

# Housing Development

by the Urban Poor Movement



Community Organizations Development Institute (public organization)  
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# Organizing the Homeless in Thailand

Nopphan Phomsri  
Human Settlement Foundation (HSF)<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> **The Human Settlement Foundation (HSF)** is a non-governmental organization that has been doing community organizing work with the urban poor in Thailand since 1988. Initially, HSF worked with the urban poor living in slum communities before expanding its work to organize another group of the urban poor that was even worse off, namely people living under bridges in Bangkok. Later, HSF also began working with the most marginalized group in urban society, the homeless. Currently, HSF has started working with urban renters of cheap rental rooms, too. In supporting these groups of the urban poor, HSF's goal is to create strong groups with the power to create change in their own lives, their communities, and society, whether in the area of developing housing, developing quality of life, or other social issues, both at the local level and the policy level.



## Problems of the homeless in Thailand

As a group, the economic status of the homeless tends to be worse than that of the poor in general. Their problems and life conditions are complex. Aside from the obvious problem of economic poverty, another relevant issue for the homeless is often the fragility of the family institution, which is unable to withstand the internal conflicts or stress that arise from any number of factors, resulting in people being pushed out of their homes, where many end up living by themselves in public spaces. At the same time, other social institutions are not strong enough to provide the necessary support to these people.

The Human Settlement Foundation (HSF) has found that most homeless people have left their homes by themselves as individuals. Very few of the homeless are families. Most are



male, but they range in age from children and youth to working age and the elderly. In terms of problems, we have observed that there are people with disabilities, people with physical and chronic illnesses, people living with HIV, alcoholics, people with mental illness, people released from prison after having completed

their sentences, etc. Some homeless people may be experiencing several overlapping issues simultaneously. These factors constitute one of the reasons that people may be pushed out of their homes. On the surface, it might appear as if it is personal failures or personal problems that are responsible for homelessness, but if examined more deeply, one can see that these factors largely stem from an economic and social structure characterized by a high level of inequality that creates failure in the lives of many people while, at the same time, there is still an absence of a sufficiently strong state social welfare policy. In other words, the state still does not attach enough importance to guaranteeing fundamental rights to life for everyone in a way that is conducive to caring for people experiencing these problems and enabling them to carry on with their basic life.



Homelessness means having to sleep and live in public spaces, whether parks, sidewalks, in front of shops, in bus or train stations, sheds, abandoned buildings, or unattended spaces in various areas of the city. Consequently, for the homeless, daily life itself becomes difficult. There are no appropriate and safe places to sleep, to shower, or wash clothes. There are no bathrooms to use. Homeless people have to secretly bathe and wash their clothes at public piers, gas stations, and bus or train stations. But if one day, good fortune should have it that a homeless person receives income from working, they might gain a little more comfort by being able to pay to use the services of a private bathroom. Homeless people have a way of life that is related to the city, as the city is their source of work and their source of resources that helps make their lives easier. The homeless survive as low-level urban labor. They are hired at low wages to do the work that no one else wants to do. Yet urban society does not consider the homeless to be a part of the city and instead, always seems to exclude them and drive them out of the city. As a result, many homeless people live in a state of fear and feel a great need to protect themselves from outsiders.



In addition, because some homeless people do not have national identity cards, they are unable to access basic state services, such as medical services or welfare benefits for the elderly or the disabled. If homeless people in this category are assaulted or have their rights violated in any way, they cannot report the case and file a lawsuit to protect themselves. Not having a national identity card also makes it impossible for some homeless people to find stable work.

Beyond all the external difficulties that homeless people have to face every day, it is often the internal factors that create the biggest problems: the state of powerlessness and feelings of hopelessness, which are caused by repeated failures in life, being rejected by family, community, and a society that views the homeless as excess.

