, Covid has made the poor poorer, sicker, more vulnerable and more hungry.

But we also see organized groups of the poor using the urgency of the Covid crisis to come together and marshal whatever resources they can to address their common needs in fresh, practical and efficient ways. These community-led initiatives, even when very modest, have strengthened people's group power and their position in the city. For these groups, the pandemic has presented an opportunity to grow; an opportunity that would only have opened up in a dire crisis which shakes everything up and scares everyone out of their sleep.

So instead of being a story of only diminishment and loss, the pandemic has in some cases become a story of strengthening and renewal, and of validation of an alternative people's system. In this newsletter, we look at some Covid stories which show that another ending to the inexorable narrative is possible, in which the most badly-affected people are part of the solution.

**SPECIAL ISSUE
ON HOW POOR
COMMUNITIES
ARE DEALING
WITH THE**

HOUSING

byPeople

IN ASIA

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COMMUNITY KITCHENS ▶

Many communities and networks dealt with urgent food needs during the crisis by setting up community kitchens, which produced ready-to-eat meals in quantity, to feed hungry and out-of-work families and to reach out to other vulnerable communities with assistance and information.



REVIVING LIVELIHOODS ▶

Many community networks found fresh and unconventional ways to help Covid-hit community members boost their incomes and add new opportunities to earn, at a time when many had lost jobs or were prevented from doing their normal informal businesses because of lockdowns, curfews and the larger economic downturns.

◀ PROTECTING HEALTH

Throughout the pandemic, community groups have found creative, thrifty and effective ways to slow the spread of the virus, help people stay healthy, and look after those who have gotten infected with Covid: making and distributing face masks and alcohol gel, identifying vulnerable households, tracking infections and vaccinations in communities, and setting up home-based and community based-quarantine systems where infected people can be looked after by their neighbors.



◀ COMMUNITY GARDENS

The Covid pandemic has brought new urgency and relevance to Asia's already-active community garden movement, when suddenly many out-of-work urban poor had no choice but to grow what they eat, as much as possible, to reduce food expenses and boost nutrition.



COVID VIRUS

COVID STUDY

Research by doers

Midway through the Covid pandemic, community networks in four Asian countries (Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand) took part in a research study which allowed them to reflect on and document the innovative Covid response work they were already doing. Besides helping them to expand and deepen that work, with some modest resources, the study enabled these groups to meet each other regularly, present their work to their peers in other countries, learn from each others' experiences and reflect collectively on the role the Covid crisis has played in the progress of their community movements.

The study was facilitated by ACHR, with support from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The work of gathering information, making presentations, leading discussions and documenting the projects was all done by members of the grassroots community networks in the four countries, with support from their partner organizations and from ACHR. These are the "doers" who also planned and implemented all the community-driven Covid projects the study examined.

The projects were presented and shared in a series of online discussions which took place between September 2021 and January 2022. During a time when in-person meetings and project visits were not possible, the Zoom meetings gave these active people from the community networks a chance to meet, tell their stories and learn from the projects their friends were implementing in other countries. This lively sharing and cross-pollination of ideas between community doers has itself been a powerful knowledge-generating and knowledge-disseminating process.

This Covid study follows on the heels of three other ACHR "action research" studies which were also carried out in ways which allowed community organizations to become the principal researchers: poverty lines (2014), community finance systems (2017) and food security (2019). (All can be downloaded from the ACHR website.)

This Covid study adds to a growing body of analysis and reflection on different aspects of poverty - and solutions to poverty - by the poor themselves. The rationale in all these studies has been the same: just as the people who experience poverty are the real "experts" and are fully capable of studying and defining its characteristics, so too are the people who have experienced the worst effects of the Covid pandemic and developed their own solutions to the crisis the real "experts" on community-driven Covid relief and rehabilitation.



The Covid crisis has changed the whole world, and it's even not over yet. But along with all the terrible loss and hardships the pandemic has directly and indirectly caused, it has also rattled the foundations and opened doors for change.

Networks think **beyond** the immediate Covid crisis

When a country is beset by a calamity like Covid, everyone is touched by it. People face all kinds of problems as a result - especially the poor. When governments try to respond to these multiple and overlapping needs, their efforts are hampered by vertical delivery mechanisms and program structures that invariably target individuals and address only specific sectors or needs. When a crisis happens and all those needs are coming at the same time and all the sectors are jumbled up, those vertical government systems don't work very well.

That's why organized communities - with their more horizontal structures and reach - are so important in crises. The people who experience first-hand the multi-dimensional reality of a crisis situation can be the best actors to understand all those multiple needs and to address them in more holistic and effective ways, so that everyone in need is reached. But they have to be organized. Poor people who aren't organized are alone and powerless. They will be the ones hardest-hit by all the problems the crisis brings and the last to be reached and taken care of by whatever help may or may not come from the formal system.

And that's why we need to support and strengthen these horizontal people's systems, so they can deal more effectively and more comprehensively with all these multiple issues, and reach everyone in need - in the pandemic and in other crises yet to happen. There are different kinds of people's processes, though. Asia's organized community movements operate at very different scales and with very different levels of support:

- 1** Some groups are organized a little, within communities or as part of a network, and have built structures for bringing poor people together and helping each other, with good trust and good leadership. These groups have the potential to grow, but without a strong external support system to assist them, they can operate only up to a certain limit, when faced with so many urgent issues.
- 2** Other community groups are organized into networks and have ongoing partnerships with professional support NGOs, which help mobilize resources and strategize about what to do. A community-based organization can go only so far on its own; it needs a bridge, and these support NGOs can bridge the community process with the formal structures, so they can do more than just deal with everyday survival needs.
- 3** Then there are community organizations which have a support mechanism that has been institutionalized. By being able to mobilize resources and intervene at a national level, this kind of support mechanism can make a bigger linkage between the people's process and the other systems in a country.

We need to understand the strength that already exists in these different kinds of community movements in order to find ways to support them, so they can grow into something bigger and more strategic, at the same time they address immediate survival needs. The community-driven covid projects described in this newsletter all involved interventions which allowed organized communities to do that, in different ways and at different scales.

A note on what **action research** means:



Instead of being purely research, this study focused on action to support poor communities facing the impacts of the pandemic and then helped the implementing groups to discuss and document their actions. The study provided some small but flexible funds for additional activities, which allowed these networks to supplement the Covid work they were already doing on the ground, and to experiment and move forward.

Here is how Somsook Boonyabancha described the logic: "This study is part of a larger movement of supporting change and generating knowledge through action by people. Action is the key. Poor people live in reality, not in theories. Their way of making change is always by taking concrete action to address the many problems that are part of that reality. If we want to learn from the poor and get their stories, it is always important to bring some needed assistance. This is not to pay them or give them a reward, but so they can use that assistance to make some immediate change by taking action, by showing some new possibilities which go beyond what they have already been doing. Many stories and ideas will always come out of that action. Then, when they tell their stories of what happened and discuss how they made that change, we can learn from them. Knowledge that comes from action - and change that is driven by action - is always livelier, because we're not just discussing theories but seeing real, pragmatic new possibilities on the ground."

What these millions of hand-stitched face masks tell us:

The tide of centralized and authoritarian governance that is sweeping through Asia these days holds that as long as everyone does what they're told, the government will take care of everything and everyone. No government can take care of everything and everyone, of course. But that crazy idea persisted during the Covid crisis, and those top-down government systems failed woefully to address the real nature or scale of needs with their slow, cumbersome and bureaucratic aid efforts.

Instead of complaining about that or playing the silent victim, organized communities of the poor began taking action right away, finding all sorts of ways to help out their distressed neighbors, using their own funds and whatever small resources they could muster locally from politicians, friends and donors. They distributed food, made masks and hand-sanitizer, set up community kitchens, kept track of needy households and linked with local agencies to help channel public assistance to the families most in need of it. Cases of community people spontaneously helping each other in all these ways blossomed everywhere.

As ACHR's chairperson Somsook Boonyabancha put it, "We see immense energy among the people to deal with things when they are in a desperate situation like the Covid crisis. When people wait for assistance to come from the system of the authorities, it kills that energy. And they're probably not going to get that assistance anyway, because most formal programs are designed from the sky, not from the ground realities. But when communities realize that there are a lot of things they can do by themselves, that energy is unlocked. Communities have no problem collectively inventing all sorts of ways to address the Covid crisis in appropriate, cheap, pragmatic and creative ways. Why? Because they are the ones who experience those problems and benefit from those solutions directly. In these ways, the poor can not only be part of the virus response planning, but they can lead the way. This is what we see happening in many cities, where communities are leading the response to the virus."

In Thailand, for example, as soon as the first outbreak of infections had sent the whole country into a panic, the government advised everyone to wear special N-95 masks, which are manufactured only by certain companies. Within hours, all the N-95 masks in stock were snapped up, and no such masks - or any others - could be found in any store. At a time of high infection, when people most needed those masks, none were available. So the Thai public was mobilized: people donated whatever masks and protective equipment they could find to hospitals and medical people who needed it most. They even brought food to the overworked health workers. People also started making their own cloth masks, and the informal sector started making masks to sell. Sewing machines began humming all over the place, and resourceful seamstresses in the communities started making masks, working day and night.

Suddenly there were face masks everywhere. The markets and street stalls were bursting with them, in all sorts of beautiful colors and designs. It turns out the mask problem is not so difficult after all, and these cloth masks worked quite well. Suddenly, there was an alternative solution to a serious problem, and that solution was supplied by the people, at a huge scale. The same thing was happening in other countries too: Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines, Bangladesh. People had taken active ownership of the situation, and the message that came with those colorful cloth face masks was this: *this is our community, our crisis, and we have to take care of each other - we're not only waiting for others to rescue us.*



Welfare or structural change?

"If we only think of Covid relief as a kind of welfare hand-out, we'll never be able to give enough. It's not going to solve the real problems. Sadly, that's exactly how the system works in most of our countries: a little welfare handout, chasing the problems, but never changing or even touching the underlying structures which cause those problems in the first place. But if we can find ways for people become active in addressing those problems they face themselves, things can be changed. And when they're given a little room and a little support, people can deal with the risks in very interesting ways. Their ability to deal with those risks - as a group - can lead them into another level of development possibilities. And that leads us to a more structural way of thinking about how to handle the pandemic - or other crises." (Somsook Boonyabancha)

The Covid study teams :

The organizations which took part in the Covid study are all mature, experienced community networks. All have a long history of doing projects in collective housing, settlement upgrading, savings, fund management, land acquisition, disaster rehabilitation and working with their local and national governments on many fronts. All these groups have known each other and worked together for decades, in a long history of friendship, collaboration, sharing and mutual support, as part of the regional ACHR coalition.

- 1 INDONESIA:** The Covid projects in Indonesia were done by the Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota (JRMC - "Urban Poor Network"), a network of 25 large kampungs (informal communities) in Jakarta, with support from the Jakarta-based NGO Urban Poor Consortium (UPC).
- 2 MYANMAR:** The projects here were carried out by the Women's Savings and Development Network, which has worked since 2008 with the NGO Women for the World (WfW) to help Yangon's poorest women squatters to form savings groups and develop collective, low-cost housing projects.
- 3 PHILIPPINES:** The projects here were carried out by the Homeless People's Federation Philippines, Inc. (HPFPI), a national network of urban poor communities that was established in 1995, with support from the NGO Philippines Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives, Inc. (PACSII).
- 4 THAILAND:** The projects in Thailand were carried out by urban and rural community networks around the country, with support from the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), a public organization under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, whose mission is to strengthen communities and their organizations as key agents of change and central actors in development which affects their lives and communities.
- 5 BANGLADESH** was not officially part of the study, but through overlapping ACHR projects, the teams of community architects in Dhaka (POCAA) and Jhenaidah (Co.Creation.Architects) were able to add their wonderful children's Covid gardens and community isolation ideas to the soup pot.



COVID IMPACTS

How the pandemic has besieged the urban poor in Asia

People's capacity to cope with the virus and its repercussions has much to do with conditions that are not only medical but also economic, social and political. The pandemic, which has also triggered an economic catastrophe, has made those structural inequities sharper than ever.

No matter where we look, those dying of the virus and suffering from its direct and indirect effects are more likely to be poor, more likely to suffer from bad nutrition and poor health, more likely to have no savings or safety nets, more likely to be unable to afford health care, and more likely to live in shoddy and crowded housing conditions where precautions like social distancing and frequent hand washing are impossible. But the effects of these health-affecting inequities has been made heavier by the economic ones.

For the poor, the pandemic rapidly become a challenge to their very survival. "If we don't work, we don't eat. We're more afraid of starvation than the virus." By March 2020, when the first lockdowns in Asian cities were already preventing the poor from working and earning, some variation on this stark reasoning was repeating itself in urban poor and vulnerable communities around Asia. The pandemic also wrecked havoc on children and the progress of their education. Schools were closed and children were stuck at home, where many families in poor communities didn't have the computers or internet access - or even spare money to buy phone time - to enable their children to take part in online home classes.

The first case of Covid-19 infection outside of China was identified in Thailand, in January 2020. All hell broke loose after that, and within a couple of months, the virus was spreading across Asia, with wave after wave of infections and new variants. By June 2022, the more contagious Omicron variant was sweeping across many countries in Asia, so the pandemic is far from over.

In the first months of 2020, when the pandemic was beginning to spread across Asia, governments closed borders and imposed various kinds of lockdowns and curfews to limit the spread of the virus, and these measures continued, on and off, all through the year and well into 2021. Things began to open up again when the vaccination programs began in 2021, though by June 2022, large portions of the population in most Asian countries were still not yet fully vaccinated.

In a zoom meeting on August 5, 2021, the teams from the countries involved in the Covid study made brief presentations about the key issues urban poor communities were facing and the trajectory of the pandemic in their contexts. Here are a few notes from those presentations:



1 BANGLADESH

The first Covid infections were confirmed in March 2020 and the virus spread very quickly. Later the same month, to slow the spread of the virus, the government imposed a "general holiday" - an upbeat term for what was in effect a national lockdown, with schools, offices, shops, transport systems and public places closed. All public gatherings and religious rituals like praying together in mosques were officially suspended, even during Ramadan. Infections still soared, though, hospitals were overwhelmed and much-needed oxygen tanks were in short supply.

Since there was very little Covid testing in Bangladesh, the numbers of infections and deaths were thought to be far higher than the official numbers. The lockdowns continued, on and off, responding to successive spikes of infections and deaths in the summer of 2021 (the delta variant) and in January 2022 (the omicron variant).

In Dhaka, between 40% and 50% of the population lives in squalid, crowded and under-served slums, where social distancing and pandemic hygiene measures are all but impossible for people to maintain. Most of the urban poor earn their living day-to-day, and the lockdowns and factory closures meant they couldn't earn or feed their families. At the same time, the prices of vegetables, rice, fish and other staples rose sharply in the few designated fresh markets that were allowed to partly open during the lockdowns. Soon there was a huge exodus of urban poor people out of Dhaka - millions of people - going to their villages in the countryside, where they hoped it would be possible to survive. For those who stayed in the city, things got very hard, and hunger became a serious issue.

The pandemic was especially hard on children in Bangladesh, since schools were closed for almost two years. For most of the country's 40 million students, online classes were a remote fantasy, since most couldn't afford to have phones, computers or internet access. The government vaccination program began in February 2021.

COVID FACTS : (as of June 5, 2022)

- **Population: 165 million**
- **1.96 million infections**
- **29,131 have died**
- **31 new infections every day**
- **71.4% now fully vaccinated**

2 INDONESIA

The Covid pandemic hit Indonesia with a vengeance in March 2020. Infections soared, the death toll climbed, hospitals were overwhelmed and the country became for a while one of Asia's hottest Covid hot spots. Municipal governments soon began imposing a series of "semi-lockdowns", which greatly limited people's ability to move around and to gather.

In Jakarta, which has had the greatest number of infections throughout the pandemic, roads were blocked, curfews were imposed, transport systems were shut down and people going out were stopped and questioned by policemen. Government policies required companies to reduce by 50% the number of employees coming into the workplaces, and the rest were forced to work from home - or not work at all.

During those early stages, the urban poor had an especially hard time coping with both the health and economic aspects of the pandemic. Everything happened so suddenly. Many of the urban poor work in the informal sector and earn their living day-by-day. But all the streets, sidewalks, commercial areas and public spaces that they normally used for their vending and small trading businesses were off-limits under the lockdown restrictions. At the same time, motorcycle taxi and pedicab drivers had fewer customers, and workers in many sectors - like building construction - were laid off without pay.

So the poor lost their income and their means of supporting themselves. At the same time, interruptions in the transport and supply systems caused prices of food staples to rise sharply. There were no clear policies or programs from the government to support the urban poor or provide them with any welfare assistance in the pandemic crisis. On top of that, social distancing was almost impossible for people who live in small houses in crowded kampungs. The government's vaccination program began in early 2021, but even by June 2022, just over 60% of the country's population of 274 million had been fully vaccinated.

COVID FACTS : (as of June 5, 2022)

- **Population: 274 million**
- **6.1 million infections**
- **157,000 have died**
- **303 new infections every day**
- **61.3% now fully vaccinated**



3 MYANMAR

In the first year of the pandemic, it was not the virus itself but the closure of factories and loss of jobs and earning opportunities that most affected the urban poor. To make matters worse, thousands who had migrated to neighboring countries to work rushed back to Myanmar when those countries began closing their borders to ward off the pandemic. That meant no remittances and more mouths to feed for their families at home.

The pandemic was completely eclipsed when the military seized control of the country in a coup d'état on February 1, 2021, just weeks after national elections. Citizens all over Myanmar took to the streets to protest the overthrow of their democratically-elected government, but the peaceful demonstrations were brutally put down. The protests continued though, and soon turned into an armed civilian resistance movement. By May 2021, Myanmar had plunged into civil war, with continuous violence and massacres by the junta.

In Yangon, the political unrest affected all aspects of daily life. The junta closed banks and limited withdrawals from ATM machines. Prices of essentials skyrocketed, people lost jobs and the economy ground to a halt. Unremitting violence and surveillance by the military created an environment of terror. As the pandemic worsened, the military took over public hospitals, arrested doctors, refused care to Covid patients and outlawed the purchase of oxygen by ordinary citizens for their Covid-infected family and friends.

On top of all these troubles, several months after the coup, the junta launched a campaign of forced evictions of informal settlements and land grabbing. Since September 2021, tens of thousands of Yangon's poorest and most vulnerable families have been violently evicted by armed soldiers and their houses have been burned or bulldozed, leaving them with no alternative housing or assistance. In this terrible situation, when all public systems were breaking down, self-help became the only possible support system for people in the city - especially in poor settlements.

COVID FACTS : (as of June 5, 2022)

- Population: 55 million
- 613,000 infections
- 19,500 have died
- 17 new infections every day
- 48% now fully vaccinated

4 PHILIPPINES

The first Covid cases in the Philippines were identified in January 2020. Two months later, the government began imposing "enhanced community quarantine," which meant an almost total lockdown, with temporary closure of all non-essential shops and businesses and severe restrictions on people's ability to move around, work and get the things they need to survive.

The first enhanced community quarantine was imposed in Metro Manila, a city where about 40 percent of the 13 million inhabitants live in squalor, crowding and insecurity in informal settlements. Similar orders followed in provincial cities around the country. Despite these strict measures, though, the virus spread rapidly. In many poor communities, residents put up barricades and guarded the entrances around the clock, to keep strangers from coming inside their community and possibly bringing in the virus.

Under these strict rules, banks, offices, construction sites and businesses were all closed, and this had a domino effect on jobs and economic activity, leaving millions without work and worried about their daily subsistence. People were forced to stay in their houses, and those who ventured out looking for some way to earn risked being caught by the police and fined or arrested.

The country's urban poor, who earn day by day, have suffered the worse consequences of these lockdowns, especially with food. Without being able to earn, families couldn't put food on the table, and there was a lot of hunger. At the same time, interruptions in transport and commerce drove the cost of basic foods and vegetables higher and higher. Many families coped by eating fewer or less nutritionally complete meals, relying on donated rice and instant noodles - or just going hungry. The government responded with some emergency measures to distribute food packs or cash aid to poor and out-of-work households, but these initiatives didn't reach everyone and fell far short of meeting actual needs. Things began to improve after vaccinations began in March 2021.

COVID FACTS : (as of June 5, 2022)

- Population: 110 million
- 3.7 million infections
- 60,500 have died
- 225 new infections every day
- 64.7% now fully vaccinated

5 THAILAND

Thailand's first Covid infections were detected in January 2020, and the government moved swiftly to contain the outbreak, launching a national system of isolation, treatment and contact tracing, which worked with the country's public health care system. These measures helped to slow the virus initially. But in April 2020, in the face of the new surges, the government began to impose lockdowns. The lockdown measures were graded and color-coded, according to the severity of infection rates. In Bangkok, for example, which has remained the virus epicenter throughout the pandemic, the strictest lockdowns were imposed.

For several months, shopping malls, schools, universities, entertainment venues and many businesses and government offices were closed, and the entire country was put under a night curfew. Some provinces closed their borders to traffic in and out of the province, and most Thais followed the government's suggestion to wear masks in public and practice social distancing.

But even in the worst months of the pandemic, cities were never closed down as completely as they were in Indonesia or the Philippines. Markets, grocery stores and convenience stores all stayed open, public transport systems continued to function and people could move around the city and buy food from restaurants and shops.

