

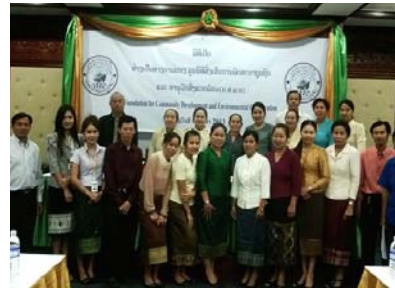
LAO PDR

BRINGING LAND AND HOUSING ISSUES INTO A WOMEN'S SAVINGS MOVEMENT

Auntie Sommay Vongnakhone is one of the senior community leaders in Lao PDR, and a tough fighter from back in the days of Lao's nationalist war. She is one of the national leaders of the women's savings network in Lao, which they now call the Community Development and Environment Conservation Foundation (CDEC), which is implementing all the ACCA projects there. Here are some notes from a presentation she made recently in Bangkok about the ACCA process in Lao PDR :

Over the last fifteen years, we've started our savings groups, built our networks at village, district, province and national levels and started our own network funds. We now have 567 savings groups in 27 cities and districts around the country, with over 100,000 members and collective savings of US\$18 million. In some of these districts we now have savings in 100% of the villages, and in a few villages, we have savings members in 100% of the houses. Besides savings and loans, these savings groups work together on environmental and agricultural projects, community enterprises, markets, traditional crafts and mushroom growing. We also run our own welfare funds at the community level. These savings and development activities have strengthened the role of women in Lao society, and gotten poor women to pool their resources, work together, encourage each other and develop skills in financial management.

Before, the government may not have recognized community organizations that were outside the government structure, and they thought that savings was just women's work! But when the ACCA program came and people started to build roads and toilets and new housing projects, the government began to see the real role of women. Now it is all of us women who are showing the government how to develop our country! Now we can negotiate with the government for land, because we negotiate as a network, with the strength of our network's 100,000 savings members and our big collective savings. And we also negotiate with the strength of our partnership with the architects at the university behind us.



The ACCA program is now active in all the cities and districts that are part of our national women's savings movement, and it is bringing the new aspects of community upgrading and housing into our work and helping to strengthen our networks at community and city levels. The big housing project in the Nong Duang Thung squatter community in Vientiane (see next page) is the country's first community-driven, on-site slum upgrading project, and the first urban poor community to negotiate to rent the public land they have been squatting on. And the big housing projects in Luang Prabang and Muang Ngoy Districts are the first cases where poor communities being evicted to make way for big development projects (an airport and a dam) have been able to negotiate to get free government land

nearby and plan and implement their own relocation housing projects. There are also many small projects being implemented with ACCA support, including wells and hand pumps in rural areas (built at a cost that is much lower cost than those installed by other organizations), communal toilets, road improvements, flood prevention and community savings centers.

Small projects go as **LOANS** through CDF:

The savings networks in Lao PDR have developed their district-level community funds and community upgrading process in 27 districts now. They use the ACCA funds a little differently and spread these resources out much wider than in other countries. Early on, they agreed to share the total budget so that each district got \$7,000 for small projects, which they put into their district-level funds, and from which the savings groups then borrow amounts ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 (all loans, no grants!) for their small upgrading projects. With this \$7,000, each district implements three or four projects, and when the money revolves back in the CDF, it supports another round of small projects. In this way, we can see a big, big number of much-needed small projects being implemented by community groups, through the mechanism of these district funds and the savings groups they link together. All the ACCA support has gone into these district-level funds, which were originally managed jointly by the savings network and the Lao Women's Union, but are now managed entirely by the savings network.



ACCA in LAO PDR :

PROJECT CITIES (total 27)

- Chanthaburi District, Vientiane
- Pak Ngum District, Vientiane
- Naxaythong District, Vientiane
- Sangthong District, Vientiane
- Sikotthabong District, Vientiane
- Srisatthanat District, Vientiane
- Hadxayfong District, Vientiane
- Xaysetha District, Vientiane
- Hom District, Vientiane
- Muang Kong Dist., Champasak
- Pakse District, Champasak
- Chana Somboon D, Champasak
- Luang Prabang Dist., Luang Pra.
- Muang Ngoy Dist., Luang Prab.
- Nambak Dist., Luang Prabang
- Pak Ou Dist., Luang Prabang
- Huayxay District, Bokeo
- Tonpheung District, Bokeo
- Paktha District, Bokeo
- Boonneue District, Pongsaly
- Yod-Ou District, Pongsaly
- Phongsaly District, Pongsaly
- Buntay District, Pongsaly
- Muang Khwua Dist., Pongsaly
- Nhommalath Dist., Khammuan
- Tha Thom Dist., Xieng Khuang
- Khoum District, Xieng Khuang

SMALL PROJECTS

Small projects approved : 122
 In number of cities : 27
 Total budget approved : \$197,000

BIG PROJECTS

Big projects approved : 9
 In number of cities : 9
 Total budget approved : \$333,000

SPECIAL PROJECTS

One flood disaster-rehabilitation project in 3 provinces, budget \$10,000

SAVINGS (only in 27 ACCA cities)

Savings groups : 567
 Savings members : 96,941
 Total savings : \$17,568,951

CITY DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

CDFs active in : 27 cities
 Capital in 27 CDFs: \$14,408,009

- from ACCA \$517,000 (4%)
- from coms. \$13,859,752 (96%)
- from gov. \$16,750 (0%)
- from others \$21,507 (0%)

IMPLEMENTING GROUP:

The ACCA projects in Lao PDR are being implemented entirely by the national network of community women's savings groups (CDEC), with no NGO support.