## Overview of HSF's work with the homeless





# 1

## Getting to know the homeless, building relationships and trust, and forming groups

Our work with the homeless began with getting to know them, understanding them, and understanding the problems of homelessness. To learn and gain this understanding, we had to go out and reach the homeless, be with them and work with them in the various areas around the city where they were living. We used several methods, such as sleeping in public spaces with them, standing in line together with them to wait for free food distributed by welfare institutions or other donors, and going to sell things or to collect recyclables together. Aside from these methods, we also devised an outreach activity called “coffee rounds,”<sup>2</sup> which involved walking out to visit homeless people in various areas around the city where they were present, bringing drinks, such as hot water, coffee, or soymilk; basic medicines; mosquito repellent; and ready-to-eat food. We used these interactions as an opportunity to talk with and

get to know homeless people, learn about their problems, their difficulties, and their needs.

After gaining the trust of many homeless people and learning about their problems, we began to promote and support the formation of small groups of the homeless in various public spaces around the city. One method we used to build groups and attract the homeless to come together was showing outdoor movies to provide entertainment, or preparing hot food and sitting to eat together in spaces where there were a large number of homeless people, such as the square in front of Bangkok City Hall.



<sup>2</sup> Making “coffee rounds” was modeled on an activity observed while on a study visit to learn about work with the homeless in Japan. In Japan, due to the cold climate, hot tea was brought along when visiting the homeless in public spaces. In adapting the activity to Thailand, we used coffee instead, since the homeless here prefer to drink coffee, but often find it hard to get hot water. Some homeless people tear open a sachet of coffee, pour the contents into their mouth, and then follow that with a drink of water.



We did this along with showing videos or other news stories that were related to the homeless. We used these opportunities to provide information on issues relevant to the homeless and invited academics, students, or people who were involved with solving various problems to join and speak. While conducting these activities, we also observed and looked for homeless people with the capacity to become small-group leaders, who could serve as the key people for coordinating with other homeless people in each area and promoting processes that lead to solving concrete problems experienced by the homeless. Concrete problems addressed started with issues that were relatively easy to solve, such as taking people to get a new national identity card, transferring the right to receive medical care from the provinces to the area where the homeless person was actually living, etc. “Easy issues” were chosen first in order to enable the homeless to build up confidence and then gradually expand to work on bigger or more difficult issues.

## 2

### Starting the process to solve the problem of housing for the homeless following the proposals of the homeless themselves

Solving the problems that the homeless themselves present is important and needs to be emphasized when working with the homeless. It is also essential to work together, pushing for a solution until success is achieved, as this success builds up confidence among the homeless that when they come together and work together, they can actually solve their own problems, starting from small ones and gradually developing the capacity to solve

larger problems. Such larger problems included specifically the problem of housing, which required the power of the homeless working together with their network to solve.

To solve their problem of housing, the homeless proposed building a homeless shelter that would be owned and managed by the homeless themselves. This proposal was made in response to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration’s policy to close public access

starting from August 2001 to *Sanam Luang*,<sup>3</sup> a big public space where a large number of homeless and other people in Bangkok spent time relaxing and living their lives. We met with the homeless group at *Sanam Luang*, and they proposed that it was necessary to begin thinking about solving their problem of housing. In their analysis, housing that was accessible to them and that they actually had the capacity to bear the expenses of would have to be in the form of a shelter that was a large house, where the homeless could live together, helping each other to pay for water and electricity bills, while managing and looking after the place together, too. So the homeless group went to work pushing for a concrete solution in an effort that would prove their own capacity and dignity. They began by searching for land that could accommodate the construction of a shelter in an area that was appropriate for the homeless.

In the end, they found a plot of land owned by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) near Charan Sanitwong train station in Bangkok Noi District, Bangkok. The location was easily accessible and convenient for transportation. Together and with the support of Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN), the homeless were able to press their demands until they were finally accepted. They were thus able to rent the plot of land from the SRT on 25 March 2005, with the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), under the jurisdiction of the



Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), serving as the middleman agency for the land rental in accordance with conditions set by the SRT. The 3,200 square meter plot of land was then sublet to the homeless so that in actual practice, they manage the shelter themselves, with CODI providing budgetary support for the actual construction of the shelter and the first three years of rental payment to the SRT. After the first three years, the homeless themselves assumed responsibility for paying rent for the use of the SRT's land. Construction of this homeless shelter was completed in 2008. It can accommodate approximately 50 people. Some of the labor in building the shelter was performed by homeless people, from clearing the area, joining in the construction, and participating in monitoring and controlling the construction process until it was completed. The shelter was named the Suwit Watnoo Homeless Center in memory of a person who was an important driving force behind our work.