But for the urban poor, the effects of the lockdowns were felt immediately and severely, and at first they were felt economically much more than medically. People lost jobs, lost work and earning opportunities, and without money to feed their families, many faced the dire reality of hunger. Some who had villages to return to left the cities before the inter-provincial bus transit was stopped, and were at least able to eat from their farms and gardens. But most had no choice but to stay in the city, and for them, things got very bad. The situation gradually improved, though, and the government's vaccination program began in June 2021, but waves of the virus continue to prevent the country from fully re-opening.

COVID FACTS : (as of June 5, 2022)

- Population: 70 million
- 4.5 million infections
- 30,143 have died
- 3,500 new infections every day
- 75.3% now fully vaccinated

What the community Covid projects have showed us

The Covid study provided a fertile opportunity for members of the community networks and their supporters in the four countries to reflect on their community-driven projects, to present their work and ideas to their peers in other countries and to compare and learn from each other's activities. Because successive waves of the pandemic made travel impossible during the six months of the study, all the meetings took place online, so Power Points and "virtual" community visits had to take the place of real visits. Despite these constraints, a number of striking common ideas gradually began to emerge from the experience of organized communities in planning, implementing and collectively discussing these community-driven Covid projects in the four very different contexts. Here's the rough list, with apologies for some overlap:



1 The crisis activated the people's system when formal systems were falling short. Formal efforts to deal with pandemic needs of the urban poor were slow, bureaucratic and insufficient. But while governments dithered, organized communities were already using their collective energy to invent all sorts of ways to address the crisis and help each other in appropriate, cheap, pragmatic and creative ways. In many cities, the poor were not only part of the virus response - they could lead the way.

2 The crisis put Covid-hit communities in the giving and helping-each-other mode. Welfare-style disaster aid usually targets individuals. But in a crisis like the pandemic, that individualized approach forces people to think only about themselves and to compete. But deep down in human nature, there is an impulse to help others, and times of crisis invariably bring this out. Covid has shown us that when that human impulse is unlocked and brought together into an organized force, its power can be immense.

3 Networks used the crisis as a chance to go beyond just relief and do more. Most of the community-driven Covid initiatives aimed higher than just providing a little assistance or treating the symptoms, without treating the causes of poverty and vulnerability. That kind of thinking is important. When planned strategically, community-driven Covid relief was a powerful means to help poor communities strengthen their organizations, increase their negotiating power, enlarge their ranks of allies, scale up their development possibilities and make themselves visible, proactive development partners in their cities.

4 Flexible funding allowed networks to deal more holistically with the crisis. Poverty has many dimensions, and the needs in poor settlements at all times - especially during a crisis like the pandemic - are many: both individual needs and community needs. The study showed us that when communities and their networks were given space and resources which allowed them to flexibly and collectively address those complex and overlapping needs, even if the resources were very modest, they could be very creative in how they responded to those needs, according to the dynamic situation on the ground.

5 Communities could do more with less. The funding support available to the community networks in the four countries varied widely, but in all cases it was insufficient to resolve all the needs or to reach everyone. But that funding allowed communities to think together, do things together and unlock their native skills of thrift and resourcefulness, which are multiplied when people in communities work together. This knack for doing more with less manifested itself in two ways: stretching and multiplying the resources, and using the community-led activities as a bridge to link with other programs and resources.

6 Community-driven relief strengthened the larger community movement. The Covid projects have shown that relief activities can open up opportunities to reform and strengthen community organizations. Concrete activities always open new space for others in the community to take part, to become active, to lead things, to innovate, to bring their skills and ideas into the larger effort. The Covid relief activities created a lot of new space for this kind of participation, and in the process, they helped reform and strengthen both communities and networks, making them more active, more balanced and more open.

7 Networks built on the collective force in communities. While people may be poor and powerless as individuals, they become richer and stronger when they pool their resources and do things together as a group - richer in knowledge, in social support, in protection, in financial capacity and in negotiating clout. The same holds true for Covid, where the projects were consciously crafted to activate and strengthen communities and community networks at the same time they delivered much-needed Covid assistance.

8 Communities used the crisis to revive and expand their networks. In all the cities in the study, networks or federations were already in place, linking many of the city's poor communities. Most of them already had years of experience dealing with housing, community finance, disasters and other issues. But some needed a boost, and the urgency of the Covid crisis pushed many of them to grow fast, learn fast and bring lots of new people and new communities into the network process.

9 Women held it all together. The role of women didn't come up much in the Zoom discussions, but it was impossible not to notice how prominent the role of women was. It was women who held up the lion's share of the community Covid projects in the study, and women who enabled the projects to elicit broad participation and to remain grounded in real needs in the communities. This jives with ACHR's long experience in Asia, in which women invariably play a central and active role in anything to do with housing, living conditions, health, food, welfare, community finance, savings or the life of the community.

10 The Covid projects offered new ideas for a different urban future. For the past half century, urbanization in Asia has meant building up every square inch of land in a city and maximizing the profit on it. That concept - which nobody questioned - has left us with cities that are awful, unhealthy, ugly and dangerous to live in. The Covid gardens poor communities have planted on vacant pieces of land have helped give us a new way to think about the city, and helped us imagine a different urban future - a more human, more green, more healthy, more sustaining and more environmentally friendly one.

11 Everything led to housing

As they dealt with Covid, networks kept their eye on the long-term goal of secure housing



The Covid crisis has been a wake-up call for cities with large portions of their population still living in squalid, insecure and substandard housing. And in Asia, that's a lot of cities! When the Covid crisis began and local authorities instituted lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus, people were told to stay home. But what is "home" for the poor? For many, it's a very insecure place, in shabby, crowded, unhygienic and under-serviced conditions. Any epidemiologist will tell you that a city's defenses against a pandemic are only as strong as its weakest point. If so many people in a city are living in that kind of virus-loving squalor, the whole city will remain vulnerable.

The pandemic has shown that solving these housing problems in a big way, at citywide scale, is not just a noble idea but an urgent necessity. Community-led housing development is a structural solution to these problems of poverty - a more holistic solution that not only addresses the symptoms of poverty but directly challenges and changes the larger structural systems in cities which cause - and perpetuate - poverty in the first place. When people who have had no choice but to live in conditions that are illegal and substandard in every way become the designers and builders of new housing that is healthy, legal, secure, collective, supportive and fully part of the legitimate city, that is not just a housing project, it's a systemic change.

We need to build the kind of housing that gives people secure, safe and healthy housing but also builds the community at the same time. This is important because for the poor, the community is the welfare unit, the social support system, the safety net, the organization that can ensure that everyone - even the poorest and most vulnerable members - are taken care of. Not only during this virus crisis, but in the future, when more crises will come. In their pandemic relief projects, many of these more seasoned community networks have kept their eye firmly on the long-term goal of secure, decent housing, and we can see this happening in several ways in the different Covid projects:

1 Indonesia: In Jakarta, all the Covid projects by the JRMK Network were strategically planned to strengthen and enlarge the kampung-based cooperatives and to build their capacity to become a collective, legal and multi-purpose support system for the hundreds of poor families in these large urban communities. This is all part of JRMK's long campaign to work with the municipal government to win secure collective land tenure for these communities and to use the cooperative model to collectively improve people's housing, tenure security, living conditions and livelihoods. This campaign towards secure land and housing has made some big steps forward during the pandemic. All 25 kampungs in the JRMK network are now fully registered with the government as cooperatives. 7,000 houses in 15 of the kampungs have been granted temporary building rights, which essentially legalizes their existing structures. All of the kampungs have been made legal residential areas on the city's master zoning plan ("spatial plan"), which strengthens their tenure and prevents them from being evicted for encroaching on zones designated for other purposes in the city's plan.



2 Myanmar: In Myanmar, the coup d'état in February 2021 was followed by a huge wave of forced evictions of informal settlements by the military government in Yangon. That has made the communities in the large housing projects built by the Women's Savings and Development Network very worried about their houses, since the projects were built on land provided free by the pre-coup government. These communities have used their Covid projects to protect their land and houses, at the same time they address immediate needs. Here is how Women for the World's director Van Lizar Aung described their strategy: "We still have some vacant land in those large housing projects on government land, and every day we worry that the government will take it back. So we have been doing everything we can to occupy that land somehow. We built 20 new houses on some of the land, using donor funds, and we also used the Covid projects to make big community gardens and plant trees on some of it. We built a fence around one part of the land and put up a signboard that says 'Playground for Children'. On other parts we've put up cooperative markets and renovated the community centers. We even asked the old people in the communities to perform a kind of religious rite on that land. We do all these kinds of activities on that land so we can keep it."



3 Philippines: In the Philippines, the sprawling informal communities on the Prison Authority land in Muntinlupa used their Covid projects distributing rice, setting up community kitchens and cultivating vegetables to organize themselves and bolster their negotiations for secure land and housing. The seaside community at SAJUSSA in Davao also used their vegetable gardens, mangrove planting and weekly shoreline clean-ups to show the coastal authorities that communities like theirs can help protect fragile coastlines and to strengthen their campaign to get land titles. Even the community gardens in Quezon City were used by the Homeless People's Federation to bring more vulnerable and insecure communities into the federation's savings process and put them on track to forming homeowners associations, acquiring land and linking with the various government housing finance schemes to develop their own housing.



4 Thailand: In Thailand, all the Covid relief activities - like the surveys, the food distribution, the community kitchens and community gardens - were designed explicitly as tools to help the community networks reach out to vulnerable and unorganized communities, scattered and invisible squatters and room renters in their constituencies and bring them into the network process - and ultimately to help them develop their own collective housing solutions, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong program. In a way, the entire Covid intervention supported by CODI could be described as an intensive Baan Mankong housing preparation exercise for insufficiently-housed communities across the country, in both urban and rural areas.





THAILAND

Community kitchens in Bangkok Metro

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Thai government imposed different kinds of lockdowns and curfews to contain the spread of the virus. That meant lost jobs and drastically reduced opportunities for informal sector economic activity, which is the lifeline of most urban poor earners. Without income to pay for necessities like food, many families began having serious troubles eating well - or eating at all.

That's why many of the earliest community-driven Covid initiatives involved getting food and groceries to families in need. Many community networks used their own resources and donations to distribute packets of essential food staples and set up free-food cupboards, and some worked with local aid organizations and government agencies to help direct food aid to those most in need. Some communities set up systems of giving needy families food-buying coupons which could be "spent" at food shops within the community.

Many community networks quickly realized they could deal with these urgent food needs more efficiently and more collectively by setting up community-based kitchens, which could produce ready-to-eat meals in quantity to distribute to hungry and out-of-work families. The community kitchens were not only an efficient way of producing nutritious meals at scale, but became an important tool for reaching out to needy communities and expanding the circle of assistance and information-sharing about the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security was keen to launch an emergency food distribution program in Bangkok, where the pandemic effects were most severe, and people were really suffering. After some negotiations, CODI was able to persuade the Ministry to let them manage the funds and translate the Ministry's policy goal of providing food aid to the poorest into something more collective and more community-driven, using community kitchens.

This policy from the Ministry gave a big boost to the community kitchens that had already started, and the process very quickly grew into something much bigger and more organized.

These community networks stretched the budget for 110,000 meals to cook for 300,000 ...

That was the beginning of the community kitchen program, which became a crucial part of the early phase of CODI's national Covid support program (*details on page 38-39*). The community kitchen program was designed by the Bangkok community networks, but later spread to other cities where Covid lockdowns were causing lost jobs and hunger too. The community networks used their regular meetings with each other and with CODI to discuss the needs, examine the pioneering community kitchen initiatives and then design a program to support these community kitchens in a larger and more systematic way.

In the simple program the networks quickly invented, everyone agreed that a budget from CODI of 30 baht (US\$ 1) per meal would be provided to network-run community kitchens, up to a ceiling of 200,000 baht (US\$ 6,500) per network. Those were the simple parameters and budget ceilings: the rest of the details about how they would survey the needs and how they would plan their community kitchens were left to the networks to decide: how often to cook? which groups to cook for? what to cook? how to distribute the meals? Because the networks had this freedom to plan what to do and how to do it, their strategies for using the community kitchens were all different, and there was a lot of innovation and variety.

By July 2020, 71 community-managed kitchens in Bangkok and other cities were in full operation, and hundreds of community volunteers were chopping vegetables and cooking up rice, noodles and all kinds of aromatic curries and soups and spicy chili pastes in pots the size of bathtubs. These community kitchens quickly became a vivid demonstration of community ingenuity, resourcefulness and thrift. In their first two months of operation, the 60 community kitchens in the Bangkok metro region received funds from CODI to cook 110,000 meals, at 30 baht (US\$ 1) per meal. But by using all volunteer community labor, by haggling the lowest possible prices for ingredients in the market, by leveraging additional donations and materials locally from temples, politicians, businesses and private citizens, and by growing some ingredients in their own community gardens, those community kitchens were able to cook and distribute about 300,000 nutritious meals to vulnerable and hungry families in the most precarious early stage of the pandemic.

In the following two pages, we take a peek at five of these community kitchens in Bangkok. These notes are drawn from visits to these kitchens in May 2020, just a month or two after most of them had started.

What do community kitchens do?

In food-loving Thailand, there is a long history of using community kitchens to feed, console and organize disaster-hit people after tsunamis, floods, landslides and fires. Covid has been a different sort of disaster, but a disaster all the same, and community kitchens have proven to be just as useful. In early July, 2020, when the first batch of community kitchens in Bangkok had been up and running for a few months, Somsook joined a meeting with community leaders at CODI to reflect on the program and offered these thoughts on why the community kitchens were so important:

- 1** They bring communities and community people together, so they can work together, put their force together and bring their hearts together to help each other in a bad situation.
- 2** They strengthen and revive the spirit of community networks, by using food to reach out to more vulnerable communities and pull them into the network process. The Baan Mankong communities were the big sisters in this process, which was about much more than building houses.
- 3** They showcase the ability and strength of the network to the other actors in the city, and by leading the action in this very concrete way, they get the other actors to join and support them.
- 4** They lead to other spin-off activities like community gardens, "sharing happiness" food cupboards, and other collaborations, because they are very dynamic and generate a lot of energy.
- 5** They carry a social and spiritual message that is much more than just a meal. They are a way to stretch out a hand to people in a time of great need and to let them know someone cares and is there to help. This caring works the other way around also: it does us all good to be able to help others, to direct care and kindness outwards, to our neighbors and to others in our area.
- 6** They lessen the burden on people who are going through difficult times, by reducing their food expenditure and freeing up their time for more urgent things like earning and surviving.
- 7** They are a way to reach out and help the very poor and invisible people who may fall through the cracks and be passed over by conventional aid efforts and government programs.
- 8** They provide food that is hearty and delicious, because they attract the best cooks in the communities to come together and show off their cooking skills for friends who are hungry and in need.
- 9** They spend less but serve more, by economizing, stretching, mustering additional resources and dipping into the deep wealth of resourcefulness that poor communities have to draw on.
- 10** They are outward-directed expressions of care-taking and kindness, and they build on the culture of giving, sharing, helping and doing for others that still thrives in poor communities.



ee A lot of older and jobless women come to donate their time for the cooking, which takes a lot of work. But it's also fun and sociable, with lots of laughing and gossiping and storytelling, just like in any kitchen. **99**

(Pi Sawm, network leader in Bang Bon District)

The Bang Bon network's nutritional goal # 1: SECURE HOUSING FOR ALL

The community network in Bang Bon links together 23 of the total 35 poor communities in the district. Five of these communities have developed their housing with support from the Baan Mankong Program, but many haven't started any housing process yet. There are a lot of dilapidated communities and scattered slum pockets in the district where the very poor settle, along the canals and on bits of leftover or hidden land.

Many in these settlements have no house registration, so the residents can't access public services, schools and health care. Some of these communities are part of the network, but many still aren't. The District Authority wants to evict some of these settlements that are thought to be blocking the drainage canals. So the network has been working with the District Authority to survey these areas under eviction threat - and others - and help find a solution.

Since the Covid crisis hit, the network has been using the cooking as a tool to go into these very poor communities in the district and bring them into the network process. As Pi Sawm described it, "Many of these families have been staying as squatters or land renters for a long time, and they don't feel any urgency to secure their future. We want to wake them up. We see the community kitchen as a way to strengthen and expand the network, and the long-term goal is secure land and housing for everyone in Bang Bon District."

1 Community kitchen in Bang Bon District

Bang Bon District, with a population of about 120,000 people, is one Bangkok's 50 districts. Because it's way out on the southwestern edge of the city and far from the center, commercial pressures on land there have been lower than elsewhere. This has made it easier for informal communities to find land for making housing projects, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong program. There are five Baan Mankong projects in the district, and all are part of the district-level community network, which has its own district-level fund and welfare program.

The network's community kitchen was set up early in the pandemic, in March 2020, in the Baan Mankong 133 community, one of the district's pioneering community-led housing projects. Like many other Baan Mankong projects, the modest two-story rowhouses - all painted pale blue with white trim - are arranged in a compact layout along a network of narrow lanes. There isn't much space for gardens, but the residents raise mushrooms and grow a lot of vegetables and herbs in small planters and in the spaces along the sides and fronts of houses.

First, the network surveyed all the communities in Bang Bon District, to identify needy families to cook for. They did this in collaboration with the District Authority, so the local government would accept the network's survey data and agree on where the needy families are. Each community draws up a list of families facing serious problems during the Covid crisis and needing food, then sends the list to the network, where the lists are compiled and posted on the board. Family members sign when they receive their food pack from the community kitchen. All the meals are given to communities that haven't done Baan Mankong projects yet.

The community kitchen is set up in front of the community center, where a bit of the lane has been commandeered and shaded with a marquee to make room for all the high-volume cooking that goes on there every day. They cook one time and prepare at least 500 dinners every day, using a budget from CODI of 15,000 baht (US\$ 500) per day, calculated according to the standard 30 baht (US\$ 1) per meal. But the network has found that if they stretch that budget a little, buying things in bulk and using some donated ingredients, they can cook more and feed 600 people with the same budget. And as one volunteer cook assured, "It's still a delicious meal."

That budget is not nearly enough to feed all the people around the district who are in need of food, so the network delivers the dinners on a rotating basis, focusing on cooking for three or four communities each day, making sure that everyone on the lists gets a meal once every ten days. Each day, between 20 and 30 volunteers - mostly women - come to chop vegetables help prepare the meals. The volunteers all eat together after cooking, so everyone who comes to cook gets at least one delicious meal. They write the menu on the board every day. On May 21, for example, the menu was a hearty Chinese-style chicken soup with rice noodles, tofu and boiled egg, and it would be delivered to four communities in the district that day.



"One good meal can mean so much"



Many of the community kitchens had a strong, talkative and substantially-proportioned woman in charge, and the one in Bang Bon District is no exception. This kitchen's strong and substantially-proportioned woman is named Ruchaneekorn Chanboriboon ("Pi Sawm"). These are Pi Sawm's reflections on the deeper meaning in cooking for others, as described to some visitors in May 2020:

"Cooking for others who are in need does so many things. It unites us and gives us a way to show love. It gives the people who help a feeling of being useful and needed. We're not only distributing food, but we are building a relationship with those who have been outside our community process, and we are bringing them in.

When we decided to cook only one meal a day, we felt it was important that the one meal should be dinner, so that the whole family will be home and can sit down together at least one time to a meal that is delicious and nutritious and free. Even if we can't cook for them every day, this is a way to make people feel that someone cares about them. With that sense of being cared for, people begin to feel that if they decide to start their secure housing process, someone will be there to help them. When we deliver the dinners to the settlements, we always use the visit to encourage people to start Baan Mankong projects. One good meal can mean so much. It can mean love and understanding. It can start a relationship. Even people who were forgotten by the world will know that someone cares for them - at least with one good meal. And after that, we can see about what the next step will be."

2 Community kitchen in Phasi Charoen District

Phasi Charoen District is on the western side of Bangkok. 35 of the district's 50 poor communities have active savings groups and link with the community network. The network's community kitchen was set up in April 2020, in the Klong Lat Paa Chee community, which was one of the first Baan Mankong housing projects in Thailand and functions as the network's headquarters. They began by cooking meals for people who were in need but couldn't cook themselves, using money from their own network fund. At first, there were complaints that the food wasn't delicious, so they got more people to come help. With more skilled cooks involved, the food got more tasty. Later, their community kitchen began getting funding from CODI of 12,000 baht (US\$ 400) per day, and that support allowed them to scale up the cooking. They cook at least 400 meals each day, cooking just one time, at mid-day. All the meals are distributed among poor communities in the district that haven't done Baan Mankong projects yet, and also to some Burmese construction worker's camps nearby. Each community surveys its own members and sends the list of most needy families to the network in Klong Lat Paa Chee, and then the kitchen cooks for the people on those lists. There are too many people on the lists to feed every day, so they rotate between communities. At first, they put the meals in foam boxes to distribute. But those boxes end up being thrown away and polluting the city. So instead, they carry the big pots of food to each community and then ask people to bring their own containers and take back as much food as they need.



