

# 215 Cities in Asia

FIFTH YEARLY REPORT OF THE ASIAN COALITION FOR COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM • NOVEMBER 2014

## More proof that citywide slum upgrading is possible, and works

The Asian Coalition for Community Action Program (ACCA) is a program of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) which supports a process of citywide and community-driven slum upgrading in Asian cities. Urban poor community organizations are the primary doers in planning and implementing projects which tackle problems of land, infrastructure and housing at scale in their cities, in partnership with their local governments and other local stakeholders. The ACCA Program didn't come out of the blue, but builds on the initiatives that have already developed in most countries in the Asia region, by community organizations and their supporting groups, and it draws on their combined experiences, mistakes and learning over the past 25 years. The program is an important tool for making change in situations of poverty - a tool which belongs to Asia's urban poor and to all these active groups, and which is helping them to grow and to make change in their cities.

The ACCA Program has now completed its fifth year. The program has supported activities in 215 cities, in 19 countries. This very wide reach in such a short period of time has been a kind of region-wide experiment, and the experiment has proved that urban poor communities and their development partners in all these (and other) cities are ready to address citywide problems and citywide development together. The program has demonstrated a new kind of development intervention, for the more open, democratic world we now live in, in which the poor have the freedom to decide things and manage their own development. In this model, instead of being seen as the problem or the passive recipients of somebody else's idea of what they need, the poor themselves become the doers and the deliverers of solutions to the huge problems of urban poverty, land and housing in Asian cities.

The ACCA projects now underway are creating space to implement citywide upgrading at scale. In all these 215 cities, citywide community surveys are being conducted, and these surveys are being used to identify, prioritize and plan settlement upgrading projects, which are then carried out by community people themselves, in partnership with their city governments. The 146 big housing

projects being implemented with ACCA support have so far have helped 49,356 urban poor families to get secure land and housing, and have also facilitated the creation of city development funds, which are now operating as new joint financial mechanisms in 136 of these cities. Small upgrading projects (like walkways, drains, toilets, water supply, community centers and solid waste systems), which have been implemented in 2,021 poor communities, are allowing some 342,399 poor families to collectively develop practical solutions to immediate problems they face and are leading to more active involvement within the communities and more collaboration with their local governments. All with a modest support of only about \$58,000 per city. In this report - which is the fifth year report - we take a look at the ACCA program's progress.

**ACCA is a regional program of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights that is building a community upgrading process in Asian cities which is :**

- implemented by people
- based in concrete action
- driven by real needs
- city wide in its scale
- strategic in its planning
- done in partnership
- aiming at structural change





### These big problems CAN be solved :

*After these three-and-a-half years of implementing the ACCA Program, in 215 cities, we are finding plenty of evidence that it's not so difficult to solve these gigantic problems of land and housing as we thought, when people have the right tools and when they can work together with each other and with their city governments.*

## Solving Asia's serious housing problems using Asia's greatest resource: **PEOPLE**

ACHR is a 25-year-old coalition of Asian professionals, NGOs and community organizations committed to finding ways to make change in the countries where their work is rooted - change that goes along with the particular realities of their own cultures, politics and ways of doing things. The collective experience of all these groups represents a huge quantum of understanding and possibilities - Asia's own home-grown development wisdom. After linking together as a coalition first in 1989, we began exploring ways of joining forces and supporting each other through a growing number of joint initiatives: housing rights campaigns, fact-finding missions, training and advisory programs, exchange visits, workshops and study tours, projects to promote community savings and community funds and citywide slum upgrading.

This mutual support and cross-pollination of ideas between Asian groups is important, because so many of the development theories, planning paradigms and urban development models which set the course in Asia - and which we are often obliged to follow - are transplants from somewhere else. And sometimes in our rush to grow and to develop, the wisdom and practices that have sustained Asian societies for centuries get lost, and we forget our own considerable human wealth. The skyscrapers and the shopping malls may be going up fast and furiously, and our "tiger" economies may be booming, but the gap between rich and poor is getting wider, and slums and squatter settlements are still spreading faster than solutions from the government or the market sector can keep up with.

