

ACHR's work on Housing Rights over the last 23 years

A note from Somsook Boonyabantha (Director of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights), for the UN-Habitat's meeting on Housing Rights, in Nairobi, September 2011

The UN Habitat has a new executive director, Dr. Joan Close, who has called a meeting in Nairobi in September 2011 to discuss how to move forward on the issue of housing rights, which continues to be a serious issue in countries around the world. This is quite an important meeting, and the UN Habitat has invited all the key people and organizations which have been involved in the issue of housing rights around the world. Most of the people on the meeting list - including many we've known for years - are committed activists and eviction-fighters whose own approach to housing rights may be quite different than ours, so we'd like to take a few moments to explain how we at ACHR approach the issue, and how our ways of addressing it have evolved over the past years.

Housing rights has been one of the most important issues in all of ACHR's work, from the coalition's very beginnings in 1988, to the work we are doing around the region today. All of the people and groups that make up the ACHR coalition feel this is the key issue that needs to be dealt with: that people in Asian cities should not be deprived of their rights to live in decent houses, in supportive human settlements, with access to basic services and public amenities, just because they are poor and cannot afford even the most minimum formal housing the private and public sectors provide. For housing rights is not just a matter of having a decent, secure house. Decent, secure housing is the thing which most sharply separates the poor from everyone else in their cities, and the thing which most powerfully ensures a person's security, dignity, legitimacy and citizenship.

When some see the work ACHR is doing now in cities around Asia, to promote city-wide slum upgrading by poor communities themselves, they may feel we've forgotten our activist roots, abandoned our struggle for housing rights and become instead a kind of housing developer or a donor agency that funds housing projects. But in the past 23 years, we have never ceased to focus our work seriously on this issue - although the way we have done so has gone through many changes. And this city-wide upgrading work is no less passionately about helping the urban poor to realize their housing rights than the coalition's earliest work making noise about the evictions that were taking place around the region. But it may be helpful to explain the logic which informs this city-wide and community-driven movement ACHR is now supporting by describing the stages the coalition's work has gone through, the lessons each of those stages has given us, and the reasons why we are now working in the way we are.

FIRST STAGE : Fighting evictions. We first came together as a regional coalition of people and groups in Seoul, Korea, at a time huge evictions that were taking place there as the city prepared to host the winter Olympics in 1988. We organized a fact-finding mission to look into those evictions, and followed that up with similar fact-finding missions in Hong Kong and in Korea again. We also set up of an Eviction Watch program, to monitor evictions taking place around Asia and make information about these evictions known to as many people as possible through reports and fax campaigns (no e-mail back then!). All the groups that came together for the first time in this new coalition were deeply troubled by the evictions they saw taking place around Asia, and by the way huge numbers of poor people were being excluded from the cities their cheap labor helped to make prosperous. This was the first stage, and the ACHR's activities in this stage included organizing fact-finding missions, eviction monitoring, anti-eviction campaigns, advocacy, organizing meetings to link activists and urban poor groups, starting to organize poor community groups and advising them about the laws which guarantee their housing rights.



SECOND STAGE : Exploring solutions to eviction BEFORE they actually take place. But we quickly began to see that no matter how hard we fought against these evictions, we never won the larger war - *and we couldn't ever win it on those terms.* We may have been able to win a few small, isolated battles here and there, and stopped one community from being bulldozed or shamed some municipal government into some concession. But when we fought against actual evictions, the battle was always a reactive, defensive one, and it always took place at the bitter end of a long process of cause and effect, which left us and left communities with very few options but to resist and confront, or to hope for some beneficent force to save them. By then it is too late to explore alternative options or to facilitate a reasoned dialogue. We also saw that the poor in these desperate situations were weak, were not organized, were isolated, had no collective bargaining power, had no resources and were not prepared with any alternative options of their own to bargain for. It was as though this eviction-fighting was a damage-limitation exercise, and a game in which we were never be on the offensive.

It was also difficult to ignore the reality that the problems were so much bigger than just those few hot evictions we were monitoring or advocating against. For every single eviction case our shouting and screaming helped to stop or slow down, there were a thousand other slums and squatter settlements whose date with the demolition squad was coming, sooner or later, a thousand other city development plans being drafted that would cause new waves of evictions, a thousand other government slum clearance policies being tabled that would mean fresh waves of housing rights confrontations. It was as though this enormous, wrongful urban development process were rolling right ahead, and all we could do was run after it, grabbing with all our good intentions at a few stray bits but never for an instant slowing down these larger changes.