"The cooking and distributing of meals has brought people together in the district. And it has brought many poor forgotten communities into the district network process." (Pi Tim, Lat Paa Chee)

3 Community kitchen in Sathorn District

Sathorn District is right in the middle of Bangkok's financial and night-life area, where some of the city's richest and poorest citizens live side by side. There are 24 poor communities in the district, but only one Baan Mankong project so far - the Suan Phlu community, which was rebuilt on public land after a fire. One day early in the pandemic, a woman from a church organization came to Suan Phlu, wanting to distribute cash to people suffering because of the lockdown. The community people suggested she could reach more people by letting the network manage that money. She agreed, and they used that first donation to buy rice and other groceries and started cooking. That's how the community kitchen started. Now, with a daily budget from CODI of 15,000 baht (US\$ 500), they cook at least 500 meals each day. About 200 of those meals go to needy Suan Phlu residents, and the rest are delivered to three other communities in the area - including the NHA project right next door - according to lists of needy families those communities send to the kitchen. They bring the big pots of soup and rice in a truck to the other communities, and people come to the distribution point with their bowls or containers to collect the food. As Pornthip Wongjom, Suan Phlu's energetic chairperson put it, "This food we cook is a way for us to share what we have with poorer communities and with people who are suffering because of lack of work. People from other communities come to join us every day and we make the food together, with a lot of happiness, and then distribute it. Afterwards, everyone who joins the cooking gets a good meal."



"Nowadays, I dream about recipes and calculate quantities in my sleep, in preparation for the trip we make every morning to buy ingredients in the market. When I'm not sure about the recipe for something, the market vendors always know what goes in what and how much to buy." (Pornthip)

4 Community kitchen in Ratchathewi District

Ratchathewi District is in the oldest part of Bangkok, close to the royal palaces. The community network brings together 23 informal communities, including 14 on State Railway land. One of those railway communities is Makkasan, a crowded old squatter settlement of about 600 families. There are rumors that the railway authorities have plans to evict the community and redevelop the site as a shopping mall, but nobody knows for sure. Many people in the community are informal vendors who sell their wares in and around the big markets nearby. During the lockdown, everything closed, and most couldn't work. The community kitchen started in February 2020. The royal family had donated food packets to the Makkasan community, which were distributed to needy families. But many families weren't able to cook, so they gathered ingredients from the food packets and started cooking meals for people. After conducting a survey, they found that about 500 people in Makkasan and nearby areas were sick, elderly or unemployed and in need of food. So the network raised funds through Facebook appeals, and gathered contributions and food donations from community members and a nearby temple. With these resources, they could cook for more and more people. Later, with support from CODI of 15,000 baht (US\$ 500) per day, they could cook at least 500 meals every day. They cook in a covered open space near the community's daycare center. Many who come to help cook are hotel and restaurant workers temporarily out of work because of the lockdown. They can all have a good meal after the cooking is over. They pack up the meals in plastic bags and then distribute them by zones, where a community representative distributes the meals, door to door.



"The cooking has brought us together as a community and given us a new sense of unity. If we have to move somewhere else, we will move together, as a community, and make our new housing together." Sumittra Wuttiwaree, Makkasan

5 Community kitchen in Taling Chan District

The community kitchen in Taling Chan District has been set up at the Homeless Center, which made history as Thailand's first homeless shelter to be designed, built and managed by a network of homeless people themselves. 76 homeless people now stay in the center, including seven who are blind and ten families with children. The community kitchen cooks 300 meals each day - 150 lunches and 150 dinners, using a budget from CODI of 90,000 baht (US\$ 300) per day and some donated rice. Besides cooking for the center's residents, the volunteers cook for other homeless families in the area, motorcycle taxi drivers and poor room renters in nearby communities. When the CODI budget ends, the center has plans to continue the community kitchen. But instead of giving meals for free, they will sell meals very cheaply, for 10 baht (US\$ 30 cents), and use donations to keep the cost low. That way, the community kitchen can be both a service to the needy and also a small business for the center - like a poor person's canteen.





INDONESIA

Community kitchen in Yogyakarta

Yogyakarta ("Jogja") is considered to be the place where all the flowers of Javanese arts and culture are preserved and appreciated: shadow puppets, batik, gamelan and classical dance. One special thing that isn't often included in these lists, but is no less a beloved Jogja institution, are the women porters who ply their trade in the city's traditional markets. In most Asian cities, market porters are mostly men, but in Jogja, they're almost all women - and a lot of them elderly women.

You will have a tough time finding a more hardy and resilient group than these women market porters. It's a hard job, and most do it because they are poor and need to sustain themselves. They carry big loads of fruit, vegetables and dry goods in baskets or bundles strapped to their backs and shoulders with a long woven scarf they always carry with them. On a busy day, a porter can earn at least 50,000 rupiah (US\$ 3.50). The women porters in four markets have their own union, which is supported by Yasanti, a local NGO.

At the beginning of the pandemic, all the city's markets were forced to close down, and later were allowed to reopen only under certain conditions. The tourist trade completely disappeared. These closures and restrictions meant fewer customers and dramatically reduced income for the women porters. Conditions got very bad for them.

Meanwhile, among civic groups and development organizations in Jogja, there was an outpouring of solidarity with the people who were suffering from the effects of the pandemic. They distributed masks, sanitizer and packets of essential food and set up lots of public kitchens to prepare meal packs that were handed out to hungry citizens. As well-intended as all of these *gotong royong* ("people helping people") efforts were, most reached people only randomly on the street, without any sustained assistance to any particular needy group. And Jogja was full of very badly-off urban poor during those times.

For more information about the public kitchen in Yogyakarta, please contact Mul:
e-mail: sistersindanger@gmail.com

This kitchen cooks for the women porters who carry loads in the city's traditional markets...

M. Berkah Gamulya ("Mul") is a community activist who used to work with the Jakarta-based NGO Urban Poor Consortium (UPC) on their projects with urban poor communities. Now he runs a cafe, but when the pandemic forced his cafe to close, Mul joined forces with his UPC colleague Dodok to start their own public kitchen. Instead of cooking and passing out meals to people at random, though, they decided to focus on one particular group and give the lunch packets to the same people every day, so they could eat properly, in a more sustained way. There are, of course, many urban poor groups in Yogyakarta, but they decided to support the women market porters. This is Mul's story of their *Dapur Gendong* ("Kitchen for Porters"):

After discussing our idea with Yasanti and the women porters, we agreed on a plan. Our team (which included volunteers, students, unemployed people and even professional chefs) would prepare the meals once a day, in the morning, and then drop them off at the market entrances at noon, where representatives from the union would meet us and distribute the lunches to their members inside the market, with no big fuss. Same place and same time every day, five days a week, Monday to Friday. We planned our cooking and fund-raising in one-month batches, so the women would know they could count on those meals for at least a month. That way, the project gave the women some sense of security at a time when their earnings were low and uncertain. The meals not only provided nutrition, but they helped psychologically, because the women knew that no matter how little they earned each day, they would always have something to eat.

To turn the project into a genuinely community-driven public kitchen, we made good use of social media to spread word about the project and to mobilize donations and volunteers from around Indonesia and Jogja to help. We used Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and online crowd-sourcing sites, and posted daily online reports which included the lunch menu as well as photos of the volunteers in the kitchen and porters at the market. We also posted weekly and monthly reports which detailed how much money we had raised and how it had been spent, as well as how many women the kitchen had fed and how many volunteers helped that week.

The *Dapur Gendong* project began in October 19, 2020, and it soon caught the city's imagination, for the women market porters are a much-loved institution in Jogja, and many wanted to chip and help these hard-working women. Stories about the project appeared in newspapers. Most people donated money, which we used to buy the ingredients for each day's cooking, but we also got donations of rice and other ingredients from local NGOs. Dodok has good links with a union of farmers around Jogja, and when the public kitchen was first taking off, the farmers sent big loads of rice, vegetables and watermelons. There was strong solidarity from everyone.

When we launched the kitchen, the first thing we did was to call for volunteers to help cook and pack up the lunches every day. Some volunteers were professional cooks who had worked in catering and big restaurants and knew how to cook food in large quantities, improvising the menus according to what donated ingredients were available. They cooked all kinds of Indonesian food, which we packed in compostable cardboard boxes - fried rice, fried chicken, fish, eggs, vegetables cooked in different styles. The menu was different each day.

Depending on how much funding we could raise, the kitchen prepared between 130 and 402 lunches each day. During the worst of the pandemic, when a lot of extra donations and food were coming in and we had big teams of volunteers to help, we also distributed lunches to pedicab drivers and street cleaners - sometimes even to doctors and medical staff at the overburdened public hospitals. But the focus was always on the women porters in the four markets, whom we always fed first. By December 2021, the worst of the pandemic in Indonesia seemed to be over, lots of people had been vaccinated and the markets in Jogja were all fully open again. But trade was still slow and earnings were still low for the women porters, so we continued the public kitchen a few more months, until we were sure these intrepid women could get back on their feet.





PHILIPPINES

Community kitchens didn't wait for aid, just started cooking

At the beginning of the pandemic, communities in the Homeless People's Federation quickly got busy holding emergency meetings to discuss the situation and decide what to do. Initially, the virus itself wasn't the main problem. When the lockdowns began and people weren't allowed to leave their communities to work or earn, many faced serious hunger. Later, when community members got infected and had to quarantine in their houses, they also needed food. The lack of food quickly became the federation's biggest challenge.

Without waiting for outside aid to come, many communities began buying food staples in bulk and distributing food packets to those in need. Many also set up community kitchens and started cooking food collectively, sharing whatever food they could get hold of, to make sure nobody would go hungry.

Some of these community kitchens have been supported entirely by the communities themselves, using their collective savings or resources from their community-level or city-level disaster funds. In others, the communities partnered with government agencies and other support organizations to provide regular, nutritious meals to out-of-work and vulnerable families during the long periods of "advanced community quarantine", and also to infected community members isolating in their houses.

By activating all this collective development energy and attracting all this collaboration, these community kitchens have managed to keep hundreds of vulnerable children and families fed with nutritious meals. At the same time, they have drawn communities much closer together and strengthened their relationships with other groups in their cities.

In these two pages, we take a look at just three of the federation's many community kitchens.

1 Community Kitchen in SAJUSSA in Davao

The San Juan Seaside Settlers Association (SAJUSSA) is a sprawling community of 104 poor households composed of indigenous people, fishermen, laborers and informal workers, built on a strip of land along Davao's coastline, where it continues to be vulnerable to typhoons and coastal erosion. When the pandemic reached Davao in 2020, the community was badly hit, with many infections and serious loss of jobs and income during the lockdowns that followed. Things eventually opened back up and some people could go back to work. But the schools remained closed and all the children were still at home, and had to do their lessons at home, with their mothers mainly tasked with helping them.

The SAJUSSA community has been running a community kitchen program since March 2020, with the support of the Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo, a convent adjacent to the community. The sisters regularly provide the community with all the ingredients - rice, vegetables, chicken, spices, eggs - and the community people do the cooking, at several locations throughout the community. During the worst period of the pandemic, when most of the community members were out of work and unable to move around the city, the community kitchens fed entire families. But later, when vaccines and preventative measures improved the Covid situation, the community decided to focus their cooking on meals for the children in the community, who continued to be stuck at home, since the schools were still closed.

Because the community is so big, they decided to organize their cooking in groups, instead of setting up one big community kitchen. They divided the community into three groups, and each group set up its own smaller kitchen, with the community mothers doing most of the cooking. One of the dishes most popular with the children is *chamorado*, a delicious and fortifying hot porridge made of chocolate, sticky rice, sugar and evaporated milk. Since most of the women were busy helping their children with their studies in the morning, they got together and cooked in the community kitchens in the afternoons. They cook twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays, and the community kitchens are seen as a way to supplement people's diets in hard times.



2 Community Kitchen in Agaw-Agaw in Muntinlupa



Agaw-Agaw is a new community of 1,058 poor families who are being resettled here, in batches, after being evicted from squatter settlements on other parts of the land surrounding the New Bilibid Prison, in Muntinlupa. Because there has been no consultation with people and no plan for legalizing the tenure on the new site, the people feel they are moving from one situation of insecurity to another, and losing their houses in the process. It's a bad situation, and all this has been happening during the worst period of the pandemic. Teresa Fadriguera is a community leader in Agaw-Agaw, and she also helps the federation coordinate with other communities on the Bilibid Prison land: "Many in the community worked as construction laborers, and all construction stopped during the lockdowns. Lots of people had no work and could not get food for their families. There was serious hunger. The community kitchen we set up in Agaw-Agaw helped a lot."

The community kitchen was launched in January 2019 and continued to operate through all the government-imposed lockdowns. The objective was to improve the health and nutrition in the community at a time when people had lost their jobs in the pandemic and their houses in the eviction. By combining some small donor funds with assistance from the city's Health Department, and the barangay office, they were able to run their community kitchen for four months. Then, with support from the local Rotary Club, they continued cooking for another seven months. The community kitchen focused mostly on feeding the community's children, many of whom had become seriously malnourished. Before starting, they checked the health and weight of all the children, with help from the Barangay health workers. They continued to monitor the children's weight throughout the kitchen's operation, to see if they were getting healthier and putting on weight.

The mothers in the community had a core team to manage the kitchen and do all the purchasing of ingredients and all the cooking. They cooked three times a week, one meal each time. The cost worked out to about 60 pesos (US\$ 1.20) per meal. The meals always included vegetables, fruits, protein sources and rice. The mothers were proud that the plates were always colorful, with a lot of fresh produce. As Teresa reports, "The children did become healthier and put on weight. The meals we prepared for them regularly made a big difference."



Here a group of children in the Ati community are helping one of the mothers prepare vegetables from the communal garden for the day's lunch, which will feed all 150 people in the community.



(Photos, top to bottom) Harvesting vegetables from the Ati's communal garden; fish from the communal fish ponds; one of the mothers cooking the day's soup; the finished lizard soup, filled with vegetables and protein. (below left) Back from a snail hunt.

Lizard soup anyone?

3 Community kitchen in the Ati community in ILOILO

The Ati are an indigenous ethnic group in the Visayas region, and their story is a fascinating one. The Ati were among the first inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago and are thought to have migrated there from Borneo some 30,000 years ago. The Ati have traditionally stayed in the mountains, but over the centuries, the forces of development have encroached farther and farther into their ancestral lands, and poverty and hunger have driven some to come down among the "lowlanders" and settle in communities like this one, located on the outskirts of Iloilo City, with 45 households and a population of about 150 people. Some of the Ati in this community once lived on the streets of Iloilo, making a living by begging or selling indigenous crafts like medicinal bracelets and handmade purses. Some years ago, though, the tribe's own community church, headed by Pastor Rogelio Elosendro, was able to raise donor funds from abroad to collectively purchase the land they had been squatting on. Later, with help from the Federation, they were able to build simple bamboo houses for themselves and have planted an extensive vegetable garden.

When the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns came, even those who could work lost their jobs or means of earning. At the same time, there were very few people in the streets of Iloilo to buy handicrafts or herbs from the Ati peddlers. Things got so bad that many people in the community were only eating once or twice a day. That's why they decided to start a community kitchen, to make sure that all the people in the Ati community could eat at least one good meal every day, as long as the pandemic lasts.

Rogelio describes how their community kitchen works: "We cook every day at lunchtime, and we feed all 150 people in the community, including grown-ups and children. Our idea is that everyone in the Ati community should get one good meal each day, at lunchtime, and then they can cook their own morning and evening meals, as they are able. We assign a different family to cook the food for the community each day, with all 45 families taking their turn to cook for the others. Mostly we use the vegetables and fish and eggs we produce ourselves, in our community garden and fish ponds. But often we supplement our food with rice and other ingredients that are donated to us by other organizations. Our pastor friend in the USA, for example, sometimes supports us with funds to buy rice for the community kitchen, and many community members also donate cash for the kitchen, if they have a little extra. During the worst of the pandemic lockdown, when we couldn't go out, the mayor of Iloilo sometimes sent us fish."

The Ati people have a long tradition of living on the land, and still have great skills as hunters and foragers. These skills have come in handy during the pandemic, when it comes to running a community kitchen and feeding everyone in the community every single day. Many times, the protein-rich lizards, snakes, turtles, snails and other wild game the youngsters catch on their hunting expeditions go right into the day's soup, along with the vegetables and aromatic herbs they grow in their garden. *Lizard soup?* some visitors may gasp. But Rogelio reassures them, "It tastes just like chicken, and the Ati have their own way to cook these things, to make them delicious." (more on the Ati's community garden on page 18)



Tips from the Ati community about how to stay healthy during a pandemic

So far, there hasn't been a single Covid infection in the Ati community, and all of its 150 residents have remained quite healthy throughout the long pandemic, through all the virus mutations. Rogelio attributes this remarkable resilience to all those vegetables and all those nutritious lizard soups. So robust has their health been that there is a joke going around that maybe the blood from the Ati people would make a good vaccine, since they seem to be so strong at

resisting the Covid virus. The Ati people have also avoided hospitals, not just because they are much too expensive, but because they are full of Covid infections. When some community members have gotten colds or suffered various aches and pains during the pandemic, they have been able to treat those maladies at home with the medicinal herbs, like ginger and turmeric, which they grow right there in their sprawling community garden.

INDONESIA

Rice distribution in JRMK communities

During the early months of the Covid pandemic in Indonesia, the urban poor had an especially hard time coping with both the health and economic effects of the crisis. When the lockdowns were imposed, the poor lost jobs, earning opportunities and their means of supporting themselves. At the same time, staple foods like rice, fish, vegetables and cooking oil became increasingly scarce in the local markets, and prices climbed rapidly. It got harder and harder for the urban poor to get essential foods to feed their families - especially rice - and hunger became a serious issue.

As the rice became increasingly scarce and the prices went up, the quality of rice that was available in the markets went down. The national government has an aid program for the poor, called *Beras BULOG* (*Beras is the Indonesian word for rice, and BULOG is the acronym for the government's staple food logistics agency*), which buys and distributes inexpensive rice during what it deems to be periods of need. But as anyone in the kampungs will tell you, the *Beras BULOG* rice is very bad, and nobody likes to eat it.

The JRMK Network started right away to discuss collectively what they could do, as a network of kampung-based cooperatives, to deal with the hardships people were facing during the Covid crisis. And particularly how they could help their members get cheap and good quality rice, which is the primary staple food for Indonesians and essential for everyone's survival.

Through their partnership with UPC and other local activists, the JRMK network had links with several networks of farmers in different parts of Java. They began to contact friends they already knew in these farmer networks to see if they could find a source of good quality rice, which they could buy at a cheaper price, directly from the farmers, and then sell it at cost to their network members. That was the beginning of the network's remarkable rice distribution program, which has become one of their ongoing programs.



“ When we took the sample around to members of the cooperative, the women didn't need to cook the rice. They could just look at it and feel it in their hand to be able to judge the quality. I don't know where this knowledge comes from, but they knew the Kendeng rice was a good rice. ”

(Ms. Herdayati, a leader in the cooperative in Kampung Elektro, JRMK Network)

This community network teamed up with farmers to get good rice to hungry families in Jakarta

After gathering information about possible sources of rice and prices in several areas, the network first linked with a rice farmers' cooperative in West Java. The farmers sent a ten-kilo sample, which the JRMK then distributed to cooperative members, to give everyone a chance to test the quality of the rice. Unfortunately, that rice was found to be too dry and got the thumbs down. Next the network linked with a network of farmers in the Kendeng region, in the highlands of Central Java. This time, the rice got a more favorable review, and everyone agreed to continue collaborating with the Kendeng farmers.

Two problems emerged though - one at the supply end and one on the demand end. The cost of transporting small quantities of rice from Central Java to Jakarta was very high. The only way to reduce the transport costs would be to purchase rice in much larger quantities of at least eight tons (8,000 kilos) per load. At the same time, cooperative members were experiencing serious problems of lost income because of the lockdowns. So even though the rice was cheaper than the market price and better quality, many still couldn't afford it.

So the JRMK network began calling for public donations, using social media and crowd-sourcing. Their goal was to raise enough funds to provide a 50% subsidy for cooperative members to purchase the rice. They raised 47 million rupiah (US\$ 3,350) and then sold the rice to cooperative members at a 50% subsidized price of 5,000 rupiah (US\$ 35 cents) per kilo, which was half the rate the network had sold the rice to members before - and already well below the market rate. To make it fair, they set a limit that each cooperative member could buy a maximum ten kilos of rice at the subsidized rate, per cycle.

This good-quality and inexpensive rice became a lifeline for urban communities during the hard times. After the donations had been spent, the Covid situation in Indonesia was starting to improve, and people were earning again. The rice distribution scheme moved into the next stage, in which the network developed a sustainable system for buying and distributing the rice at cost, without any subsidy.

Besides eliminating all the middle-men, who usually swallow up most of the profits from buying and selling rice, the relationship between these urban and rural community networks has also bolstered the campaign of the rice farmers in Kendeng to resist being evicted from their ancestral land to make way for an environmentally catastrophic lime mining operation. By January 2022, the network had purchased and distributed about 60 tons (60,000 kilos) of rice, in seven cycles, and the distribution project continues to this day.



No profiteering on basic needs . . .