**Through this collaborative work over many years, all these people and organizations in the coalition have found that they had one crucial thing in common: a belief that the key resource to solve our enormous problems of poverty and housing is the people who experience those problems directly, who are most urgently wanting change and most vitally motivated to resolve those problems. The poor themselves represent Asia's greatest and least-tapped development force.**

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## Unlocking that huge problem-solving force . . .

The ACCA Program has brought the ACHR coalition's work to a new stage of scale and action, and has brought together many of the elements these groups have developed over the years and tapped this huge people's problem-solving force. The program allows people in a city to come together, think together, look at their problems together and take action right away to start fixing them, using the simple tools the program offers. And as this action by people grows in scale and strength around the Asia region, it becomes a new, proactive political process also, in which the poor are winning support for their initiatives from their local governments and other local stakeholders and becoming vital and accepted development actors in their cities. The ACCA Program is now supporting groups in 215 cities, in 19 Asian countries to take action in different ways to show visible change by people, to show that poor people themselves can make this change, and to show this change happening at scale.

The program allows the implementing groups in different cities to meet often, to compare notes, and to work together in new ways and with a new intensity, to bring the region's community-driven and citywide development processes up to a new level, through ACCA-supported projects they use to strengthen their initiatives. In this way, the ACCA Program is becoming a new learning platform in the region - a platform which allows community groups, professionals and local officials to see, to learn, to share, to grow and to develop a common direction - a common direction that is community-driven and citywide and rooted in Asia's own politics, its own cultures and its own social realities.



# HOW THE ACCA PROGRAM WORKS



## ACCA COORDINATION :

The ACCA Program is a little unusual in the way it is being implemented: not by one single organization but by a regional coalition of experienced groups in Asia that are all finding ways to make best use of the program, according to the changing situation in their own contexts. Such a far-flung and lively field of activity requires some serious coordination, though, and the ACHR Secretariat in Bangkok has facilitated the process in several ways:

■ **Facilitating the ACCA process in various countries :** Since the program began, the ACHR secretariat has provided extensive support, advocacy and coordination assistance to the process in all the countries in the program, through constant correspondence, advisory visits, participation in meetings and negotiations and help organizing exchanges.

■ **Producing program documents and reports :** The ACHR secretariat documents the ongoing ACCA process through a variety of reports, publications, newsletters and media tools (*detailed list on page 21*), which have been distributed widely. Most of them can be downloaded from the ACHR website.

■ **Linking with broader sources of support :** The secretariat also continues to collaborate with and work to influence other funding institutions and regional development agencies to support activities and policy changes which are in line with the community-driven, citywide and community-city partnership strategies of the ACCA Program.

In all of the countries, the ACCA projects are being implemented by key groups that are already working on issues of urban poverty and housing, or by several key groups who link and work together. Most of these groups (which include grassroots community organizations, NGOs, development institutions and architects) already link together and most have collaborated within the ACHR network. All of them share an important belief in large-scale change that is led by people and community organizations. Many of these groups already support networks and federations of poor communities, and most have already cultivated some kinds of collaborative links with local government agencies.

The ACCA Program has been designed to offer new tools to these groups to enhance, strengthen and scale-up the work they are already doing and to expand the space in their cities for community people, the local government and different stakeholders to sit together, work together and create a collaborative, citywide mechanism for bringing about change in their cities. The ACCA projects work like catalysts to activate this new mechanism and to put it to work right away in hands-on projects. The idea is that it will continue and will take on many more initiatives beyond the activities actually supported by ACCA.

The core activities of the program, which account for 58% of the program budget, are the small upgrading projects and big housing projects, which are being implemented in poor communities, by people themselves. The plans for these projects, as well as the citywide surveying, saving and partnership-building processes they are part of, are developed by the local groups and proposed to the regional ACCA committee, which reviews the proposed projects and approves them. The budgets are then released in two of three disbursements, according to schedules the groups work out themselves, with minimum fuss, maximum flexibility, simple reporting and a lot of trust. Aside from modest budgets for city-level activities and national process support, most of the project money goes directly into the hands of poor communities, who do everything themselves.