These three projects are by no means perfect, but they are important pilots for the country of Lao PDR, because so many people without any registration papers or formal rights to their land here are being evicted for development projects and left in a kind of limbo, because they aren't considered "legal" or entitled to any compensation or relocation.

Three breakthroughs in urban poor HOUSING

BIG PROJECTS: The ACCA housing projects in Vientiane and Luang Prabang show how communities themselves can fix the problems quite simply and easily . . .

1 NONG DUANG TUNG in VIENTIANE (84 households) When this community faced eviction from the government land they'd been squatting on, they worked with the community architects to survey and map their settlement and develop an on-site reblocking plan, which they used to negotiate the country's first case of an urban poor community being given a long-term lease to the public land they already occupy. After the ACCA project was approved, the people decided to start with the infrastructure improvements first, to bring community members to work together on communal needs, and then improve the individual houses later. They used \$10,000 of the \$40,000 ACCA budget for infrastructure (as a grant), and set aside the remaining \$30,000 as a revolving fund for housing improvement loans. But instead of giving loans to just 5 or 6 families to build full new houses and make everyone else wait a long time for their turn, they decided to give only small house repair loans (maximum \$500) initially to 50 households, which are repaid within six months, at 8% interest, of which 3% stays in the community savings group and 2% goes into their district-level fund.



2 POO SANG KHAM in LUANG PRABANG (52 households) Luang Prabang is one of the country's most beautiful cities and a World Heritage site, but government efforts to develop tourism here have made land prices skyrocket and indirectly led to increasing eviction of city's poor. With support from ACCA, the savings network carried out a citywide survey in 2011, to understand the situation and see how to solve the urban poor land and housing problems on a citywide scale, with savings groups as the backbone. During the survey, they found several communities living in vulnerable situations, including a group of 52 families who'd been evicted for an airport expansion project and weren't eligible for compensation or resettlement. After presenting their survey findings to the mayor and key departments, the network persuaded the city to provide a piece of nearby land for housing these 52 families. The land was free, but came without any infrastructure, so \$10,000 of the ACCA big project funds was used to install a water supply system, and the remaining \$30,000 was used to give housing loans of 5 million kip (\$625) per family to build a simple starter house.



3 BUAM NALAY in MUANG NGOY (92 households) Rural families all over Lao are being evicted from their ancestral land to make way for big dam projects and land-concessions to Chinese companies for mining and contract farming. In one case, 92 families in Muang Ngoy District were evicted from their ancestral riverside villages, which will be submerged when a big Chinese-funded dam is built on the Nam Ou River. The government provided free resettlement seven kilometers away, but a year after relocation, the people found themselves in a very bad situation: no space for subsistence farming, no basic services, no proper housing and an access road that was so mucky that people had to walk through forest pathways to reach their old land, which the government was still allowing them to cultivate. The ACCA project here, which is still in process, allowed the people to address their most urgent needs first, like roads, electricity, toilets, schools and a village office, and will expand later into small housing improvement loans, once the community members can get back on their feet.



The national women's savings network in Lao decides it's time to strike a blow for **INDEPENDENCE** :

Although it began only in 2000, the national community women's savings process in Lao PDR has flown on the wings of this country's quiet but abundant social strength to become one of the most robust savings processes in the Asia region, with over 100,000 savings members in 600 communities and collective savings of over US\$18 million - almost all of which is in constant circulation in loans for livelihood, emergencies, agriculture, animal husbandry and housing improvements. The savings process in Lao was originally supported by the Lao Women's Union (LWU), CODI, ACHR and WCEP (a local support NGO), and district-level CDFs have now been set up in all the districts, which link together all the savings groups in that district.

For some time, an idea had been floated of finding a way to institutionalize this large, national women's savings process under the LWU. But after years of working in partnership with the LWU and being supported by an MOU between the MOU, CODI, ACHR and the local NGO, the network decided in 2012 to take over the facilitating, coordinating and fund management work that has so far been done by LWU and WCEP, while still maintaining their close working partnership with the LWU. Since then, this energetic national network of grassroots women's savings groups in Lao PDR has been sailing its own ship, without any NGO support, and has registered itself as a foundation: The Lao Community Development and Environmental Conservation Foundation (CDEC).