Whatever small profits are generated from the selling of the rice (after paying for the transport and the courier team) are divided between the local cooperative (which keeps 70%) and the JRMK Network (which gets 30%). But as Gugun pointed out, "One of the very important principles of the cooperatives in the JRMK network is that the purpose of the cooperative is to serve the members, to help the members meet their basic needs and make their lives better in various ways. If a cooperative profits from people's basic needs, they are no different than the usual middlemen and capitalists. So if the cooperative runs a business unit that supplies essential needs

like rice or eggs or cooking gas, then there shouldn't be much profit. And if there is a small margin or profit, then it should be used for the operational costs of the cooperative." And that's what happens. In Kampung Marlina, for example, they use the small profit they have generated from six cycles of selling the Kendeng rice for the cooperative's operational costs, meetings and transport. When JRMK organized their yearly evaluation meeting recently, on the outskirts of Jakarta, the representatives from the Marlina Cooperative had their transport and food expenses covered by the cooperative. This makes both the cooperatives and the network more self-supporting.



This community network not only buys and distributes rice to needy families - it also grows it

Chum Phae is a small trading and manufacturing town in the fertile rice-growing province of Khon Kaen, in northeastern Thailand. With support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program, the very active community network there has built 13 housing projects (with 1,052 houses), and promoted all sorts of activities to improve other aspects of people's lives and well-being - many in close partnership with the local authority: their own city development fund, a "birth to death" welfare program, a housing insurance scheme, community libraries, elderly and youth groups, livelihood projects and community enterprises.

The community network also manages its own collective rice farm on the outskirts of town. The 6.08 hectare piece of farmland had been foreclosed and was being sold cheaply by the Government Housing Bank. The network purchased the land in 2012, with a 2 million baht (US\$ 62,500) loan from CODI. The original idea was to keep the land for meeting housing needs in the future, when land in the city might become too scarce or too costly. That was always the focus, but in the mean time, the network decided to cultivate the land, and make use of their collective land bank to boost the health and food security of the city's poor by producing rice and healthy food. And that's just what it does. Besides rice, the farm has all kinds of fruit trees, fish ponds, chicken coops and areas for growing vegetables. And every product from the farm - grown according to strict organic principles - is a direct investment in the health and well-being of Chum Phae's poorest citizens.

The network keeps adjusting their system for managing the collective rice farm, according to what works and what doesn't. Under the current system, the rice fields are rented out in sections, to community members who organize themselves into groups of eight or nine people - one group from each of the 13 communities - who do the rice farming work together. The land rental rate is 1,000 baht per rai (US\$ 208 per hectare) per year, and the land rent goes into a special rice farm fund. Since the rice fields cover 27 rai (4.32 hectare) of the farm, that means the rice farm fund earns 27,000 baht (US\$ 900) per year on rent.

Rice bank: When the community farmers harvest their twice-yearly crop, they usually keep enough rice for their families to eat, and then sell the rest, to make a reasonable income. But instead of selling their surplus rice to the unscrupulous rice mills, at whatever miserable low rate is prevailing in the market, as most farmers have no choice but to do, they sell their surplus rice to their own rice bank, which they set up in 2018. The rice bank stores the rice for a waiting period of three months. During that time, if the market price of rice goes up - as it often does after harvest - the farmers can buy back their "deposit" of rice at the same rate, and then sell it in the market at the higher rate, to increase their earnings. At the end of the waiting period, whatever rice is left in the rice bank is sold at the prevailing rate, and the profits go into the collective rice farm fund.

The rice bank had only been running for two years when the pandemic hit. Even in a small town like Chum Phae, many people were suffering from lost jobs, lost income and difficulties getting enough food to feed their families. The enterprising community network lost no time in finding creative ways to respond to the crisis. One of their projects involved developing a system for buying all the surplus rice produced on the farm at a fair price (first using its own network resources and later grants from CODI) and then distributing the rice, for free, in 5-kilo bags, to families identified by the women's groups in each community as being in most urgent need.

During the 2021 year, the network bought six tons (6,000 kilos) of surplus rice from the community rice farmers to distribute to families in the 13 communities in the network. Because the effects of the pandemic weren't as bad in Chum Phae as in larger cities, the network decided to donate and truck two tons of that rice to the urban networks in badly-hit Bangkok, as a direct, people-to-people gesture of solidarity.

THAILAND

Rice distribution in Chum Phae

A lot of the community-managed Covid projects in Thailand have dealt with food, in one way or another. Especially in the first year, when people were out of work, out of money and hungry. In cities, where people in poor communities were locked down and had few options, urban community networks set up community kitchens and organized projects to deliver packets of essential food to people in need.

Lots of network-driven food projects were designed specifically to help people get rice, which in Thailand is the staple food and essential to survival. Some urban community networks bought rice collectively in bulk, at a cheaper price, and then sold it at cost, or at a subsidized rate, to their members. Some urban networks took advantage of links with rural rice-farming networks to buy rice directly and more cheaply from the farmers, cutting out the middlemen, and distributing it to needy families, at cost or at discounted rates, with CODI grants or their own emergency funds helping to subsidize the price.

The community network in Uttaradit used the distribution of rice as an incentive to promote collective saving and greater self-reliance. The network used a grant from CODI's special Covid support program to set up a rice fund, which bought rice in bulk and then sold it to community members at cost - 100 baht (US\$ 3.30) for a 5-kilo bag. When people purchased the rice, the money they paid was used to buy more rice, so the fund revolved, with no profit and no loss. If people joined the savings group, they could get the rice right away, but pay back the 100 baht at the end of the month. In that way, the rice distribution was used as an incentive to people to save.

One Covid rice distribution project in northeastern Thailand is a standout: in this rice project, the community network in the city of Chum Phae not only distributed rice to their own needy community members - and to out of work friends in Bangkok - but they also produced all that rice themselves, on their collectively-owned rice farm. Here is the story.





BANGLADESH

Community gardens in two cities focus on children's needs

Jhenaidah is a small district capital in the lush, rice-growing heartland of southwest Bangladesh. The town, which is built on the banks of the Nabaganga River, is very old and is sprinkled with ancient mosques and temples. There are 81 low-income communities in Jhenaidah, and some 30,000 people (11% of the city's population) live in these settlements.

Since 2014, many of these communities have been linking together as a citywide network, with support from a group of community architects called Co.Creation architects. Their partnership - in collaboration with Jhenaidah's progressive mayor and other local organizations - has produced two important housing projects so far, some settlement improvement projects and a thriving network of community-based women's savings groups.

During the first Covid lockdown in March 2021, the architects had to limit their visits to the communities. But in phone calls with community people, they came to know that without being able to go out to earn, people didn't have money to buy food to feed their families. Rationed rice from the government was a help, but buying vegetables for many became very difficult.

Meanwhile, in some of the communities, men and women who'd lost their jobs had started cultivating vegetables in the small spaces around their houses and on whatever bits and pieces of empty land they could find. An enthusiastic young community woman named Tripti began going around filming these early gardening efforts on her phone and sending her videos to the architects, to help them stay in touch with what was happening. Besides providing much-needed vegetables, the gardening was also clearly serving as a kind of therapeutic activity for younger people who were stuck at home with nothing to do after the schools had been closed and were keen to get involved.

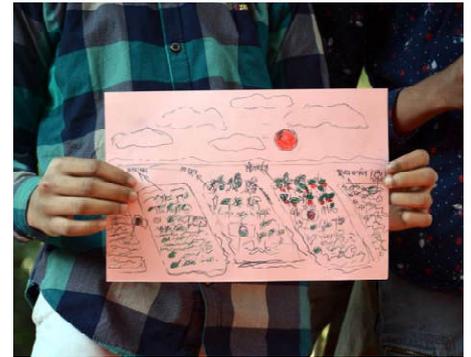
For more information about the community gardens in Jhenaidah, please contact Kabir:
e-mail: khondaker.kabir@gmail.com

These gardens in **JHENAI DAH** are a source of food, and also a form of play for out-of-school children

With the idea of engaging the city's children who were stuck at home during the Covid school closures, the municipality announced a video competition, asking children what they can do to improve their communities. A lot of the ideas that the kids submitted had to do with cleaning up their communities, making the soil more fertile and planting flowers and vegetables. That was how the community gardens began, and with a small grant from ACHR's Community Architects Network (CAN), the architects began helping nudge all these good ideas into a citywide community garden program.

In one of the communities, a school teacher named Alamgir had started a children's library. He and his daughter gathered a group of about 30 children and started the first garden, right in front of the library. After cleaning the area, they bought seeds and a watering can (which the children loved to use) and made a fence so that goats wouldn't eat the plants. The children drew colored plans for their garden, and when the time came for planting the seeds, some of the more junior gardeners planted chocolates, in hopes they would grow too.

On January 1, 2021, the architects organized a day-long picnic with all the communities interested in community gardening, to share a good meal and agree on a plan for the gardens. Teams from about a dozen communities came, and the mothers brought lunch for everyone. A month later, the District Commissioner of Jhenaidah invited all the children who had started to garden by then to come meet him. About 150 people came, and they planted a ceremonial row of corn at the District Commissioner's house and cleaned a small area beside the Nabaganga River for another garden. This was a big turning point; once the city authorities got involved, the adults became serious too.



Before long, the children in 30 communities were making their gardens, and these gardens were full of whimsy and creativity. In most of the communities, the children chose the dirtiest, most trash-filled place for creating their gardens, so that growing food and managing the area's solid waste could go together. The adults helped clean up the area and prepare the soil, and gardening teams from one community began going to help teams in other places. After cleaning came the designing and planting part, with frequent celebrations and joint meals, to which everyone contributes. Most of the gardens have a local mentor - a youth club or a teacher or an enthusiastic parent - and this is important, because keeping a group of high-energy children focussed on the task of cultivating, watering and looking after a garden, day after day, calls for some persistent guidance.

Whenever a new garden is created, the architects present the children a watering can to celebrate. In a show of civic support, the owner of a local seed shop gave the architects a 50% discount on all the seeds they buy for the garden project. But many of the groups are already developing their own seed banks and exchanging seeds with other groups. Meetings are organized often, and the meetings always include two important things: a big delicious meal and a visit by at least one person who is important in the city. Sometimes the important person is the mayor or a city official, sometimes it's an organic gardening practitioner who works in the field of environment or education. Having these dignitaries spending the day among the local communities and children and eating with them gives everyone a confirmation that what they are doing - and growing - together is important and dignified. For these celebratory events, the architects always print out a big banner full of photos of the children and their gardens, and this gives a lot of excitement to the children.





(Left) Ten-year old Abdur Rahman waters some of the plants in the children's "high-rise" crate garden in Gabtoli.

(Photos right, top to bottom) Children sketch their garden ideas; bringing home the recycled crates to make the planter boxes; selecting plants at the nursery; celebrating the planting of a crate garden in one of Gabtoli's narrow lanes.



There isn't much space for growing anything in Gabtoli in **DHAKA**, so this garden is grown in crates

Gabtoli is a sprawling housing colony for municipal sweepers in Dhaka, where 800 poor families squeeze together in ramshackle tin houses on tiny 12 x 15-foot plots. Over the past two years, a group of young community architects (Platform of Community Action and Architecture) have been working with the women's savings groups in Gabtoli to help them design and build new houses which demonstrate innovative ways to expand living space and bring light and air into even very small rowhouses. One of the outcomes of that project was the children's "crate garden," which is described here by Mahmuda Alam from POCOA:

Abdur Rahman, a boy of 10, lives in a 380 square foot house in Gabtoli with his sister Nurjahan, his brother Yakub and his parents. His friends in the neighborhood live in similar houses, sometimes with even bigger families. Since the houses are small, the children spend a lot of time outside, playing near the house. There isn't much open space at all in Gabtoli, and a lot of the community's daily activities take place in the narrow alleyways: preparations for cooking, drying clothes, socializing, playing. The lack of community space can cause troubles and put a strain on community relationships.

In Gabtoli, all the schools had been closed for almost one and a half years because of Covid, and the children had absolutely nothing to do. Our project began with Abdur Rahman and his friends in the neighborhood by searching in this densely crowded community for a place to play. For children especially, Gabtoli is a real wasteland when it comes to play options: no trees to climb, no swings or jungle-gyms to play on, no pool to cool off in, no trees to pick fruit from, no place for picnics, no field for playing cricket, no place to plant flowers.

After an initial survey, the children confirmed that a small space near the communal water tap and the narrow alleyways in the community, which are scarcely two meters wide, were all they had to work with. So they decided to figure out a way to make mini-gardens there. Nobody believed there could be any kind of garden in those dark, narrow, dusty spaces. But the kids worked with our team to get some recycled plastic crates, which we lined with recycled cement bags to make planter boxes and placed along the edge of the narrow lanes. Then we got some potting soil and went to the local nursery to find some plants - fruit trees, flowers, climbing vines, tomato plants, shrubs. With guidance from the people at the nursery, the children chose plants that didn't need a lot of water, since there are always long queues for water at Gabtoli's few communal taps.

To everyone's surprise, the children's crate gardens flourished, and some of those grim Gabtoli lanes began blossoming with color and scent. The children's next idea was to expand their crate gardens vertically. Our team helped to fabricate some inexpensive stands to stack up the crates and make vertical gardens, using bits of steel rebar welded together. The children now have plans to festoon both sides of the 50-foot wide road that passes through the community with these high-rise crate gardens. The little crate-farmers have also started a seedling bank, which crate-farmers in other parts of the community can borrow from.

For more information about the Gabtoli children's "crate garden" please contact Mahmuda:
e-mail: aritra.ahmed@gmail.com

More community gardens in Dhaka . . .



Over the past two years, during the worst of the pandemic and lockdowns, networks of women's savings groups in different parts of Dhaka have been working with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to learn how to cultivate vegetables and fruits on whatever bits of available land they can find, inside or nearby their communities. Some of their gardens are in densely-crowded inner city slums. Others are in peri-urban settlements where there's a lot more space - like this roomy garden in Gazipur (photo at left), on the outskirts of Dhaka, where Mosammat Kamrun Nahar is proudly inspecting her pumpkin patch. Besides providing much-needed, nutritious food during very hard times, some of these gardens are also providing a way to earn a little extra

income. In the FAO's training program, community members learn how to prepare the soil, select seeds, manage pests and fertilizer, and look after their plants so they thrive and produce a bountiful harvest. A team of 20 experienced community gardeners now act as "master trainers" and go around helping other communities start their own community gardens. People grow pumpkin, eggplant, bitter melon, okra, spinach, guava, jujube, papaya and lemon. In some gardens - even the ones growing on very small bits of leftover land - the harvest has come in such quantities that these new urban gardeners have been able to help feed their neighbors and friends as well.

For more information about the community gardens in Dhaka, please contact John Taylor:
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PHILIPPINES

Community gardens do more than feed hungry families

During the height of the pandemic in the Philippines, multiple lockdowns and “enhanced community quarantine” prevented the urban poor from going out to earn. Without income, families couldn’t put food on the table, and there was a lot of hunger. At the same time, interruptions in transport and commerce drove food costs higher and higher. Many families coped by eating fewer or less nutritionally complete meals, relying on donated staples like rice, instant noodles and canned goods - or just going hungry. The government responded by distributing some food packs or cash aid to poor households, but these measures fell far short of meeting real needs.

Many families began finding small spaces within their communities, or on bits of borrowed land in the city to grow vegetables or raise animals like chicken or fish, for both eating and selling. Some without much space grew leafy greens in pots and recycled containers. But even though the Philippines is a hugely fertile country with favorable conditions for growing just about anything, conditions in densely-crowded informal settlements in cities like the ones in Metro Manila are not great for growing things: lack of space, lack of light, bad soil and polluted water.

The Homeless People’s Federation used the crisis to partner with local governments and other support organizations to initiate more substantial and more collective community gardens in several cities - some on land within the communities and some on borrowed public or private land nearby. By activating communities, unlocking their collective development force and collaborating with other stakeholders, these community garden projects have been able to do much more than families could do individually.

These gardens are feeding hundreds of hungry families with nutritious produce. At the same time, they are providing new tools for collaboration and new avenues to bring vulnerable communities into the federation’s program of saving, livelihood and housing. In these two pages, we profile four of these community gardens.

1 Community garden in the Ati community in Iloilo

The Ati are an indigenous ethnic group in the Visayas region, and were among the first inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago. Over the centuries, though, the forces of development have encroached farther and farther into their ancestral lands in the hills, and most of the Ati are now very poor and excluded from public entitlements like education and healthcare. This Ati community, with 150 people, is one of the poorest in Iloilo, but some years ago, they were able to raise donor funds to collectively purchase the land they had been squatting on and build simple bamboo houses for themselves.

They have a small garden where they grow vegetables and herbs, which they use for their own cooking and for selling in the market. They also raise fish in ponds, to cook and to sell. During the pandemic, when many lost their informal incomes and the garden had become the community’s main source of food, the local government agreed to their request to use some vacant land just outside of the community to expand their garden and grow more vegetables. They also use that government land to raise chickens, for meat and eggs. As community leader Rogelio Elosendro says, “The garden really helps us a lot, so everyone can have something to eat, even if they have no money or job at all.”



2 Community garden in the SAJUSSA community in Davao



The San Juan Seaside Settlers Association (SAJUSSA) is a sprawling community of 104 poor households built on a strip of land along Davao’s coastline, where it continues to be vulnerable to typhoons and coastal erosion. Early on, when joblessness and hunger were becoming serious issues, a group of families in SAJUSSA began setting up an unusual community garden on a small piece of land they got permission to use in the protected mangrove area adjacent to the community. Because the land is in the coastal area, the soil is saline and bad for growing vegetables.

So they made their garden in all kinds of boxes, including some recycled refrigerators they buy from a local junk shop. As community leader Edna Sernada described it, “We fill them with good planting soil, which we enrich with compost from our kitchen waste, and grow medicinal herbs and vegetables like tomatoes, radishes, leafy greens, bitter melon and cucumbers.” On weekends - especially on Sundays - lots of people (including children and young people) come to help tend the “box garden.” They share the vegetables they grow among the gardeners, for their own dinner tables, and sell whatever surplus they have left to community members and neighbors, at prices that are cheaper than the market.

3 Community garden in Agaw Agaw in Muntinlupa

Agaw-Agaw is a new community being formed by 1,058 families who were evicted from one part of the vast public land surrounding the New Bilibid Prison and resettled on another part a few kilometers away. The new site has no basic services or access road, and most of the families are living in temporary shacks, in very bad conditions. The situation is very difficult and insecure, and has been made worse by the fact that the resettlement happened during the pandemic. The federation has been helping the people to undertake various activities which bring them together and build their strength to negotiate with the government for secure land tenure.

One of those activities is a community vegetable garden, which the people have cultivated on a piece of adjacent public land the government has given them permission to use. Throughout the pandemic, the price of vegetables in the market continued to soar, and because of the community garden, the 33 families taking part in the garden project have been able to reduce food expenses for their families and still eat well. They all help with the garden work and take turns doing the watering and weeding. Besides ordinary vegetables like cucumber, tomatoes, pumpkin, bitter melon, and onions, they also grow yellow ginger, oregano, *kalamansi* and very spicy orange-colored chilis called locally *siling labuyo*.





“ If all the city governments could do what our mayor has done in our city, to help make these gardens on idle land, nobody would be hungry. ”

(Ofelia Bogotto, federation leader and urban gardener)



4 Community gardens in QUEZON CITY

With a population of 3 million people, Quezon City is the largest of the 16 cities in Metro Manila - largest in population and largest in urban poverty, with half the city's population living in squalor and insecurity in informal settlements. Early in the pandemic, when food was already becoming a serious problem for the poor, the city's progressive mayor, Joy Belmonte, initiated an urban farming project to promote greater food sustainability. Instead of a top-down, government-run program, though, the mayor got grassroots organizations - and especially women - to be the doers, identifying idle land in the city, negotiating to use it and then converting it into vegetable gardens, with technical and negotiating support from the city. The Homeless People's Federation was one of several groups invited to join the project, and the community gardens federation members subsequently developed became some of the project's showcase gardens:

FIRST COMMUNITY GARDEN IN BARANGAY PAYATAS: The federation's first garden was on a 450 square meter piece of private land in Amlac Village, in Barangay Payatas ('barangay' is the term for urban subdistricts in Philippines cities). After getting permission from the landowner, a small group of poor mothers from nearby communities prepared the soil and began planting vegetables, with seed kits and technical assistance provided by the municipal government's agriculture office. The vegetables the women planted grew and their group of community gardeners soon grew to 38. The garden soon expanded into a much larger piece of adjacent land, where a new group of mostly women gardeners began raising vegetables for their own family's consumption and to sell for income.

SECOND COMMUNITY GARDEN IN BARANGAY TANDANG SORA: A few months later, the city invited the federation to help develop another new community garden – the largest yet – on a 1.2-hectare plot of idle private land in the Pasong Tamo area of Barangay Tandang Sora, which the city had negotiated to borrow. The city's idea was to use this large plot not only for community gardens, but as a demonstration farm for training more people from vulnerable communities to grow healthy, organic vegetables and produce other food such as eggs, poultry and fish. The federation was initially allotted 200 square meters for their part of the garden, where they organized a group of 60 urban farmers from nearby poor communities to grow vegetables. Since large portions of the 1.2-hectare site were still available, the municipal government asked the federation to mobilize more community groups to come and join this large community garden and start cultivating vegetable plots. During the harvest, all the communities pitch in to help, so even though people tend their plots individually, the spirit in the garden is very much collective.

By May 2021, there were 160 community vegetable gardens on vacant lots all over Quezon City. Eleven hectares of idle land had been turned into urban vegetable farms, and these farms were providing nutritious food and additional income to thousands of low-income urban farmers and their families. Municipal governments in other parts of the country followed the Quezon City project and wanted to replicate this community gardening project in their cities.