## KEEPING THE FINANCE SIMPLE WITH SMALL BUDGET CEILINGS :

The ACCA program sets extremely modest budget ceilings for most of the specific activities it supports. This small-ceiling strategy helps make the program's finance system simple and clear to everyone. It is also a way to de-emphasize the budget aspect of the program, so groups can think more about the real substance of their citywide upgrading process. But perhaps the most important aspect of the small ceilings strategy is that it allows the opportunities and budget the program offers to be spread out to reach as many communities and as many cities as possible, allowing all these communities and cities to wake up, to get in the active mode, to start working and to start linking with each other.

The budget ceilings are very small, but the implementing groups have a lot of flexibility in how they use those small resources to address diverse needs in their cities. And it's possible to do a lot. These small budgets give people something in their hands to negotiate with. Small budgets force people to economize and think hard. When communities plan well and use these funds strategically to link with other resources, as has happened in many of the cities, even these modest budget amounts help unlock people's power to negotiate with other actors for more resources, more land and more support.

### Just \$58,000 per city :

- **\$15,000 for at least five small upgrading projects**, in at least five different communities in each city. But many groups are opting to stretch this \$15,000 budget to implement small projects in as many as 12 communities!
- **\$40,000 for one big housing project in each city**, with a maximum of about seven or eight big housing projects per country (not all ACCA cities have implemented big housing projects).
- **\$3,000 per city for city process support**, to cover a variety of joint development processes within the city, such as surveying and mapping, network-building, support for savings activities, local meetings and exchanges.
- **\$10,000 per country per year for national coordination**, including meetings, exchange visits, advocacy.

## SUPPORTING COLLABORATION AND LEARNING AT SEVERAL LEVELS :

The program also supports the setting up and strengthening of collaborative mechanisms at various levels, to build structures of linking, learning and mutual support, to carry the process forward after the ACCA projects are finished:

- **Regional ACCA / ACHR committee :** A regional committee was set up at the start of the program to help coordinate this regional process and to review and approve projects proposed for support by the ACCA Program. The 15-member committee meets every 2 - 3 months and is the key regional mechanism for learning, sharing, assessing, supporting the cities involved in the program, organizing exchange visits and forums and linking with international organizations.
- **Sub-regional support systems :** Some sub-regional groupings have also emerged, in which groups in neighboring countries are assisting each other more regularly and more intensely (especially in Indochina and South Asia).
- **National joint committees** have been set up in several countries which link community groups, government officials and NGOs to work together to make decisions, learn, assess, advocate, build joint capacity and make policy changes.
- **City development committees :** In most of the cities, some kind of joint working group has been established, to provide a platform for community networks, city governments, civic groups, NGOs and academics to plan, to manage the upgrading and city development fund process, to look at land issues and to support change in the city together. These city committees represent a new partnership and a new kind of governance, being built through actual development activities.
- **Citywide community networks and coalitions :** These are the key mechanisms to link poor communities in the city, to work together, support each other, pool their strength, learn from each other's initiatives, survey and map their settlements, strengthen their community finance systems, formulate their upgrading plans, negotiate collectively for land and for various other resources and changes, and plan joint activities in collaboration with other groups.

# TEN KEY IDEAS BEHIND ACCA

The concepts that have informed the design and implementation of the ACCA Program represent a continuation, intensification and scaling up of ideas which have been seminal aspects of ACHR's work and learning over the past 25 years:



In this model, instead of being seen as the problem or the passive recipients of somebody else's idea of what they need, the poor themselves become the doers and the deliverers of solutions to the huge problems of urban poverty, land and housing in Asian cities.