So in this second stage of ACHR's work, we began to look at a variety of ways these housing rights conflicts can be addressed - as a regional coalition - long before any eviction actually takes place. This exploration included starting work in countries where this urbanization process was still in its infancy (like Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR and Nepal), organizing meetings, workshops and exchange visits which allowed community groups and NGOs from different cities and different countries to learn from each other's experiences - experiences in slum upgrading, in accessing housing finance, in collaborating with other stakeholders, in surveying and developing information about informal settlements in the city, in developing community networks.

This stage was a way of tapping the enormous wisdom and experiences which already existed in the coalition groups around Asia and using that wealth to create a common pool of understanding, a common pool of options, and a common pool of expertise which could be borrowed and transferred, as the groups facing these terrible situations found new ways of dealing more proactively with the issue of urban housing rights. This stage of the coalition's work focused on sharing of knowledge, strengthening links, collaborating and widening the net of assistance and advocacy between all the groups around the region - *before the evictions actually happened.* ACHR's *Training and Advisory Program (TAP)*, was developed during this stage, and became one of the coalition's key tools for mutual learning and mutual support, and it was a stage of great learning and broadening of possibilities and a stage of beginning to look at the larger structures which caused evictions in the first place.



THIRD STAGE : Showing how poor communities themselves can deliver solutions. One of the biggest lessons we all learned in the first two stages of ACHR's work was that the formal systems of delivery - the meager public sector housing and various government projects and the private sector market housing - were unable to deliver enough secure, affordable and accessible housing to meet even a tiny fraction of the real needs. And yet so many of the activists fighting against eviction kept demanding that their governments - *who were in most cases the ones doing the evicting!* - solve those problems, change those laws and deliver those solutions! This realization that the government couldn't deliver solutions, that the private sector couldn't deliver solutions and that all the formal systems of delivering housing solutions to the poor were moving at a snail's pace, compared to the lightening speed of real change in Asian cities and Asian societies. This was at a time when land-prices in cities around the region were skyrocketing, when disparities between rich and poor were widening rapidly, when millions of poor rural migrants were pouring into cities looking for opportunities.

A lot of this failure of the formal system to keep up with the real needs and real dynamism in Asian cities has to do with knowledge - or rather the serious lack of knowledge - about how to solve these problems. Most governments in Asia don't have a clue how to tackle their enormous problems of housing and land, except to trot out those same tired old notions that have

been disproved again and again: we should be like Singapore and build tall blocks of flats for everyone, we should gather up all the poor and truck them back to their villages. And year after year, we hear the same old things: that they don't have land for housing the poor, that they don't have money to give loans to the poor, that the poor have no capacity to do anything. The understanding about the realities in their cities, and about what poor people are capable of doing, is simply not there in most governments. So why on earth should we keep looking in that direction for the solution, keep demanding answers from a quarter where there is only ignorance?

But at the same time, we kept seeing all around us, that even without land, without support, without finance and without any sort of help from anybody, the poor in Asian cities were managing to survive, to find some kind of shelter, to earn and to bring up their families, even if all this miraculous survival was taking place in such inhuman conditions. For most groups in the ACHR coalition, this was the most interesting aspect of all our work - this tremendous creativity, this energy and this capacity to survive among the urban poor. And the more we looked, the more we began to see that all this messy, jerry-rigged survival going on (which governments see as illegal behavior and seek to punish it) is not a problem at all, but is actually an enormous development force, a force which could potentially be channeled to solving these enormous problems, at the real scale of the problems.

So in this third stage of ACHR's work, we began to look at this big scale of people as a solution, rather than a problem. And since it was clear we weren't going to find any solutions being delivered by the government, we decided to see how we could support these poor communities to deliver their own solutions, and then show their solutions to their governments and larger societies. Many of the activities ACHR supported in this stage, then, had to do with building the capacity of poor communities to develop such solutions, including promoting community savings and credit (in order to develop people's own funds and their abilities to manage finance collectively), building networks which link poor communities within cities and within countries (to strengthen their ties of mutual learning, mutual support and to build their collective bargaining power) and supporting some of the first community-driven housing and settlement upgrading activities. As a result of all these activities, a number of ground-breaking housing and community upgrading projects were implemented by poor communities in different countries, and these projects began to show new possibilities and new kinds of people's solutions. These were like people's process pilot projects, and they were still fairly scattered, but the increasing linkages between groups and countries, which ACHR continued to facilitate, made the learning from these scattered projects zoom around the region quickly and powerfully.



FOURTH STAGE : Moving from scattered pilots to city-wide and community-driven slum upgrading.