"Most of us are people who have lived in big cities for a long time. It's really a different feeling we get when we do this gardening every day. It's good exercise and it makes us feel happy. A few hours of gardening can lessen our stress levels." (Ruby Papeleras)



Using gardening as a tool to address structural issues of land and housing

The Quezon City government is using the urban gardening project to make the city's poor communities more food secure by helping them to produce their own food, during the pandemic and afterwards. But in the longer term, they also want to tackle the city's serious problems of poverty and insecure housing by helping communities in the city to take the lead in getting land and developing better housing. As Ruby Papeleras, a federation leader and urban gardener described it, "The local government invited the federation to be part of this garden project

because they know we are promoting savings and doing housing. They understand that urban gardening can be a good starting point for vulnerable communities to organize themselves, then start saving and later form housing cooperatives or develop land and housing projects with help from government housing programs. For all that, the federation has a lot of experience and we are ready to share our experience. While we work on the urban farming, we are also organizing some of the community gardeners to start savings groups."

THAILAND

Community gardens become a lifeline during the pandemic

There is a couplet carved in stone over the entrance to a 13th Century royal palace in Sukhothai which reads, “*Nai nam mee plaa, nai naa mee khao.*” Those simple words, which are thought to be the first evidence of the Thai language being written down, mean this in English:

*In the water there are fish.
In the fields there is rice.*

It's hard to imagine a better description of a place where all the conditions to support life are so gloriously abundant as they are in Thailand. But that natural abundance has been badly compromised by the forces of development, urbanization, changing agricultural practices, monoculture and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Not to mention climate change and the rise of corporate control over food. As a result, Thai people - especially the poor - are eating food that is less nutritious, more dangerous and more likely to cause all sorts of maladies.

But the news isn't all bad. In the past few years, community networks in cities around Thailand have been finding innovative ways to grow vegetables and fruits and produce healthy food on leftover bits of land, both inside and outside their communities. These community gardens may not solve all the problems of hunger and food insecurity, but they have improved nutrition, lowered food expenses and built greater self-sufficiency in food among some of the country's most vulnerable citizens. They have become a kind of green welfare that is accessible to all. It's become a movement now in Thailand's urban poor communities. Since the Covid-19 crisis hit, and so many people have lost their jobs and their ability to buy food, community gardens have become even more of a lifeline for the poor.



“ We poor people may feel that there is little we can do to eat better, except to make more money to buy better food. But that's not true. There is a lot we can do to produce our own healthy food, even in crowded urban communities. And food is another issue – like housing or land or finance – that we can use to make ourselves, our communities and our networks stronger. ”

(Mae Nong, senior community leader from Chum Phae)

COMMUNITY GARDENS: The need that became a project that became a national movement . . .

Community gardening has been part of the national Thai community movement's agenda since 2013, when the urban community networks collaborated with the Thai Government's Health Promotion Foundation to develop community-managed projects in which community members began growing safe, healthy, organic vegetables and fruits in pots, planter boxes and on common land and around their houses in low-income communities in cities across Thailand.

The project was later expanded with support from CODI. By 2020, about half of Thailand's low-income urban communities had become green: growing their own organic vegetables, improving their community environments with vegetable gardens and fruit trees, reducing their expenditure on food and empowering community members (and especially children and youth) to learn how to garden, to nourish themselves and to take greater control over the food they eat. A process which began as a project intervention had mushroomed into a national green community movement and become a major part of the Thai urban community network agenda.

The Covid crisis has added a new layer of urgency and relevance to these community gardens, and provided an unexpected opportunity for an enormous scaling up of Thailand's nation-wide community garden movement. It didn't take long for the effects of the pandemic, and the lockdowns that came with it, to reach poor communities - especially in the country's larger cities, which quickly became pandemic epicenters. With loss of jobs and opportunities to earn, food security and hunger became big issues right away. Some people were able to migrate back home to their villages, where they would at least be able to eat. But for the many who stayed in the city and had only the market to supply their nutritional needs, food became a serious problem.

With support from CODI's Covid program (see page 38-39), the networks in many cities began inviting communities to develop projects to improve their own food security by starting community gardens and producing their own food. Communities got very creative and started their gardens in many ways. If there was enough vacant space inside the community, they would plant their gardens there. But if there wasn't much land, they would start by letting each family grow their own vegetables in the small spaces in front of their houses, or even in pots. Many communities were able to negotiate permission to cultivate vacant pieces of nearby public or private land. In many cities, the community networks helped with these negotiations and partnered with public and private land owners who have allowed communities to cultivate vacant plots and raise food.

The five community gardens we profile in the following eight pages are just a few examples from the ever-expanding portfolio of green innovation from Thailand's communities.

Gardens are a network-boosting tool too

Each city in Thailand has a network of poor communities, and the first thing our networks focused on was solving our housing problems, with the Baan Mankong program. But after upgrading our housing and feeling more secure, many people feel there is no need to link together with their neighbors or with other communities any more. But people in our communities are still poor and still have lots of other problems and needs - needs we can't meet alone.

Housing and well-being go together, so we began making our collective systems within the community to bring people back together and address different aspects of our lives. Community gardens are part of that. When we work together to grow and produce our own healthy food, we are improving our health and self-sufficiency.

In many of the cities that took part in the early stages of the green community program, the community networks had slowed down or were inactive, without much energy or activities. We used the gardening to boost those city networks and get everyone involved. Because growing vegetables is something simple and much-needed, that poor people can do right away, it's easy to link people together around that issue, and the networks start getting active again. Community gardens are a tool that can help revive the networks and get them back in the active mode. Now we have gotten 70 cities to revitalize their community networks, by producing food within their city and their communities and using the food issue to link with their city government also. (Nim-Aroon Junsooksri, community leader from Nakhon Sawan, speaking in January 2019)





THAI COMMUNITY GARDEN #1

Collective gardening is both a singular and a plural verb in this city

Chum Phae is a small trading and manufacturing town in the fertile rice-growing Khon Kaen Province, in northeastern Thailand. Though small, the town has its share of the usual urbanization problems: in-migration of poor rural people, rising land prices and housing costs and increasing commercial pressure on urban land - all leading to problems of eviction and lack of affordable housing.

As Sanong Ruaisungnoen ("Mae Nong"), the chairperson of Chum Phae's community network says, "When we started our savings, network and upgrading process back in 2004, Chum Phae was full of slums, where living conditions were bad. And people had no pride, no courage, no togetherness, no idea what to do." Since then, this very strong and very big-thinking community network has gone from strength to strength.

With support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program, the network has completed 13 housing projects (with 1,052 houses). Having solved most of the city's housing problems, the network has promoted many activities to improve other aspects of people's lives and make sure nobody is left behind - many in close partnership with the local authority: their own city development fund, a "birth to death" welfare program, a housing insurance scheme, community libraries, elderly and youth groups, livelihood projects and community enterprises to produce bottled drinking water and raise mushrooms.

The Chum Phae network has also incorporated community garden and food security ideas in several innovative ways. Most of the upgraded communities in the city are bursting with fruit trees and small vegetable patches. They have also put their resources together to buy a big piece of land on the outskirts of the city where they have developed a collective rice farm (see page 15), which provides cheap, organic rice and produce to community members, and also serves as a land bank for future housing needs. All these initiatives figured prominently in the network's strategies to help their members survive the troubles of the Covid pandemic.

Every nook and cranny of space gets cultivated in the Baan Rom Yen community in CHUM PHAE

All of the 13 Baan Mankong communities in Chum Phae have found ways to "green" their environment: planting trees for shade and fruit, growing flowers and herbs and vegetables on spare bits of land and in pots - and even raising fish and poultry. The Baan Rom Yen community, with its 30 modest one and two-story houses, makes a good example of this. This is Mae Nong's community, and it was one of the city's pioneering Baan Mankong projects, in which a group of squatters got together, formed a housing cooperative and negotiated to collectively lease a plot of public land on which to build their new community.

Fifteen years later, this little community has been transformed into an oasis of abundance. Despite having no big pieces of land for a more proper vegetable garden, most of the houses are festooned with hibiscus, pomegranate, papaya, bananas, and with pots in which all sorts of herbs and vegetables and flowers are growing. The small spaces behind and between the houses have likewise been turned into pocket gardens, where green onions, coriander, chilis, lemongrass and leafy greens spill out of raised beds and all manner of unconventional planters. Mae Nong says "You start growing things in pots and in small leftover spaces between the houses, and gradually develop. It's like making something from nothing."

Some families grow things in pots raised up on recycled concrete pipes, and Mae Nong explains that this innovation came about to stop the community's many dogs from peeing on them. "People grow different things, so they can all share and exchange produce. No need for everyone to grow everything they need. One person grows coriander, another grows eggplant, another has good chili plants, another has a big lime tree. People can grow anything, and most share with others."



The rule here is that everyone can pick and eat these vegetables. "A funny thing happens psychologically," Mae Nong says. "When sharing is the rule and everyone can pick whatever vegetables and fruits they like, everyone takes just a modest share and grows their own vegetables to contribute." A recent community visitor from Cambodia was astonished at this and said that in Phnom Penh, if somebody grew such lovely vegetables in a pot like this, others would steal them in no time. Mae Nong said there were no problems like that here. "If all the households have pots filled with vegetables, what need is there to steal?"

"If we go on the basis of sharing and giving, those who steal will feel bad and may even start growing something themselves, to share with others. It's so important to believe in people's goodness and then make your system based on that. On the basis of giving and trust, we can build a community where everyone contributes, everyone is responsible. Trust is the most important thing."

At one end of the community, next to the children's library, a small garden is surrounded by a low wooden fence. Anyone can pick the vegetables growing in this garden too, and everyone helps cultivate and look after them. Mae Nong uses this little garden as an "indicator" of people's well-being: if she notices that a family comes and picks vegetables there several times a month, that's a sign they have little money to buy food, and so she'll go talk to them and see what's the problem, and how to help.





THAI COMMUNITY GARDEN #2

No such thing as a space too small for growing fruits and veg

Many urban poor communities - even the upgraded ones - are so crowded that there isn't room enough for people, much less for growing vegetables. But cramped conditions haven't stopped a lot of communities in Thailand from finding imaginative ways to grow vegetables and produce food - perhaps not all that they need, but enough to give residents the sweet taste of self-sufficiency.

The Koh Klang community makes a good example of this, for they have found ways to use every nook and cranny of unused space in their densely-packed 4,800 square meter community to produce food. Koh Klang is a very old informal settlement of 58 households, built on an island within a canal which leads into the Chao Phraya River, in Bangkok's Klong Toey District. The community is smack dab in the middle of the city, with skyscrapers, billboards and roaring elevated expressways on all sides.

For many years, there had been problems of drug addiction and conflicts in the community, as well as accusations from neighboring buildings that the people in Koh Klang were polluting the river and generally being a blight on the neighborhood. In 2008, a terrible fire swept through the rickety wooden houses in the community. The people in Koh Klang decided to use the fire, which had reduced the whole island to ashes, as an opportunity to organize themselves and start all over again.

First they registered as a housing cooperative, then they negotiated a long-term lease to their land, and then, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong Program, they completely rebuilt their houses and infrastructure - all with good collaboration from the land owning agency (Crown Property Bureau) and the District Authority. The ingenious community garden they incorporated into the design of their new housing project quickly became a model for others, and turned out to be a god-send during the Covid crisis.

Turning a crowded settlement in inner-city BANGKOK into one big communal fridge

During an ACHR regional meeting on the subject of poor communities and food security, in December 2017, a group of community visitors from Cambodia, Nepal and Thailand were invited to make a tour of Koh Klang and have dinner with the community people. This was two years before the Covid pandemic hit Bangkok, but when it did, this community's garden proved to be a life-saving amenity for the many vendors and informal workers who found themselves unable to earn and unable to feed their families. For that reason, this earlier-told story has much to offer in ideas and spirit to the cumulative wisdom of Thailand's community Covid gardens. One of the many enthusiastic guides during that December 2017 visit was Khun Ew, who is the secretary of the housing cooperative and an active leader in the Koh Klang community. These notes are drawn from Khun Ew's presentation:

After the housing project in Koh Klang was finished, all the families here had big housing loans to repay. Most of us still had low-paying jobs as vendors and daily wage laborers, so it was crucial for us to reduce our living expenses and increase our incomes, so that we could make our housing loan payments. We began to develop a variety of community projects which expanded our redevelopment process in different ways. Growing vegetables, producing food and boosting our economic and environmental well-being were a big part of that.

The focus was always on working together, and solving our problems together, as a community. We started with small projects to help us reduce our household expenses and foster a sense of belonging. Then, as we got more confident, we took on larger projects to address other social and environmental problems and tackle other needs in the community - many in collaboration with the District Authority and other agencies. We organized cultural programs, youth projects, elderly exercise programs and outings. We also set up our own community loan fund and a "one-baht-a-day" welfare program that we manage together, which takes care of everyone "from birth-to-death". As part of our redevelopment, we decided to follow the principles of self-sufficiency that were promoted by Thailand's late king, even though the size of our land is very limited. We took self sufficiency to mean sufficiency in food, in waste-management and in the environment:

- 1 COMMUNITY PRODUCTS:** We make our own community products for every day use like shampoo, soap, bug spray and aloe vera gel, so we don't have to buy them and can reduce our household expenses.
- 2 WATER TREATMENT:** Our solar-powered water treatment plant takes polluted water from the river, filters and purifies it and makes it clean enough to use for watering all the plants in the community.
- 3 KITCHEN FILTERS:** We make our own grease trap waste-water filters, and instal them in all the kitchens in the community. These filters keep the fats from cooking from finding their way into the canal.
- 4 NATURAL FERTILIZER:** As part of our program to manage our waste, we collect all our vegetable cuttings and kitchen scraps use it to produce our own natural organic fertilizer, in both liquid and solid forms.
- 5 GARDEN COMPOST:** We also produce our own compost and raise our own red worms for vermiculture, and both of these help improve and fertilize the soil in our planting beds and flower pots.
- 6 GARBAGE SEPARATION:** All the waste from the community that's not organic gets sorted into paper, plastic, glass, metal and hazardous bins, which are collected later by the District Authority.
- 7 RECYCLE CRAFTS:** We use a lot of recyclable waste materials like drinks cartons, plastic packing, drinking straws and paper to make different kinds of handicraft products we can both use and sell.
- 8 CANAL CLEANING:** Every year, we organize canal-cleaning festivals, where we go out in boats and gather floating trash and use the EM ("Effective Micro-organism") balls we make ourselves to help reduce pollution in the canal around the community.





“ This garden is our fridge beside the house. When we want to cook, no need to go to the market. We can just step outside the door and pick whatever we need. ”

(Khun Ew, Koh Klang Community)



This garden belongs to everyone . . .

Even though the open spaces in Koh Klang are very tiny, every square inch of our community is filled with trees, plants and flowers, in pots or in the ground, or hanging from trees or from the railings along the river. And most of the plants are for eating or for medicinal purposes. The garden is divided into zones, and families living within each zone take on the responsibility of watering and looking after the plants growing near their houses.

The garden belongs to everyone. The rule here is that anyone who wants to take the herbs and vegetables and fruits and mushrooms for their own use is welcome to do so. And that's just what we all do. When I'm cooking dinner, I can get some coriander from over there, a few stems of green onions from over there, and some Thai basil leaves from the pot right in front of my house. And of course this is Thailand, so there are chillies of all kinds growing everywhere. Our mushroom cultivation has been especially successful, and we're encouraging everyone to use them in their soups and stir-fries.

We started growing a few things soon after the housing project was finished. But our self-sufficiency gardening got a big boost in 2013 from the Green Healthy Communities Program, which is run by our national urban community network, with support from CODI and the Thai Health Foundation. Now Koh Klang has become a "learning center" for economic development and self-sufficiency in Klong Toey District. That means that it's our job to link with the 46 other poor communities in the district, teach them about our various development initiatives, show them what we've done and transfer to others the knowledge we've built as a community over the last ten years. Our community even got an award from the Thai Parliament for being "The best urban agricultural community and environment."

What has come of all these activities and all this development in Koh Klang? Just ten years ago, this community was a dirty squatter settlement with bad living conditions, bad houses and drug addiction problems. Nobody would ever dream of coming here! Koh Klang is a very old community, but people lived by themselves, in isolation - there were old-timers and newcomers, room renters, old and new squatters. It was the crisis of the fire that brought our community into a new stage of change. Now we are united. We live together as a warm community. And even though we live on a small island, we're no longer isolated - we have lots of friendly links with other communities, other agencies and other networks. We are part of the network of communities in Klong Toey District, part of the network of communities on Crown Property Bureau land, and part of the network of urban communities developing green and self-sufficient food production projects. In the process, our relationship with the local authority, which used to be antagonistic and mistrustful, has become friendly and productive.



These gardeners are active promoters of lonely graveyards . . .

On our tour through this beautifully green community, we passed a bed of plants which Khun Ew told the visitors are called *Paa Chaa Ngao* ("Lonely Graveyard"). This medicinal herb is believed to have so many therapeutic properties that anyone who chews on its bitter leaves or boils them and drinks the infusion every day "will forget to die," so the graveyards will be short of newcomers and the grave-diggers will be out of work. Some of the plants and vegetables in the Koh Klang community are grown as products to be sold, but some - like this wondrous herb - are only given away, and only to special visitors. What better symbol for what communities like Koh Klang - and many others across Asia - are doing with their collective gardens. Working together, raising and eating nourishing food and living in healthy, green, flower-filled communities may not quite stop death from coming, but it certainly can make our time between now and that graveyard a lot more healthy and a lot less lonely.



The city's first Urban Community Farm for the poor is inaugurated in CHIANG MAI

In March 2020, when the Covid crisis was just beginning, and Thailand had closed its borders to tourism, we visited the Mae Kha communities to see how our friends there were doing. Many were out of work and facing serious difficulties feeding their families. Some local groups were donating food, which helped a little, but the situation was really bad and people were hungry. Some had even begun growing vegetables along the edges of canal, even though the water is so polluted.



That's when the idea of making an urban farm for the poor began to take shape. Our first step was finding a possible site for our urban farm, and we didn't have to look far. In their earlier searches for alternative land for housing, the Mae Kha communities had identified a 4,800 square meter plot of vacant land right next to the canal. The land was owned by the government and had been used for years as a garbage dump. So Jaibaan Studio drafted a quick plan to propose to the municipality and began talking with other communities and civic groups, to muster support for the project and strengthen our negotiations to use the the land.

THAI COMMUNITY GARDEN #3

Another innovation from Chiang Mai's canal communities

The Mae Kha Canal flows through the historic center of Chiang Mai, linking the springs of Doi Suthep Mountain to the Ping River. The canal has deteriorated over time and is now badly polluted, but with its great old trees, it still functions as a crucial green lung in the fast-developing city and decreasingly green city of Chiang Mai.

Along the shady canal are several informal settlements, which are home to some 2,500 urban poor families. Twenty years ago, in the face of repeated attempts by the city to evict them, these communities came together and formed a network. They initiated savings groups, mapped their settlements, organized regular canal cleaning jamborees and undertook settlement and housing upgrading projects - all to improve their living conditions, bolster their right to stay and show the city that they are not a problem for the city but can be vital partners in looking after this historic canal.

For several years, the community architect Supawut Boonmahathanakom ("Tee") and his office colleagues in *Jaibaan Studio* have been working with Mae Kha Canal communities to develop several housing planning and settlement-improvement projects. In the process of doing all this work, the canal communities have won broad civic support in Chiang Mai for the active role they are playing in restoring and protecting the historic canal - an amenity which belongs to the whole city.

On these pages, Tee tells the story of the extraordinary community garden the Mae Kha communities have created, with support from Jaibaan Studio and in collaboration with many other groups in the city.

For more information about the Chiang Mai Urban Farm, please contact Tee: architect_once@hotmail.com



This is one of the early layout plans Jaibaan Studio prepared for the garden, to give everyone an idea what might be possible. Things changed a lot later on, though, once the lively discussions started.

The mayor was reluctant at first, but we found keen supporters for the project in the Provincial Governor and the municipality staff. Nobody promised any financial support, but the Provincial Governor gave us preliminary permission to use the land, and the municipality offered the loan of some big earth-moving machines to help prepare the site.

After getting a green light from the provincial governor, we spent April and May working on the site: clearing away some 5,700 tons of garbage, levelling the land and bringing in a meter's thickness of new topsoil. We got the soil from the government's Marine Department, which had dredged it from the Ping River. It was good, rich, alluvial soil, but because the Ping River is also somewhat polluted, we've had to take care to improve the new soil and make sure the vegetables grown in it will be clean and safe.

On the advice of organic gardening experts in the area, we mixed compost and "biochar" into all the new planting beds. Biochar is a kind of organic charcoal made by burning corncobs or rice straw. When it's mixed with the soil, it can help a lot to reduce contamination, improve fertility, promote plant growth and increase yield.

Later on, we launched a campaign to raise funds for the project and generate awareness about the serious issue of food security and the role of urban farming and vegetable cultivation as vital new skills for urban people. Donations started coming in: seeds, seedlings, gardening tools - even cow dung for fertilizer! With a small grant from CODI, we designed a bamboo structure for training and meetings, which can also function as a farmers market, where small-scale farmers from around Chiang Mai can bring their fresh produce to sell to the public. Another important ally has been the 12-story Shangri-La Hotel, which is just a block from the site. They were keen to beautify an eyesore their hotel rooms had looked out over for decades. The hotel helped finance the land development and soil replacement.