- 1 COMMUNITIES AS THE PRIME MOVERS AND SOLUTION-MAKERS :** Most of the scattered development interventions which follow the conventional supply-driven model are not responding to the real scale or dynamics of the poverty, land and housing problems in Asian cities. The poor, on the other hand, are growing in strength, sophistication and capacity, and they are ready to bring about change. There are plenty of examples now that show clearly that community-led development works. By opening up a big space for people to exercise their power to make change in their lives, their communities and their cities, ACCA is helping to bring this largest-of-all development armies to the task of resolving our urban land and housing problems, as the primary agents of change, not just the passive "beneficiaries" of development.
- 2 EMPHASIS ON ACTION :** It's a strange quirk of development funding these days that while it's quite easy to get "software" funding to train poor people, educate them, empower them, "conscientize" them and build their capacities, it's not so easy to get "hardware" funding to allow them to make any tangible, physical improvements in their slum communities. ACCA works on the premise that the best capacity building is the one that happens when communities take action to tackle the problems they face, and that real change is born in that kind of action - *not in talk*.
- 3 CITYWIDE THINKING, CITYWIDE ACTION, CITYWIDE LEARNING :** There is an urgent need to make community upgrading a proactive part of a city politics. The best way to do this is to work at citywide scale - the scale that is necessary to bring about changes in the deeper political and structural problems which cause poverty, slums, eviction and social exclusion in cities. Individual communities and scattered pilot projects can never hope to address all these things in isolation. In the ACCA Program, the whole city is the working unit - not one project, not one community, not one sector.
- 4 USING THE RESOURCES STRATEGICALLY :** The ACCA intervention is not intended to simply channel resources into poor communities to fund a few drainage or housing projects, but to use the program's modest resources strategically to make a greater impact on the city, by creating new structural platforms at city level, which can allow poor communities to work as equals with each other (within their communities and their city-wide networks) and with other urban partners and which can mainstream community-driven development and large-scale change by urban poor communities.
- 5 EVERY CITY CAN SOLVE ITS OWN PROBLEMS, TOGETHER WITH THE PEOPLE :** We believe that every city can solve its own problems of land, housing and poverty, if it works together with the people. City governments tend to complain that they don't have power, don't have land, don't have budget and don't have the right policies to solve these problems. In fact they can solve these problems within their own constituency. The ACCA Program is helping to create possibilities for the city to see this community-driven model as a viable way of tackling the serious slum and land problems within its constituency, through joint management, flexibility, negotiation and cost-sharing.
- 6 THE GOAL IS STRUCTURAL CHANGE :** Most problems the poor face today are the direct product of the powerful, underlying economic, governance and land-use structures which produce poverty and inequity in the first place. By working at scale, and by focusing not on nice little projects which resolve poverty only in small pockets, but on building robust, citywide and country-wide solution-making systems, the ACCA Program is using its modest resources to challenge those deeper structural problems and transform those inequitable systems.
- 7 BUILDING ON WHAT IS ALREADY THERE :** Each city has its own history and political culture, its own stakeholders and development interventions. The ACCA intervention begins with a respect for that local process, and offers the local groups modest funds to implement concrete development projects which build on whatever potentials already exist and help those groups make their work stronger, more people-driven and more citywide in concept and scope.
- 8 THE PRINCIPAL OF SPREADING OUT :** The ACCA Program has been designed to spread out the opportunities to as many community groups in as many cities as possible, to generate more possibilities, build more partnerships, unlock more local resources and create a much larger field of learning and a much larger pool of new strategies and new possibilities. This is an explicit challenge to the prevailing culture of doing single pilot projects in isolation, with a lot of focussed support, and then trying to replicate them. Change requires scale, because the reality is scale: the huge scale of the problems and the huge scale of the desire for something better in poor communities. ACCA's approach is to begin with this reality, and make scale the foundation of the program's operation, from day one.
- 9 THE PRINCIPAL OF INSUFFICIENCY :** The funding support which ACCA offers community groups for upgrading and housing projects is very small, but it is big enough to allow communities to think big and to start doing something actual right away. But it will not be sufficient to resolve all the needs or to reach everyone. When the resources are *insufficient* like this, people have to think harder and summon all their own resourcefulness to negotiate, to seek out partners and to forge collaborations to get the other things they need and to fill in that *insufficiency* gap.
- 10 REAL NEEDS AS THE DRIVING FORCE :** As the group which most directly faces the problems of urban poverty every minute of their lives, the poor themselves understand their needs better than any outsider could ever hope to do. The ACCA Program gives people in poor communities the tools to do something they need - *right away* - and the urgency of their needs is the program's driving force. This way, all the projects and activities are driven by real demands in that place and not by priorities imposed by some outside "supply-driven" agenda, as with too much of development.