And that brings us into the fourth and current stage of ACHR's work, in which those scattered people-driven pilot projects are being scaled up into something larger-scaled, through the promotion of a city-wide and people-driven slum upgrading movement in Asia. This city-wide slum upgrading process is now working very well and happening on a very large scale in several countries now - especially Thailand, India, Cambodia and a few others. In this city-wide process, poor communities link together at the city-wide scale, survey all the settlements in the city, manage their savings and city funds and survey information at city-wide scale, develop plans for upgrading all the settlements at city-wide scale, manage their negotiations for land and infrastructure at city-wide scale and develop their layout planning and design their affordable housing types at city-wide scale. Now this city-wide upgrading - as a concept and as a new way of implementing - is being expanded to many other Asian countries, with support from ACHR's new ACCA Program (*Asian Coalition for Community Action*), which is helping groups in about 150 cities in 18 countries to build their own city-wide and people-driven upgrading process, in collaboration with their local governments.

This new city-wide slum upgrading movement is quite important in the way it is making the housing rights issue an issue that truly belongs to the poor - not just to a few high-minded activists or human rights groups. When poor communities in a city come together, survey all the people in their cities who don't have housing rights, discuss together the problems they face, and begin to develop plans and implement projects which resolve those problems, they are taking ownership of an issue which has for too long been taken up on their behalf. And it's amazing how much broader the conception of housing rights actually becomes when it is poor people themselves doing the measuring and counting. In many Asian cities now, city-wide surveys are including not only the usual slum and squatter communities, but homeless people, scattered squatters, room renters, land-renters and joint-family sharers whose housing rights come in many different shades and degrees of illegality and informality. When the poor are the ones gathering and understanding this kind of information, at scale, and when they carry out these surveys in collaboration with their local governments and other local stakeholders (as many do now), they are making the first step in a profound political shift from being the seen as a municipal problem, to being part of a team that is for the first time understanding the real scale of the problems together.

The next step is to start addressing those problems through some real upgrading and housing projects - perhaps starting with the communities are ready to go now. Although most will not have the financial resources yet to solve all their city's problems right away (and the lack of finance continues to be one of the major stumbling blocks), the important thing is that everyone's eyes are now open to the whole city. This is a dramatic enlarging of the concept, from the individual "pilot project" done in isolation and with enormous amounts of support, to the conception that the goal from the very start is to upgrade all the slums in the city, and get all the communities in the city involved. When poor communities and their local governments think in these terms, the way of working changes dramatically, to spreading out, making city wide information, city-wide linkages between communities, city-wide upgrading planning, city-wide relationships, city-wide collaborations, city-wide thinking. And the crucial belief that informs this city-wide process is *that all the housing rights problems in the city can be solved*.



In this new model, it is the people who don't have those housing rights who are the key movers and solution makers. And this is the scale in which it can no longer be just a few activists or a few housing rights reports, being written by professionals sitting half way around the world, which have a monopoly on information about the housing rights situation in Asian cities. This is a large-scale, democratic process in which the poor themselves, with other local actors as much as possible, can touch the place where the problems really are. Because it is their city, and they are the ones who live there and suffer from all those problems most directly. In this city-wide approach, they look at their own city, and then they plan and then they work out a way to deal with it. But because of the links between cities and between countries, which ACHR has built and continues to build, those groups are not doing this in isolation, but with full support and full access to a very big, region-side pool of expertise, experiences and options.



This change also represents an important move away from *supply-driven* development, in which it is governments and development organizations which determine what's needed and design the solutions, to a more *demand-driven* development, in which it is the people who face these housing rights problems determine what they need, design their own solutions and make clear what assistance they need to do that. After so many decades of clumsy, unsuccessful supply-driven development, it's clear that stuff is never going to reach the real scale of needs, or keep up with the real speed of change. We still have big problems of eviction, of illegality, of sub-standard housing and lack of access to services, but when the knowledge and the power to determine and to do shifts into the hands of the big numbers of poor people - as it is starting to do now - we're starting to find the solutions. We look at the ACHR's ACCA Program as an important set of tools to provide a kind of umbrella for the people and the delivery systems which have for too long been ignored.





HOUSING RIGHTS and HOUSING DEVELOPMENT GO TOGETHER . . .

And finally, I think it is important to say that this new, big change in the way ACHR is dealing with housing rights in Asia represents a much more comprehensive and more long-term way of dealing with eviction, than simply fire-fighting in a few hot eviction cases. For in reality, all the slums and all the squatter settlements and all the scattered poor in our cities are under threat of eviction, sooner or later. The housing rights of all the people living in all those vulnerable and squalid situations are being compromised, and so any housing rights approach that is worth its words should address all these violations and seek solutions for all these different kinds of vulnerability - not just the few being menaced by the municipal bulldozers right now. This new process of using city-wide information and city-wide housing upgrading by people to secure the housing rights of everyone in the city is showing us that housing rights and housing development are like two parts of the same whole - there is no need to divide them. A proper housing development process is the best way of all to provide housing rights to poor people at scale.