All sorts of public events have been organized in the new garden, to promote the idea of organic gardening and greater food self-sustenance in the city, to involve different groups in the project and to make the urban farm something that belongs to everyone.



Planting started in June 2020 . . .

After two months of preparing the land and raising funds, we organized our first big public event on June 7, 2020. We invited anyone interested in the urban farm project to come and help plant all the fruit trees people had given us. The provincial governor was the guest of honor, and we had good support from many local NGOs, civic groups and community people.

After that, we began organizing regular events to encourage people of all sorts to come and work together on the new urban farm: people from all the Mae Kha Canal communities and other poor settlements in the city, members of the Chiang Mai Homeless Network, kids and teachers from nearby schools, agriculture students from the local university and families who were interested in sharing a collective garden bed for planting vegetables and fruits. The main focus is on enabling vulnerable communities to produce their own nourishing food, but we wanted to extend the engagement and sense of ownership of the urban farm to as many people as possible.



People have contributed many ideas that been adopted and have helped to transform this smelly and unsightly dump site into a lush public farm that belongs to everyone. By July 2020, all kinds of vegetables were growing on the site, and were already being harvested and carried home to families that were in great need of them. A friend from a local university is helping to analyze the vegetables in a lab, to make sure they continue to be safe. Things got going just in the nick of time, for by then the Covid pandemic was sweeping across Thailand and even in Chiang Mai, the first lockdowns and curfews were making it difficult for informal sector workers like those in the Mae Kha canal communities to go out and earn.



In September 2020, we organized a workshop for all who want to be part of the project, to formulate a system for managing the farm together and to plan the next stage of our negotiations for the land and financial assistance from the municipality. Our common aims for the urban farm are to bolster urban food security by producing food and knowledge about how to produce it, to create a public space where people can engage and work together and build human bonds, and to create a pilot project which shows how vacant public land can be jointly managed by people and the government for the public good.

Somsook Boonyabanha, CODI's former director, was able to join us for that workshop, and she had this to say about the urban farm project: "If it's the right process, everyone gets changed by it: the project changes us and it changes the city."

On October 10, we organized a public forum with the provincial governor and the mayor, to share what we have learned and to discuss how to move this project forward. The forum took place in the community garden and was aired on the Thai public television station. Our idea was to use that event to negotiate in public for long-term permission to use the land, with support from citizens in so many parts of Chiang Mai. The good news is that at the end of the forum, the mayor gave us permission to use the land and pledged his support to move this urban farm project forward. Now, using Mae Kha as a pilot, we are looking for other public lands around the city to make more urban community farms.



A sombre note on the subject of poultry . . .

At one point, a decision was taken to introduce poultry into the urban farm project. So a netted enclosure was built and a flock of plump brown laying hens moved into it. The hens became a great favorite of children coming to visit the urban community farm. But one morning, they discovered that the entire flock had made a hearty - if unintended - dinner for some stray dogs in the area. The tragedy led to reinforcements being made to the enclosure, and after a suitable period of mourning, a new flock of hens (donated by a local free-range chicken farm) moved into the stronger enclosure and are safely and reliably laying eggs there now.



THAI COMMUNITY GARDEN #4

A lesson in how to re-vive some long-lost skills in self-sufficiency

This community garden story comes from the rice-growing, papaya salad-eating heart of Northeastern Thailand. Surin is a very old city, and is dotted with ruins from the 11th Century Angkor kingdom it was once part of. The city has many poor communities, and all of them have been badly affected by the Covid pandemic, and by the lockdowns and economic crash that came with it.

One of those communities is Sri Buarai. In 2007, it was the first community in Surin to upgrade its housing and infrastructure, with support from the Baan Mankong Program and the city's community network. First they formed a savings group, which quickly grew to include all 157 families. Then, with the help of two young architects from Khon Kaen, they planned a project to raise the level of the land to above flood level, then lay roads and drains, construct a community center and make modest improvements to the houses they already had. After forming a housing cooperative, they were able to negotiate a long-term collective lease to the land they had been squatting on for decades. It is public land which falls under the central government's Fine Arts Department.

During the Covid crisis, the Sri Buarai community borrowed a piece of vacant from a nearby temple and turned it into a collectively-managed garden that is now providing a bounty of nourishing, organic fruits, vegetables, eggs and fish to dozens of the city's most vulnerable families. The story of that garden is told here by Roongrat Maneesod, who is the chairwoman of the Sri Buarai community savings group (as translated and written down by Ruengyuth Teeravanich at CODI).



Instead of wasting your time doing any old thing, why not grow vegetables? 99

(Roongrat Maneesod, Sri Buarai Community)

This community vegetable garden in SURIN is being grown on land borrowed from a temple

Since we finished upgrading our community, we have continued to develop ourselves and to find solutions to various problems, like increasingly frequent droughts. But nothing could have prepared us for the troubles we've faced with Covid-19. Most of us have lost our jobs, and our children have been unable to go to school - first because the schools were closed during the lockdown, and then because we had no money for their books and uniforms when they reopened. We've tried our best to deal with these new circumstances: we have our own community quarantine system, we sew our own face masks, we organize food donations from rice mills and local groups and assign the children to help deliver the food to each house. But we're not comfortable being only the receivers of help from others.

After the Covid crisis hit, our network surveyed all 33 poor communities in Surin to better understand the problems people were facing and how to help. The situation was really bad, and some families had no food to eat at all. The network began distributing donated rice, set up donation cupboards and started a community kitchen that cooked meals for hundreds of hungry families each day. We also discussed how to make ourselves more self-reliant during the crisis - especially in food, which for Buddhists is considered one of the four elements necessary for life. Years ago, we grew our own rice and vegetables around the community, but those days are long gone. When we thought about how to bring back some normalcy to this crisis, we got the idea of reviving those old practices of growing our own food.

The problem was that we had only a small patch of unused land at the back of our community, which wasn't enough. There was, though, a big piece of vacant land right next to Sri Buarai, which belonged to the temple. When we proposed to borrow that land for cultivation, the temple's abbot readily agreed. He also offered us the use of the temple's water supply. When we put together our land with the temple land, we had a good-sized area of about 6,400 square meters - big enough for everyone who wanted to join.

That was the beginning of our community garden in the Sri Buarai community. We joined together with a neighboring community, Tessabaan Anusawn, and invited community members from both settlements to join the project. Any family that was hungry and interested could get an allotment to grow their own vegetables and raise their own food. About thirty families joined initially, and together we subdivided the land into small garden beds.

Getting the community kids involved in the garden

During the time of the lockdown, all the schools in Thailand were closed and the children were stuck at home with nothing to do. So we invited the community kids to come tend the vegetables and learn about cultivation and nutrition in the process. When the planting began, the children had a lot of fun, playing with the water at the same time they were learning things. Besides the vegetable beds, we also have a fish pond and an enclosure where we raise chickens.

The whole garden project has become a learning laboratory for the children and young people in the communities. One of the planting beds is looked after entirely by a group of children, and they have been able to earn a little pocket money for buying sweets by selling the produce they grow there. In this way, the community garden project is also bringing us our future leaders from the new generation.



Once we got started, lots of helpers came . . .

When news of our community garden project began to circulate, we got offers of help from many places. The municipal government came with their big earth-moving equipment and helped turn over the soil and make the land flat for planting. The provincial government has a policy to promote organic farming in the province of Surin, and the provincial-level Agriculture Department sent an organic farming specialist, named Khun Surapan, to show us how to plant and fertilize and water without using any chemicals. Everyone in Thailand can grow things, but with a little more technique like this, we can grow better quality produce and get better yields. Khun Surapan also coordinated with other government organizations who helped us make fish ponds and learn to raise hens for eggs and meat.

A local shop that sells gardening supplies, called *Suan Rak Mai* ("Plant Lovers" in Thai), offered to donate seeds and seedlings to the community garden project. We didn't like the idea of being only receivers of charity from others, so we took the donated supplies on the understanding that later on, when we sow our crops, we will make seeds and give those seeds back to the shop - to sell or to pass on to another communities in the city that are interested in starting their own community gardens.

The community people all came out to help when it was time to make the planting beds. Pi Kak made the first planting bed, as an example for us to learn from. Once the planting beds were ready, we all began to plant things - bananas, papaya, dragon fruit, carrots, Chinese cabbage, lemongrass, coriander, scallions, pandanus, cucumbers, garlic, chilies, eggplants, yams, bottle gourds - so many things!

People in the Sri Buarai community use the vegetables they grow in the garden for two purposes. First and most importantly they use the vegetables to feed themselves and their families, as a way of bolstering their nutrition, reducing their household expenses and making them more food secure. And then, if they have enough after feeding their families, they can sell the surplus produce. The garden had become a way to boost the incomes of many people who lost jobs during the lockdown, or who earned very little even before. The vegetables we grow are so good that one of the local hotels has given a contract to our community to produce organic vegetables to supply their hotel kitchens - which they buy from us at market rates. The provincial governor has come to visit the garden and has become an enthusiastic supporter of the project.

Our garden project in Sri Buarai has several aims. The first is to have enough good, healthy food for our children, our families and our community, so we can eat well even though we may not earn much; to supplement our incomes by earning a little from selling surplus produce; to boost collaboration between communities and with the local authority, with temples and with other friends, to make a more sustainable development for the whole city; and finally, to help make people more self-reliant, in any situation.

A community garden like this can help people to survive during any kind of hard times, even if they have no job, no money and no food. We don't have to be afraid of the Covid pandemic or any other kind of disaster, because we have people and we have friends who help each other to produce good, sustainable food. So you can see that this kind of project has a good future. My wish is that this project expands into other communities and eventually produces enough healthy food to feed the the whole city.



“When people can come together and learn how to grow vegetables like this, we meet each other and eat together all the time. It makes a happy atmosphere. There’s something about the simple acts of planting, tending and harvesting that allows us to see the future together, and to see it as being a good future, a good life.”

Meet some of Sri Buarai’s community gardeners



Wanpen Eangsonk

used to work in a restaurant, but after the restaurant closed, she had no income at all. She joined the project to learn how to grow the same vegetables she can no longer afford to buy. If the restaurant reopens, she'll go back to work, but she will continue to cultivate her vegetable bed as a side job.



Pia Puttanu

is a 15-year old boy who had an after-school job at Car Care to supplement his family's income. But after the Covid crisis hit, the schools closed and he got laid off from his job. Since joining the community garden, he has been able to earn a little money growing vegetables, to help his family.



Mongkon Salarum

is on the Sri Buarai community committee. He decided to join in the garden because he didn't like waiting around for people to donate things to the community. Donations don't come regularly, so sometimes they had nothing. "All 33 communities in the city have to stand on their own feet."



Vulnerable railway squatters come together to make a “Sharing Garden” in Khon Kaen

Natnicha Akahadpan (“PiAoi”) is a senior community leader from Khon Kaen who has been active in the city’s community network for many years. In November, 2021, during a zoom meeting about the role of community gardens during the Covid crisis, she told this story of the extraordinary community garden the railway communities in Khon Kaen have developed (as translated from Supreeya Wungpatcharapon):

When the pandemic hit and people lost jobs and were hungry, lots of communities in Khon Kaen began growing their own vegetables and fruits. But in the crowded informal settlements along the railway tracks, there wasn’t much space for growing anything. At the same time, a new elevated train was being built beside the railway tracks that pass through the center of Khon Kaen. Underneath that track was a long strip of land that wasn’t being used for anything. It didn’t take long for the idea to take root among the railway communities of using that land to grow vegetables. After negotiating with the railway authorities and getting verbal permission to use the land temporarily for gardening, they set to work. Their project soon became one of the country’s most unusual and most famous community gardens.

The project began in 2021 with just five railway families planting vegetables in that space under the tracks. But the railway garden quickly grew and by November 2021, more than 100 families from 11 railway communities were cultivating gardens that filled a 4-km strip of land under the tracks. A grant from CODI’s Covid support program helped the the community network leverage additional support for project from the Northeastern Sustainable Agriculture Knowledge Management Institute, the Thai Health Promotion Fund, Mahasarakham University and a local design group “Hug Town.” All these groups participated in learning exchanges and assisted in the development of the community garden. Before the pandemic, these railway families had no experience with urban farming or gardening. With help from these new friends, and from the provincial network of organic farmers, they learned the basics of soil preparation, compost-making, seedling-planting and organic cultivation. The railway families were learning an important new thing, and the training was a big help. The railway communities named their unique project the “Sharing Garden.”

After the railway communities had been cultivating that land for a few months, and an ugly, barren, linear stretch of land under the tracks had started to blossom with a vivid green patchwork of leafy vegetables, the State Railway of Thailand started taking an interest in this unprecedented urban farming initiative. Inspired by what they saw, the railway authorities started organizing their own railway staff to do similar urban gardening around the railway staff housing.

Once the community gardens got going, the urban farmers found themselves producing more than enough vegetables to feed their own families. Some of the surplus produce grown in these railway gardens was used in the community kitchens that sprouted up in several communities in Khon Kaen during the Covid crisis. One of the urban farming families runs a small noodle shop and decided to grow the vegetables that they put in their noodle soup, like *pak boong* (morning glory) and *pak tum leung* (ivy gourd leaves). This helped reduce their production costs and boost their profits from the noodle shop. Some families also sold their surplus produce to neighbors or used it to produce other products which they can sell in the market - like chili paste or spicy northeastern-style sausages - to increase their family income.

THAI COMMUNITY GARDEN #5

This unusual community garden is under an elevated railway line

The open land along the railway tracks in Thailand has long proven to be irresistible homesteading territory for poor urban migrants looking for a place to live. There are hundreds of informal settlements on railway land in cities up and down the country.

But the State Railway Authority has been a difficult, fickle and sometimes brutal landlord, and while many other public land-owning agencies in Thailand have been leasing their land for housing the poor, the railway slums keep coming up against a blank wall in their negotiations for secure tenure.

The city of Khon Kaen, in northeastern Thailand, is a case in point. While many of the city’s informal settlements have now been upgraded, with support from CODI’s Baan Mankong program, not a single housing project has been implemented in the city’s large railway slums, where some of the city’s poorest families live in squalor and insecurity. Without some kind of secure tenure agreement from the railway authorities, the communities are prevented from applying to CODI for Baan Mankong support.

Over the past 20 years, Khon Kaen’s railway slums have implemented several projects to improve the lives and livelihoods of railway slum dwellers, including recycling cooperatives which buy recycled waste products from informal trash collectors at fair prices, community centers and small infrastructure improvements. They have also cooperated with the railway authorities to help remove and relocate 400 houses that fell within 20 meters of the tracks, to enable the railways to expand the tracks. That project stalled, though, when the railway authorities came out with a new plan calling for developing a new dual-track system, which would add hundreds more families to the list of evictees - leaving the railway communities more precarious than ever.

Using the community garden as a “soft technique” to negotiate for land

All of the informal communities taking part in the garden project are living on State Railway Authority land, and all are under threat of being evicted, to make way for track expansion projects. The community garden acted as a catalyst, to bring these vulnerable people together, so they could discuss things and work together to organize themselves and decide what to do.

The project has also become a tool to help the communities connect with the railway authorities in a more constructive and less antagonistic way, and to get information about the railway’s plans. The railway communities have now begun to negotiate with the railway authorities to find alternative land to move to nearby, as compensation, when the time comes. All this network-building and all this negotiation and dialogue with the railway authorities were catalyzed and strengthened by the community garden project.

The “sharing garden” under the elevated tracks is a soft, lovely, green thing that everyone is in the city is happy to see. When people look at it, they can’t help but feel good. Those qualities make the garden function like a mechanism of diplomacy, which makes all these difficult negotiations with the railway authorities about land softer and easier, and has won the railway communities new allies in the city.



MYANMAR

These community gardens produce food and also reduce heat

Even before the pandemic hit Myanmar, the community housing projects that have been built by members of the Women's Savings and Development Network in Yangon, with support from Women for the World, had been incorporating flowers, tree-planting and vegetable gardens. In the earlier projects, where the house plots were very small, community members grew whatever vegetables and fruits they could in the small spaces beside and in front of their houses, and the communities were soon bursting with greenery.

Most of the families in these projects have come from squalid and insecure living situations in rental rooms and squatter settlements, where they found themselves being frequently evicted and frequently forced to move, so there wasn't much use planting anything anywhere. Even though their houses in the new projects were small and simply-built, the women's pride and new sense of security showed in the flowers and trees and vines and vegetables and herbs that very soon filled these new communities. In the later housing projects, which were much larger and built on land provided by the local government, the house plots were a little bigger and the women were able to include areas for both individual and communal gardens in their site-planning. In these housing projects, those green expressions of pride and security had room to stretch.

When the Covid crisis brought economic slow-down and loss of jobs, the community gardens became crucial to people's survival. Then a year later, when the military coup d'état plunged the entire country into a much deeper crisis, the community gardens became more important than ever. In all the housing projects, there were community members who used to do farming in rural areas, and throughout all these epidemiological and political upheavals, they became the trainers and technical supporters for a new generation of urban farmers to intensify and scale up these community gardens.



☺☺ We share the fruits, vegetables and greens we grow here in our community gardens. After feeding our families, we sell the surplus produce to other community members at the lowest possible price. ☹☹

(U Soe Lwin Oo, a savings group member in the housing project in East Dagon Township)

Community gardens in Yangon do much more than nourish hungry and traumatized families . . .

The women's savings network and Women for the World have built 15 housing projects so far in Yangon, and these projects provide secure land and basic housing to 1,853 of the city's poorest families. All these projects are now fringed and festooned and embowered with small and big vegetable gardens and with trees and greenery of all sorts. Besides providing food and shade and delight, those gardens and that greenery have done much more for these communities, especially during the overlapping crises of the past two years:

- 1 They feed hungry families:** Besides lost jobs and lost earning opportunities, the Covid and coup crises have brought serious food shortages and skyrocketing food prices. Some community members returned to their villages, where they can at least get food. But most have stayed in Yangon, and for them, the community gardens have become a crucial source of healthy food for their families.
- 2 They generate extra income:** Besides helping people to feed their families, the community gardens have also yielded enough surplus to allow many to make a little extra income by selling their produce to neighbors and in the network's cooperative markets (see page 34). Many of the urban gardeners choose fast-growing vegetables that can be cultivated and sold quickly. And many have planted trees that will later produce fruits that fetch high prices in the market, like mango and jackfruit.
- 3 They cool things off:** All of these housing projects are built in blighted peripheral areas of the city, where factory pollution and lack of trees make them much hotter than in the shadier inner city. Climate change is only making them hotter. The tree-planting and garden-growing in these settlements do a lot to help cool these communities and create a more healthy microclimate. The gardens are one way these new communities are making use of their traditional knowledge to mitigate the effects of the very contemporary problem of climate change.
- 4 They strengthen communities:** The last four housing projects were built shortly before the pandemic. Collective gardening, compost-making and seed banking are all tools to bring people in these communities together and help them develop much-needed systems of mutual trust and support.
- 5 They lessen trauma:** During a time when everyday life in Yangon is full of dangers and uncertainty, the community gardens have given traumatized residents a tranquil refuge. The quiet tasks of tending a living garden have proven to be a powerful talisman against hopelessness, consoling and calming people while also keeping them active.



Handbook for a GREEN community

Here is handbook full of ideas and details about how urban poor communities in Yangon are using their collective people power to make their settlements greener and healthier in different ways: planting trees for shade and fruit, herbs for health, vegetables for food and flowers for delight. The bilingual handbook draws on wisdom from the women's savings group members and the community gardeners in the Mae Myit Thar housing projects in Yangon, with support from Women for the World, STEPS Community Architecture Practice - and with original illustrations by Marina Kolovou Kouri. The 70-page guidebook can be downloaded from the ACHR website library at this link: http://www.achr.net/upload/collective/file_211105095546.pdf



INDONESIA

Group enterprises boost the kampung-based cooperatives

The Covid pandemic hit Indonesia with a vengeance in 2020. Infections soared, the death toll climbed, hospitals were overwhelmed and the country became for a while one of Asia's hottest Covid hot spots. Soon afterwards, in March 2020, the government imposed a "semi-lockdown", which greatly limited people's ability to move around. In Jakarta, where the greatest number of infections were mounting, roads were blocked, curfews were imposed and transport systems were shut down.

The urban poor had an especially hard time coping with both the health and economic aspects of the pandemic. Many of them work in the informal sector and earn their living day-by-day. But all the streets and public spaces they normally used for their vending were off-limits under the lockdown. So the poor lost their income and their means of supporting themselves. At the same time, there were no clear programs from the government to assist the urban poor in the crisis.

The JRMK Network started right away to discuss collectively what they could do as a network to deal with the multiple hardships people were facing during the crisis, including lost jobs and lack of income. After a lot of deliberation, the network launched several initiatives which used the strength of the kampung-based cooperatives, which were in the process of being formed, to address some of these problems by offering various goods and services to cooperative members. The network's first project to acquire and distribute subsidized rice to needy families (see page 14) addressed urgent food needs, but didn't address the livelihood problems. In these two pages, we take a look at three other cooperative-managed initiatives that addressed both Covid-related needs and also livelihood needs.



These herbal drink mixes helped keep kampung residents in Jakarta healthy during the lockdowns

The network's first experiment in cooperative-based enterprises began in Kampung Marlina, a large and densely-crowded informal settlement of 882 households, built on state-owned land sandwiched between factories and warehouses, in North Jakarta. A group of women leaders in the newly-formed cooperative in Kampung Marlina developed a community enterprise to make and sell traditional herbal drinks powders, which are called "jamu" in Indonesian.

Enny is a community leader in Kampung Marlina. She is a widow and lives in the house she and her husband built after getting married, 34 years ago, on one of the narrow lanes inside Kampung Marlina. She raised five children in that house and lives there now with her two youngest. For several years, Enny has made a little extra money for household expenses by making *jamu*. It's a complicated process that involves boiling a variety of fresh herbs and spices with sugar until they crystallize. She makes several kinds of *jamu*. They all have different medicinal qualities, but all of them are delicious and aromatic.

Making *jamu* was something Enny did only occasionally and on a small scale, selling to friends and neighbors in the community. But when the Covid pandemic hit and people were falling sick and stuck at home, with no help from anywhere and no access to vaccines or affordable medicines, word got around about Enny's *jamu*. She started getting requests on WhatsApp from other kampungs in the JRMK network for her *jamu*, and business picked up fast. Soon there were too many orders to handle by herself. So she got four other women to help make the *jamu* and boosted production substantially.

By September 2021, the five women were producing 20 kilos of *jamu* every day, starting at seven o'clock in the morning, and finishing the day's batch only at six pm, breaking off only long enough to go home to pray or to take a few moments' rest. They sell the *jamu* for 15,000 rupiah (\$1) for a 250-gram packet, but during the worst of the pandemic and lockdowns, they used a small grant from ACHR to subsidize the selling price for cooperative members, who paid only 5,000 rupiah (\$0.33) for the packet - one third of the normal price.

For Enny, the *jamu* production was another of several community projects which presented an opportunity to show everyone in Marlina that being a member of the cooperative means being part of a larger support system which has many benefits: you can get herbal drinks and rice at half price, you can get land tenure, you can get help upgrading your house. Plus, all the women who make the *jamu* are members of the Marlina cooperative, and all of them are now earning enough from the project to help meet their household expenses. This is a cooperative activity, and it directly benefits cooperative members, on both the production and the distribution ends. Even the labels on the packets say "Jamu from the Marlina Cooperative." For Enny, these are all ways to attract more people to join the cooperative, when they see tangible benefits like this.



Coop-managed BIOGAS digesters reduce garbage and generate income in the kampungs

During the lockdowns, when everyone was stuck at home, the quantity of solid waste being generated in the kampungs became too much for the city to manage. That's when the JRMK Network began an experimental biogas enterprise that allows cooperatives in six kampungs to better manage their solid waste and also generate income for the women in the savings groups who manage the project. With a small grant from the Selavip Foundation, and technical help from the local government, biogas digesters were built in six kampungs. Every afternoon, the women gather organic kitchen waste from houses in the kampung (ten houses per woman), in plastic bags. They bring it to one place, chop it up a bit, mix it with rice-washing water and then funnel the stuff into the big biogas digester. The digester produces enough cooking gas to supply several houses, and also produces a nutrient-rich liquid fertilizer called "poeca", much-prized by gardeners. The cooperatives bottle the "poeca" and sell it to community members and outsiders. Besides helping dispose of kitchen waste, the enterprise is providing a new and "green" source of income.

Cooperative laundry service

An enterprise that lightens women's clothes-washing burden

The JRMK Network also launched a project to deal with an aspect of community life that might not immediately seem related to Covid. Washing clothes in Jakarta's crowded kampungs is a toilsome business, even in the best of times. It is a task that invariably falls to women, who spend two or three hours every day washing and ironing the family's clothes. Their task is made harder by frequent flooding, erratic electricity supply and serious water supply and water quality problems. The pandemic only increased the burden for women, with people changing clothes more often after going out, and the clothes of family members who'd gone out or who might be infected having to be washed separately and in warm water, to kill the germs. At the same time, with unusual numbers of people stuck at home under the lockdowns, demand for water increased dramatically and the already meager supply decreased to a trickle.

The network used some modest grant funds to help launch a set of cooperatively-run laundry services that lighten the clothes-washing burden of women in the kampungs. The first of five planned laundry services was set up and run by the newly-formed cooperative in Kampung Akuarium - a large community on public land that is in the process of being rebuilt as low-rise blocks of cooperatively-managed apartments.

The JRMK Network provided the cooperative with a "start-up package" of laundry equipment (one high-capacity professional washing machine, one drying machine, one heavy-duty steam ironing machine, a big table and a stock of good laundry soap). The package cost 30 million rupiah (US\$ 2,083), which the cooperative will gradually repay to the network, as the laundry business takes off.

The laundry service in Kampung Akuarium is run by three women who are all members of the cooperative. They work full time, washing and ironing up to 60 kilos of clothes every day. For the full service of washing, ironing and home delivering the clothes, they charge 6,000 rupiah (US\$ 42 cents) per kilo, which is 15% lower than the standard rate local women charge for doing other people's laundry in informal kampungs in Jakarta. In the first two weeks of operation, the pilot laundry service in Kampung Akuarium washed 720 kilos of laundry, which came from 147 customers, in 9 kampungs in the surrounding area, including Kampung Akuarium. Some customers from offices in the area are also using the laundry service.

Asmiawati is one of the women who run the laundry service in Kampung Akuarium: "All of us have children and we can bring our children along with us to the laundry, or we can go back home to attend to things when we need to, since our apartments are right here in the same building. It's flexible, as long as our responsibilities in the laundry are finished. We're happy because we have been able to learn all about the laundry business. We're not just workers being paid by somebody else, but we are managing our own business, in all the different aspects. If the washing machine breaks down, we have to fix it."



Using Covid activities to strengthen the collective support systems in kampungs

All the Covid projects of the JRMK Network in Jakarta were strategically planned to strengthen and enlarge the kampung-based cooperatives and to build their capacity to become a self-managed and multi-sided collective support system which belongs to the community and exists to help make people's lives in the kampungs better, on many different fronts.

Besides facilitating collective secure land tenure, the cooperatives offer a mechanism for boosting economic empowerment, provide services for members and create a platform for discussing community problems such as land conflicts and land legalization. As a legal entity, cooperatives also allow members of the kampung to be represented in the city's formal governance and planning structures and to engage with various partners and perform legal activities. The Covid projects showed people that being part of this larger support system has many tangible benefits: they can get rice at half price, they can get herbal remedies at half price, they can get land tenure and they can get help upgrading their houses and settlements.

This is how Gugun Muhammad, a leader in the JRMK Network, described the strategy: "We want to try to build a togetherness which includes every single person in each kampung within the cooperatives. This is important because in Jakarta now, everything is individual. Most people in this city are doing everything by themselves. They live by themselves and survive by themselves. People here are alone. For some people who can afford things, that individual system may be OK. But for people who cannot afford things, we want to make the cooperative, which can guarantee that people who are members can have a secure house and can afford their basic needs - not individually, but together."

This is all part of the network's long campaign to work with the municipal government to win secure collective land tenure for these communities and to collectively improve the housing, living conditions and livelihoods. Their campaign has made big steps forward during the pandemic. All 25 kampungs in the network are now fully registered with the government as cooperatives, and all have been granted temporary building rights, which essentially legalizes their existing structures. By May 2022, all 25 kampungs had been made legal residential areas on the city's master zoning plan ("spatial plan"), which strengthens their tenure and prevents them from being evicted for encroaching on zones designated for other purposes in the city's plan.





Women in the SAJUSSA Community in Davao rediscover the power of collective finance:

The sprawling coastal community of the San Juan Seaside Settlers Association (SAJUSSA) has a strong group of women savers. Most of them are vendors, selling flowers, fish, fruits and vegetables from baskets, small carts or house-front stalls in the community. Like so many others, they soon found their earnings dwindling and their savings depleted after ongoing Covid lockdowns in the city. But without any outside support or funding, these intrepid women managed to revive their community-managed and self-sustaining finance systems in a new form: small group livelihood loan funds.

They work together in small clusters of 20 or 30 women, and the women in each cluster put up their own seed capital, and then loan it to the members for their livelihood projects. Most use the loans to buy stock or ingredients to sell in their small vending businesses. The members save 200 pesos (US\$ 4) every Sunday, as an investment in their cluster's livelihood fund. They charge a monthly interest of 5% on the loans. That may sound high, but because the loans are small the women repay them quickly, and it's not a great burden. Plus the interest goes back into the common fund. Then at the end of the year, they divide the interest they've collected during the year among the group members, and start over again, with the same capital. The loan capital, meanwhile, keeps growing, with the 200 pesos all the cluster members keep adding to their fund every week.

The women in these clusters also contribute an extra 20 pesos (US\$ 40 cents) every week into their own "social fund", which the members can use for emergencies, health needs, medicines or family bills. They keep this fund separate: for these kinds of family and emergency needs, they can withdraw it only from the social fund, not from their livelihood capital. Their rule is that at a given time, each woman can take a maximum of 10% of the total amount in the social fund, no matter what the emergency is.

During the pandemic, when community members had so much less income and so many more needs, the small cluster loan system was very helpful. Others in the community could observe that the women in the savings groups were able to earn and feed their families, even in difficult times, and new clusters quickly formed and began their own self-managed livelihood loans. At one point, someone suggested that the small groups federate into one big savings group, but this idea got a resounding thumbs-down. They can manage so much easier, the women felt, when it's only 20 or 30 friends saving together. It's good to keep the group small, so it's easier to manage.



Mae Lonzaga used a loan from her small group to buy flowers to sell in her housefront stall.



Adela Palco used a loan from her group to buy meat and provisions to sell in her sari-sari store.

PHILIPPINES

Livelihood projects boost incomes during lockdowns

The Homeless People's Federation wasted no time in taking action to develop an organized response to the many pandemic-related needs of their member communities across the regions. One of the most crucial needs was for boosting incomes, since so many had lost jobs or were unable to work during the lockdowns.

With support from their partner NGO PACSII, the federation conducted a quick livelihood survey in November 2020 to better understand the livelihood needs and to gather ideas about how the federation could help. The survey confirmed what everyone already knew: that since the onset of the pandemic, people's earnings had decreased substantially due to workplace closures, lost jobs, lack of earning opportunities, unavailable transportation, loss of customers for informal businesses, and major strains on family income like hospitalizations and funerals. The survey made clear that people needed help finding new ways to earn, so they could feed their families and get back on their feet.

Community SAVINGS GROUPS remained a lifeline during the pandemic - even when the savings were depleted ...

Communities that are part of the federation practice several kinds of savings, for different purposes. These collective savings are the community's own revolving loan fund, from which members can take loans for all kinds of needs: emergencies, education, medicines, household needs, house improvement and livelihood. These community-based and community-managed savings groups are a crucial resource for poor community members, whose only other option for getting credit is usually informal money-lenders, who charge 20-25% interest each month.

The savings groups became even more important in the Covid crisis. Here's how Elizabeth Solitas, from the federation in the city of Talisay, put it: "Our community savings program worked like an anchor through all the storms of the pandemic. Before any aid came from outside, we began making plans to assist our-

selves. We set up committees to look after various things, and used our community's special calamity fund to pay for many emergency needs. When people lost jobs and ran out of money during the lockdowns, members used their savings to survive and then took loans from their savings groups to meet their families' urgent food and medicine needs."

But within a few months of the strict community quarantines, with so many needs and so little money being earned, members of the savings groups had no choice but to withdraw their savings. At a time when they were most urgently needed, most of these community savings funds became badly depleted. After some discussions, the federation decided to do whatever it could to support a variety of income-generating projects around the country, to build these crucial community finance systems back up.





“Our plan for this community enterprise is to first focus on supplying rice. Later, if the project goes well, we would also like to supply other groceries and medicines to community members, also on short-term credit.”

(Theresa Carampatana, ULHOA Community)

And a tocino-making group enterprise in the Nalumville Community

Nalumville is an informal community of 38 households, in Davao, which is in the process of negotiating for secure tenure on the land they have occupied for years. With help from the Federation, the community formed a savings group, and almost all of the 38 families became members. Later on though, the savings stalled.

Most of the men in the community are drivers, and the lockdowns cut off their source of income and their ability to feed their families. Things got so bad that people were eating fewer meals and children were being sent to bed hungry. At a time when the need for collective saving was greater than ever, twelve women decided to restart the savings group. As part of their savings, they began looking for ways to work together to start some kind of enterprise that could provide a new source of income and which the women could work on at home, while they helped their children with their at-home lessons.

First, they started a vegetable garden, but the soil in the area was bad, and none of the vegetables thrived. Next they landed on the idea of making some food products to sell. One delicacy that is famous in Davao for snacks and cooking is *tocino* - sweetened, cured pork. This product seemed like good candidate for a collective home-based enterprise. But *tocino* requires a lot of labor and skill, and only one woman in the community had some experience making it. Over the past year, through many Covid troubles, the women have been training themselves, buying equipment and arranging for a hygienic cooking place and will soon be starting production.



Two “RICE LOAN” schemes in Metro Manila

Communities in two different cities in Metro Manila developed rice distribution projects which emphasized income generation in different ways. For some years, the savings groups in both communities had experimented with buying rice cooperatively, purchasing rice together in large quantities, at bulk prices, and then selling it at cost to savings members, so they could get good quality rice at cheaper rates. But as incomes and mobility dwindled during the lockdowns and access to food became a serious issue, the two communities developed the idea of selling rice on credit, and letting people pay back their “rice loans” in installments, over a short period. But the two “rice loan” enterprises are managed a little differently:

1 RICE LOANS IN THE SMART TOWER COMMUNITY IN MUNTINLUPA: The women’s savings group here use capital from donor funds to buy rice in bulk, once a month, in 25-kilo sacks, at 950 pesos (US\$ 19) per sack, add a 200 peso (US\$ 4) mark-up and then “loan” the rice to community members for 1,150 pesos (US\$ 23) per sack. That’s about the standard market rate for the rice, but what the scheme offers is the advantage of paying for the rice gradually, in two payments, on the 15th and the 30th of the month, which for many workers in the Philippines are payday. Once a family pays off its rice loan, they can borrow another bag of rice. A small part of that 200-peso mark-up covers the cost of transporting the rice sacks to the community and delivering them to members, at their doorstep. But most of it is added to the capital of a special community loan fund, which gives short-term livelihood loans to savings members at 3% (monthly) interest. During the lockdown, when so many in the community had no income at all, the 3% loan fund was a lifeline, and there continue to be many takers for small loans from the fund. Some take 3% loans to cover daily family needs or to pay school fees or buy phone time for their children’s online classes. But most take loans to support their small vending or food businesses. As the capital in the loan fund has increased, the women have been able to expand their livelihood lending a lot.

2 RICE LOANS IN THE ULHOA COMMUNITY IN VALENZUELA: The women’s savings group in this community runs a similar “rice loan” project. They buy rice in bulk, in 25-kilo sacks, for 1,000 pesos (US\$ 20) per sack, add a markup of 200 pesos (US\$ 4) and then “loan” the rice to community members for 1,200 pesos (US\$ 24) per sack. Customers repay the rice loan in two payments, on the 15th and the 30th day of the month. If families repay their rice loan within the month, there is no interest charged on the loan, but if the family is not able to repay the rice loan on time, they are charged 5% monthly interest, as an incentive to repay on time. In Smart Tower, the profits from the rice loans went back into their 3% livelihood loan fund, to add to the loan capital and expand their ability to give people loans. But in ULHOA, the rice loan project is managed as a profit-making group enterprise for the savings members who invest 1,000 pesos (\$20) and become shareholders in the scheme. Here, the profits generated by the rice loans are distributed among the shareholders as a dividend at the end of the year.



Using the rice loans to strengthen the community’s negotiations for land

Smart Tower is one of the 25 informal communities on the sprawling public land around the New Bilibid Prison in Muntinlupa. The government had plans to relocate all 250 households in the community to another part of the site, and the people welcomed the plan, with hopes that it would lead to greater tenure security. But after some families from Smart Tower and other settlements had been relocated to the new site at Agaw-Agaw, the relocation process stopped. Nobody knows whether it will happen at all, adding uncertainty to the many pandemic problems the community is facing. Ruby Papeleras is one of the national leaders in the Homeless People’s Federation: “We use all these activities during the Covid crisis - like community kitchens, community gardens, savings and livelihood loans - to strengthen these communities on the prison land and increase their pool of allies, so they can negotiate for secure land from a stronger position. As part of this effort, we have established a Muntinlupa Working Group, with 40 community leaders from 8 barangays, to negotiate as a block with the local government.”

MYANMAR

Community support systems anchored by savings groups

In all 15 housing projects that have been built by the women's savings network in Yangon, the practice of putting aside small amounts every week in collective savings is well established. Besides building their unity and collective management skills, those savings groups allow women to take small loans for household needs, livelihood and emergencies. The savings also helps families make their hefty monthly housing loan repayments.

The communities that built those housing projects are well organized and well networked: they have information systems, savings and finance systems and mutual support systems. All these things have made them much less vulnerable than other poor communities and much better able to collectively deal with the many troubles the overlapping crises have heaped upon them.

During the pandemic, the women in the network wanted to reach out to vulnerable people in other parts of the city and expand their savings support system. But the chaos and violence under martial law has made that impossible. Instead, the women are working to strengthen their existing savings groups - and the larger community support system they are part of - and finding as many ways as possible to bolster those community support structures, which have become the only protection people have against the crises.

At first, most of the women continued to save and borrow for their small businesses. But as the crisis deepened and earning opportunities dried up, many women with big families began withdrawing their savings to meet their basic needs. Besides threatening their ability to survive, the dwindling earning and savings has threatened their housing, since those who cannot pay their housing loans to the microfinance company risk losing their houses. All of which makes strengthening the savings process more important than ever.



“The most important thing is our mindset. Crying about the political situation or having no job or having nothing to eat won't do any good will it? We have to find our own way to put a spoonful of food in our children's mouths.”

(Daw Yamin Thu, from the Pyit Tine Htaung housing project)

Boosting earning and self-sufficiency by producing everyday products and selling them locally ...

The ongoing political crisis in Myanmar has further disrupted an economy that was already in very bad shape because of the Covid pandemic. At the same time many had lost their jobs and means of earning, increasing fuel prices and transport costs and brought about shortages of food and medical supplies and the prices of just about everything necessary for survival have skyrocketed.

In this perilous context, the savings groups have become a lifeline for community members. Many take small loans to buy stock for their vending businesses, which they ply mostly within the communities, selling things like meat, fish, rice, cooked curries, vegetables (from both the wholesale markets and from their own community gardens), clothes and medical supplies, and services like haircuts and tailoring. In some communities, the savings groups are collectively buying rice, essential food staples and medical supplies in bulk, at wholesale prices, and then selling them at cost (20 - 30% cheaper than in the market) to community members.



Even as the collective savings funds have dwindled and members have been forced to withdraw more and more of their savings to survive, the savings groups have used their group power to experiment with all sorts of enterprises to produce and sell essential goods at cheap prices. This allows community members to earn a little extra income and at the same time helps families reduce their household expenditure and get what they need right inside the community, when going out into the city has become so dangerous.

The savings group in the housing project in Shwepyitha Township arranged to get some professional training in housekeeping and catering services, to help the women there get jobs in hotels or restaurants, or as housemaids in private homes. Since the training fees were too expensive for many, those who could attend the training then passed on their knowledge to hundreds of others in the settlement.

In the housing project in East Dagon Township, many of the families got some training in how to make a variety of household products that they can sell to their fellow community members for some extra income: dried fruits and shrimp, herbal remedies, curry powders, candles, bar soap, mosquito repellent, liquid bath soap, hand lotion, tooth powder, clothes detergent and hand sanitizer.



This is the cooperative market in the housing project in East Dagon Township, in Yangon, right after it was built. The market will eventually provide stalls for up to sixty sellers from the community.

Cooperative market: a safe place for community people to buy and sell

During the curfews imposed under successive waves of the pandemic, and later during the protests and violent crack-downs under martial law, it has become more and more difficult - and more dangerous - for people to go outside the community, to work or to make everyday purchases. So many of these community entrepreneurs sell their wares from baskets or in stalls in front of their houses, and their customers are mainly their fellow community members. Everyone is happy to be able to buy things they need without leaving the relative safety of the community. In the housing projects in East Dagon

and South Dagon townships, the savings groups have given a further boost to their internal community economy by setting up community markets on vacant land within the projects, with simple bamboo and thatch structures to shade them against the fierce Yangon sun. These community markets are just starting to operate, and each one has room for 30 or 40 individual stalls, where community members can sell surplus produce and eggs from the community gardens, as well as prepared foods and household items. In this way, the profits from all that buying and selling all stay and circulate right in the community.

Upgrading community centers

Making safe spaces to meet in the midst of so many dangers

All the women's savings network's housing projects are located in the sprawling industrial townships on the northern and eastern periphery of the city, where most of Yangon's poor live. These areas have seen some of the fiercest anti-coup clashes and have at times turned into war zones. Between the high prices in the markets and the danger of violence in the streets, people have been understandably afraid to go out. As Daw Yamin Thu, from one of the housing projects, put it: "If we have to go out to work, or to do some business or get food, we have to be very careful with our safety and be as quick and alarmed as a crow."

The network had only some very meager donor funds to support their various Covid relief activities, and needs in the communities were many. But one of the needs everyone agreed was most urgent was for a safe place to gather, discuss things, organize various activities and support each other during the crisis. In three of the big housing projects that had been completed just before the pandemic hit, the communities had built simple covered structures which served as open-air community centers. But during the violent mayhem after the coup d'état, some of these community centers were looted and ransacked. At a time when public gatherings of any sort were outlawed by the military junta, nobody felt safe being there.

So after discussions with their partners in Women for the World, the communities began a process of gradually upgrading these three community centers, one after another. They built fences around them, enclosed them with masonry walls and sturdy doors and windows that can be locked, repaired leaky roofs, laid floor tiles and put in fans and false ceilings to make the rooms inside cooler in Yangon's fierce heat. Since the coup, building material prices in the city had doubled or tripled, so it was important to find ways of stretching the very modest budget Women for the World was able to muster. To keep costs down, a lot of the building materials were bought very cheaply from nearby construction sites that had stopped work after the coup or salvaged from demolished buildings. Many people also donated materials.

In the coming months, these revitalized and comfortable community centers became vital meeting points and safe places for the savings network to organize all kinds of activities. Here's how Van Lizar Aung, from Women for the World, described the process: "We use activities like the community gardens, the livelihood initiatives and the community center renovations to bring people together and make them active, when they are feeling so overwhelmed by so many difficulties. When they see their community leaders actively working on these kinds of small projects, the whole community also becomes active. And slowly, slowly, they build their hope for the future."



Using all these Covid activities to hold on to the land given by the government

The coup d'état in February 2021 was followed by a huge wave of forced evictions of informal settlements and land grabbing by the military government across the country. That has made the communities in the large housing projects built in Yangon by the Women's Savings and Development Network very worried, since their houses are built on land that was provided free by the pre-coup government, as part of its low-income housing policy. These communities have used their Covid projects to protect their land and houses, at the same time they address immediate needs.

Here is how the Women for the World's director Van Lizar Aung described their strategy: "We still have some vacant land in those large housing projects on government land, which we planned to use incrementally for other community projects. Every day we worry that if there is some land left vacant like that, the government will take it back. We don't want that. People in our earlier housing projects are also very much worried: even though they bought that land and made their proper housing, the land isn't titled yet. They can also be evicted any time. But all these communities have a system, and that system makes them different than the other more vulnerable communities.

"So we have been doing everything we can to occupy that land somehow, and make the community system stronger in the process. We built 20 new houses on some of the land, using donor funds, and we also used the Covid projects to make big community gardens and plant trees on some of it. We built a fence around one part of the land and put up a signboard that says "Playground for Children". On other parts we've put up cooperative markets and renovated the community centers. We even asked the old people in the communities to perform a kind of religious rite on that land. We do all these kinds of activities on that land so we can keep it."





PHILIPPINES

Putting group power to work slowing the spread of the virus

Besides starting community kitchens, community gardens and livelihood initiatives, the Homeless People's Federation and their member communities marshalled all their organizational skills and their group power to help keep people healthy, slow down the spread of the virus and look after community members who did get infected.

Mitigating the health effects of a pandemic is no easy task in the kind of living conditions that many informal communities and resettlement sites face: dense crowding, poor housing, lack of basic services and insecure land tenure. Add to that unaffordable health care and government aid programs that are slow-moving and spotty. But all the same, the community-based savings groups and homeowners associations that are part of the federation were able to do a lot to fill gaps in formal aid efforts and help some of the country's most vulnerable citizens survive and stay healthy.

Early on in the pandemic, when the strict "enhanced community quarantine" measures were forcing people to stay in their settlements, communities set up committees and task-forces and activated youth groups to deal with different emergency needs: identifying and looking after vulnerable families, stitching and distributing washable face masks and setting up hand and foot-washing stations at community entrances.

The federation acts as a bridge between informal community needs and formal virus aid systems ...

At first, communities used their own resources - their collective savings and disaster funds, supplemented by some small grants, to do as much as they could. But those small resources were quickly outstripped by the sheer scale of need. A crisis like Covid is too big for poor communities to handle on their own, even when they're very well organized. But the federation's citywide networks allowed communities to link their organization and people power to government aid programs and acted as a bridge between the informal communities and the formal system, to make sure the aid reached those who really needed it. In the Covid crisis, years of carefully cultivating working relationships with local government agencies, at city and barangay levels, really paid off for the federation, and there was lots of good collaboration. This bridging worked in several ways:

- 1 Identifying vulnerable households:** Community teams quickly surveyed and mapped vulnerable families and people with special needs (children, elderly, sick, disabled, pregnant women) in the community to understand who needs what help. They used that data to help mobilize their own internal aid efforts, and to also work with local government agencies to make sure various formal emergency Covid assistance programs reach the right target group.
- 2 Disseminating information:** Communities worked with their local health departments to help disseminate up-to-date information in the settlements (through meetings, posters, social media) about how people can protect themselves against infection (masks, hand-washing, physical distancing) and what resources are available if people do get sick (emergency numbers, quarantine information).
- 3 Providing healthcare:** Communities also collaborated with their local health departments and national agencies to train and equip community-based health monitors and health workers who could provide emergency services and meet basic healthcare needs (both Covid and otherwise) of people right in the community, to avoid sending all but the most urgent cases to overloaded hospitals.
- 4 Slowing infections:** Communities worked with government Covid guidelines to set up temperature check points and hand and foot-washing stations at community entrances, organized rotating schedules of volunteers to monitor who comes and goes and kept contact-tracing log-books. Later, communities also worked with local governments to facilitate the vaccination drives.
- 5 Managing quarantine needs:** Communities worked with their local health departments to set up and jointly manage temporary shelters and quarantine centers within or close by the settlements for those who tested positive, providing food, healthcare and other support to the sick and to the families of the sick - and also to community members who were quarantining at home.
- 6 Joining local Covid forums:** In many cities, representatives from the federation took part in city-level forums and task-forces to discuss pandemic issues, coordinate efforts and improve the city's response to the Covid crisis. These collaborative forums allowed the federation to bring the specific needs of the urban poor into the discussion and ensured the formal aid, mitigation and vaccine programs were effective and reached everyone in the communities.



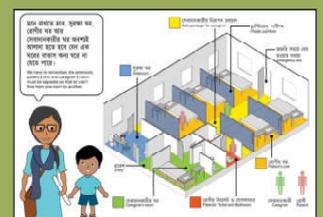
BANGLADESH



Some home isolation tips for crowded Dhaka slums

6.5 million people live in Dhaka's slums, which are among the most densely-crowded on the planet, with large families often sharing a single tin-sheeted room. It's hard to imagine a place where isolating and looking after Covid-infected family members could be more challenging. But a group of young architects from the Platform of Community Action and Architecture (POCAA) were not daunted. They worked with friends in the slum communities to examine those needs and developed a guidebook which provides residents with practical, low-cost ways to help them manage their own isolation spaces and care for their community members who become infected. The guidebook is called *Alada Ghor*, which means "separate room" in Bangla.

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THAILAND

Network-managed Covid mitigation and quarantine systems

From very early in the pandemic, community networks around Thailand did a lot of work to help protect people and slow the spread of the virus: making and distributing masks and alcohol gel, disseminating information about the virus, tracking infections and vaccinations within communities, facilitating contact tracing and Covid testing and distributing food packets and medicines to community members quarantining at home.

Many networks gathered and continuously updated information about who's possibly infected, who's definitely infected, who's vaccinated and who needs what help in poor and informal communities. That survey information became a crucial tool for the networks to plan their own Covid support activities and to collaborate with their local health departments and other agencies, so that other kinds of public Covid support and relief could reach those most in need. This was information that cities and urban districts didn't have and couldn't get - but communities did have it and could get it very quickly and accurately.

A little later in the pandemic, when Covid infections and deaths were soaring and hospitals were overwhelmed with serious Covid patients, community networks in the Bangkok metropolitan region and several other provincial cities, where the situation was most dire, set up network-managed systems for dealing with Covid infections in the community, in order to take care of people at home, or within the community, as much as possible, and prevent them from having to go into the hospitals. These community-managed quarantine systems included using Covid tests to identify and isolate infected people, tracking infections, sharing community data on infections with the public health authorities, and then helping to isolate those infected people at two levels: at home or in community-managed isolation centers.



The community network in Bangkok's Phasi Charoen District set up their own isolation center, where community volunteers could look after sick and infected community people around the clock. They used an old community center and got good support from both the district authority and local businesses. This photo was taken when the squeaky-clean center was almost ready to receive its first group of patients.

Community-managed isolation centers in Bangkok offered an alternative way to keep people healthy

The worst-yet spikes of virus infections happened in fall and winter of 2021, when the more contagious Delta variant was wreaking havoc on Thailand - especially in the Bangkok metropolitan region. People living in crowded and poorly-serviced informal communities were especially vulnerable, and infections spread quickly. At the same time, Covid testing was hard to get and too expensive for most of the urban poor, and government hospitals were so overloaded they were turning sick people away.

Twelve community networks - mostly in Bangkok - responded to the worsening situation by using the CODI support to set up their own community-based systems for managing the virus, with a lot of creativity and good collaboration. The emphasis was on caring for infected people with mild or no symptoms right in the community, to help reduce hospitalizations, and bring only those with more severe symptoms to hospital. After establishing a collaborative team of community volunteers and health volunteers, the first step was to organize Covid testing drives, usually on weekends when people were home, using the faster antigen test kits. People who tested positive would then be isolated and the volunteers would make appointments with district health centers for the more accurate diagnostic test. Once a person was confirmed to be infectious, and a doctor had determined the symptoms were mild, the volunteers would advise the patient to isolate in one of two ways:

Home isolation: When people had enough space and were able to isolate at home, the networks developed systems for supplying them with food (usually cooked by community members in the community kitchens), medical care and regular visits by community members and public health volunteers.

Community isolation: If people lived in crowded houses and couldn't isolate at home, they could stay in the multi-bed community isolation centers networks set up, where people were fed, looked after and given medical attention by teams of community volunteers, until they were clear of the virus and could go back home. The isolation centers were set up in community centers, closed schools and even in Buddhist temples.

All of this activity was entered into the network-level Covid database, which the younger and more computer-savvy community volunteers helped manage, and all the data was shared with local health officials. In all these community-managed quarantine systems, the networks worked closely with local governments and coordinated with the Health Department's Community Health Volunteers - most of whom are women who come from the communities. Many local businesses also supported the projects with donations, furniture, medical equipment, food and space for isolation centers. These community-based isolation systems won the trust of public health agencies, making coordination much easier.



No loneliness allowed in these community isolation centers . . .



Community members prepare lunches to send in to neighbors staying in a community isolation center.

During virus surges, the Thai government and the army set up huge quarantine centers and make-shift Covid field hospitals in stadiums, parking lots and airport cargo terminals, with thousands of beds, for people who were sick or couldn't isolate at home. In the communities, these government isolation centers were considered crowded and far-away and were avoided. Those who did stay came back with reports of feeling lonely and isolated among all those strangers, not knowing who to talk to, being afraid someone might steal their things when they weren't looking. The consensus was that the community isolation centers were much more congenial and more friendly places to quarantine. People could stay

close to home, and they would be taken care of by community people from their own district, people they know. If they felt like screaming, or crying, or chatting, or asking for things, or sending messages to friends and family, they could do so, just like at home. When the community networks run their own Covid isolation centers, the volunteers who work there all have to be trained in how to take care of people who may be sick or infected, and so they have all that knowledge and skill. The food was better too, because it came from the best cooks in the community kitchens. There was a lot of assistance from private sector businesses in the area also, so the centers were well-equipped and very comfortable.

THAILAND

CODI national Covid support program

Here is a rare example of a community-driven Covid relief and rehabilitation process that has been supported at scale by the government. While our friends in the community networks in Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines had only very modest donor funds and their own community-level and network-level resources to work with, Thailand gives us a chance to see what a community-driven Covid relief process can achieve when it is systematically supported and legitimized, at national scale.

Instead of deciding what should be done or what activities to support, CODI's Covid support program gave community networks and individual communities the freedom to identify their most urgent needs and to design and manage their own projects to collectively address those needs. To do that, the program channeled flexible funding, in the form of grants, up to certain agreed-upon ceilings, directly to community networks in urban and rural constituencies, with a few common objectives: the projects should address the various needs of people affected by Covid in the communities and they should strengthen both the people's process and local collaboration.

In the first phase, the budget ceilings depended on the number of communities in that network, and later on the severity of Covid infections in that constituency also. The networks were very creative and proposed all kinds of activities: meetings, surveys, livelihood support, helping affected families, basic welfare, food distribution and production, community kitchens, face masks and alcohol gel, community gardens and setting up spaces for meetings, exchanging news and dealing with multiple needs. Many community networks were able to link with other aid projects and government programs, so the limited CODI support acted as a bridge to link disparate initiatives and make them work better and reach those in real need.

Lessons from CODI in how to build a special Covid support program **with communities** ...

When the Covid crisis hit and people in poor communities were really suffering, community networks around the country began right away doing whatever they could to help. CODI's national Covid program was designed to strengthen and scale up those community-driven responses to the pandemic, and it was designed in close collaboration with the people. The story of how the program was built is described here by Somsook Boonyabanacha, who has been advising the Baan Mankong housing program and was closely involved in the Covid work:

Everyone will agree that a people-driven process needs support, but how? When many institutions try to do that, their interventions end up hindering people's initiative and stifling the potential that already exists in communities. We have to build a support system that goes with people's strength and with how they have been thinking and supports what they have been doing. That way, the tools being offered will allow communities to do more, to be more systematic and to build those strengths into broader possibilities. This is what CODI tries to do, and this is how we built an assisting program for Covid - *with the people*:

- 1 Discuss the situation:** The first step was to discuss the Covid situation with the people in a big meeting, to get a detailed picture of the real situation on the ground: the problems and how they were affecting the poor in various parts of the country, the kinds of things networks already doing which were useful and showed potential, and what ideas people had about how to support and strengthen those community initiatives?
- 2 Draft the program:** Then, after listening to the people and analyzing a little, the team in CODI began to design a possible support program, with all the details about implementation steps, budget ceilings and roles. This was a difficult step and needed some imagination, because it involved not only understanding how to work within available resources but how to bring a more strategic direction, so the support program would help communities move beyond dealing only with immediate needs.
- 3 Discuss the draft program:** The next step was to bring this draft program back to the people to discuss and see how they react. We bombarded them with questions about the program to help their thinking: How will they manage? Will it help their situation? Will it help their movement grow? Will it help the very poor? Will it help link with government and other agencies? There was a lot of feedback in this discussion.
- 4 Revise the program:** With all that feedback and some checking on the ground, the team at CODI could then revise and finalize the program design with some confidence, including all the practical details like the time frame, the budget, the project ceilings, how things will work. Then the program had to get agreement from the CODI board, the ministry and the government system, and this part can be tricky: we have to find the right language to explain all this, and that sometimes needs some diplomacy and mobilization.
- 5 Start the implementation:** As soon as we got approval for the program, we organized a big national meeting, with all the key leaders from the networks around the country, to present the new program, so all those on the demand side could understand loud and clear that this Covid process was going to be organized by them, that the networks would be the key actors to manage Covid needs in their constituency. More meetings followed, at regional, provincial and city levels, but because the needs were very urgent and the communities understood the program and were ready to go, the program moved quite fast, and at a huge scale. It took just two or three months, from the first meeting until the project proposals started coming in, which were all presented and discussed in big national meetings that were held regularly during the pandemic.



Using Covid activities as Baan Mankong prep-work ...



The \$6.2 million CODI has spent on the Covid support program so far was originally allocated for Baan Mankong housing projects. When the pandemic brought all housing projects to a grinding halt (including the ones already underway and in the pipeline), all that money couldn't be spent. At the same time, there were so many urgent needs in the communities. So CODI proposed to the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to use some of those Baan Mankong funds for Covid relief. It helped that the government had issued a provisional policy allowing government programs to redirect their budgets to Covid relief. When CODI presented the case for re-purposing that budget, they could explain that the budget would still be used for the Baan Mankong program, but instead of directly funding

housing projects, it would support activities which help the networks prepare more poor and vulnerable communities to get into the housing program. And that's what happened. All the community-managed Covid relief activities the CODI program supported were designed strategically as tools to help the community networks reach out to vulnerable and unorganized communities and scattered squatters and room renters in their constituencies, bring them into the network process, and help them develop their own collective housing solutions, with support from Baan Mankong. So in a way, CODI's Covid intervention could be described as an intensive Baan Mankong housing preparation exercise for insufficiently-housed communities across the country. There was no change of purpose, only a change of strategy.

Five phases of CODI Covid support so far :

A flexible program that is being continuously tweaked and revised

Because the pandemic has been so dynamic and needs in the communities have kept changing, the CODI Covid support program has responded to those changes with several phases of the program, each designed and strategized a little differently, each with its own emphasis, budget and package of support. The first two phases of the program dealt with needs that arose from the waves of infections from the first Alpha variant of the Covid virus. The third and fourth phases dealt with the effects from the upsurges of infections from the Delta variant of the virus, while the fifth phase is currently dealing with the effects of the more contagious Omicron variant.



1 In the first phase of the CODI program (April - September 2020), CODI provided grants totaling US\$ 4.5 million (with grants to networks of between US\$ 925 and 11,000, depending on the number of communities in the network) which supported community-managed Covid projects that were designed and implemented by 234 urban networks and 1,729 rural subdistrict networks. The networks used these funds to implement a great variety of projects. In cities, the networks collected data on vulnerable families and made and distributed masks and hand sanitizer. A lot of networks focused on providing food, which was an especially crucial problem for out-of-work families in the early stage of the pandemic: distributing food packs, setting up community kitchens, planting community gardens and producing food and food products. The rural networks worked with the community councils to mobilize landless, vulnerable families for the rural Baan Mankong program and developed projects to distribute masks, sanitizing gel and medicines and to produce food to feed hungry families, reduce expenses and boost incomes.



2 In the second phase (January - September 2021), when the Covid variants had led to second and third waves of infections (which were most severe in the Bangkok metro region), grants totaling US\$ 550,000 were given to 180 community networks in Bangkok and other parts of the country, to continue their community-driven Covid activities, with a continuing emphasis on food security and food production, as well as virus prevention, job creation, connecting products produced by rural networks to needy urban networks, and strengthening collaboration with local government agencies and other local actors.



3 In the third phase (June - October 2021), with a budget of US\$ 925,000, the grants to community networks continued, but this time only in the Bangkok metro area, where the infections continued to be most severe (with grants of \$1,500 - \$4,500 per network, depending on the number of communities and severity of infections). In this phase, grants were also given directly to individual communities (\$600 to \$1,200 per community) to carry out their own Covid initiatives. An important emphasis in this phase was revitalizing the networks and bringing more vulnerable and unorganized communities and scattered squatters into the network process and into the secure housing planning process.

4 In the fourth phase (September - December 2021), a budget of US\$ 270,000 was given in grants to community networks, with more focus on community-based quarantine centers, food production, community kitchens and community gardens, with some funds for strengthening links between rural and urban community networks to supply vegetables, herbs and rice to virus-blighted urban communities.



5 In the fifth phase (January 2022 - present), as Thailand is experiencing a new surge with the Omicron variant and sub-variants and many in poor settlements are again unable to work and earn, a new round of community kitchens and community quarantine centers are being supported by the program, which continues to evolve and adjust, to deal with the changing needs.



Three levels of CARE by communities

One observer had this nuanced reflection about the role of caring for others in the community-driven Covid work in Thailand: when organized communities reach out to unorganized and vulnerable communities in different ways, using the Covid intervention as their tool, they are offering different kinds of "care" to those vulnerable communities, and that care makes those communities less vulnerable in three important ways:

- The first and most immediate layer of caring is to provide some tangible assistance (a bag of rice, a bowl of chicken soup, some face masks, a friendly face), which lets those people know they are not invisible, that someone cares and is keeping track of them, that they are not alone after all.
- The next and deeper layer of caring is to bring those vulnerable families and communities into the network, and by doing so to bring them into a larger system of collective caring and support which can meet needs of many other sorts - not only Covid: communication, knowledge, information, collaborations, allies, welfare, organizing, access to savings and loans and access to CODI programs.
- The next and most profound layer of caring is to get these vulnerable and "invisible" communities on track to negotiate for secure land and plan their own housing projects, with support from the Baan Mankong Program, and to become full, visible, legitimate citizens in the process.

Each layer of caring decreases their vulnerability and increases their participation in and access to that larger, collective system of "mutual caring" that is the community network and the community-driven housing movement.

When someone tilts . . .



“ We have complete trust in each other in this housing project. No matter how bad the political situation is, or how bad the Covid situation is, we are united in this community. When someone tilts, the others will help put her upright again. Just like that, we live by supporting each other. ”

(Daw Yamin Thu, savings member in the Pyit Tine Htaung community housing project, in Yangon, Myanmar)



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More on the Covid study :

Some of the community Covid stories in this newsletter have been documented in much greater detail in a series of case studies. These can be found in ACHR website library, under the Covid tab.

Are you on our mailing list?

If you'd like to be on the mailing list for future ACHR publications, please send us your e-mail address and contact details. It's always nice to hear a bit about the work that you or your organization is doing, also.

**Asian
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