<sup>3</sup> *Sanam Luang* is a wide, open grassy field in Bangkok. At that time, it was a public space that all people could use for various activities, such as sitting and resting, eating, playing chess, flying kites, selling food and other things, conducting political activities, etc. It was a space where hundreds of homeless people could live their lives, sit and rest during the day, sell things, and sleep at night. But at present, a fence has been erected around area and people are only permitted to use the space during the day.

### 3

## Expanding work areas with the homeless from Bangkok to regional cities, linking them together as a homeless network, and developing a homeless housing policy to propose to the government

Through working together successfully on housing, managing the shelter, and developing their own quality of life, the homeless group came to recognize their own capacity and value, fostering their belief that life could in fact get better. Consequently, members of the group gained greater self-confidence and were able to stand up and become leaders in working with other homeless people who were still living in public spaces and in other provinces. HSF worked together with these homeless leaders to expand the work with the homeless from Bangkok to other main regional cities in Thailand. The work expanded to Chiang Mai Province in 2008 and the homeless network was established in 2009. This network involved working together in a

loosely collaborative fashion to create public space for the homeless that allowed them to be clearly recognized by society. Later, work areas expanded to include Khon Kaen Province in 2011, Pathum Thani Province in 2014, Nonthaburi Province in 2017, and Kanchanaburi, Rayong, and Nakhon Ratchasima Provinces in 2020. Our work with the homeless expanded to the provinces with local civil society partners joining to provide support and going out together to public spaces to work with the homeless. We have a joint plan to officially announce the establishment of the Thailand Homeless Network at the end 2024, with the support of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation.





In order to enable the homeless and other vulnerable urban populations to have easy access to assistance and receive support to develop their quality of life, HSF came up with the idea of creating homeless coordination points in public places.<sup>4</sup> The homeless network and HSF pushed together to establish these coordination points in public places in every province where we worked. The coordination points are a mechanism facilitating the integration of work among state agencies and civil society organizations doing work related to the homeless.

After creating a concrete solution to the problem of housing by the homeless, implemented in the Suwit Watnoo Homeless Center, the next step was to develop a policy proposal on housing for the homeless that could be presented to the government. This effort was undertaken in coordination with all sectors, including CODI, the Department of Social Development and Welfare (MSDHS),

the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, etc. Nevertheless, the main force behind the advocacy came from people's sector organizations that continually followed up and pushed for the government to adopt their policy proposal. These organizations were the homeless group, Four Regions Slum Network, the Human Settlement Foundation, and other allied networks, who spent five years advocating for this policy through three successive governments (2011-2016). Finally, on 8 March 2016, the Council of Ministers approved the policy and allocated a budget of 118.6 million baht to support the purchase of land, the construction of homeless centers, and a nationwide homeless survey. The purchase of land and construction of homeless centers would be carried out in three areas, namely Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Pathum Thani Provinces, which were the areas where the homeless group and HSF had previously gone to expand their work.

<sup>4</sup> **Homeless coordination points in public places** serve as a coordination mechanism for cooperation among various partners in local areas, such as the Human Settlement Foundation, the homeless network, Protection Center for the Destitute (MSDHS), municipalities, the Red Cross, educational institutions, the private sector, religious organizations, etc. Work is done together on seven issues: database work, access to rights and basic welfare benefits, physical and mental health services, access to housing, livelihood/employment, basic necessities, and learning space public service for interested groups.



## 4

### Managing the homeless centers, or the “Homes of the Homeless,” and working to support other vulnerable urban groups

“Homeless centers are the homes of the homeless.” For the homeless, the meaning of “home” is not just a building. Instead, “home” has the connotation of warmth and safety, regardless of whether the building is large or small, dilapidated or strong and stable. It is a place for building a family. It provides support for growth as well as physical and mental stability. There is probably no one who would not want to have a home like this. But the fact is that in society today, there are many “homes” that do not fulfill this function. For this reason, some people have to leave their homes and go out to face life alone, in search of a new, warmer home. Some people

succeed, while others fail. But those who fail are in a vulnerable condition. They need a warm home too. For the homeless, homeless centers are their homes.

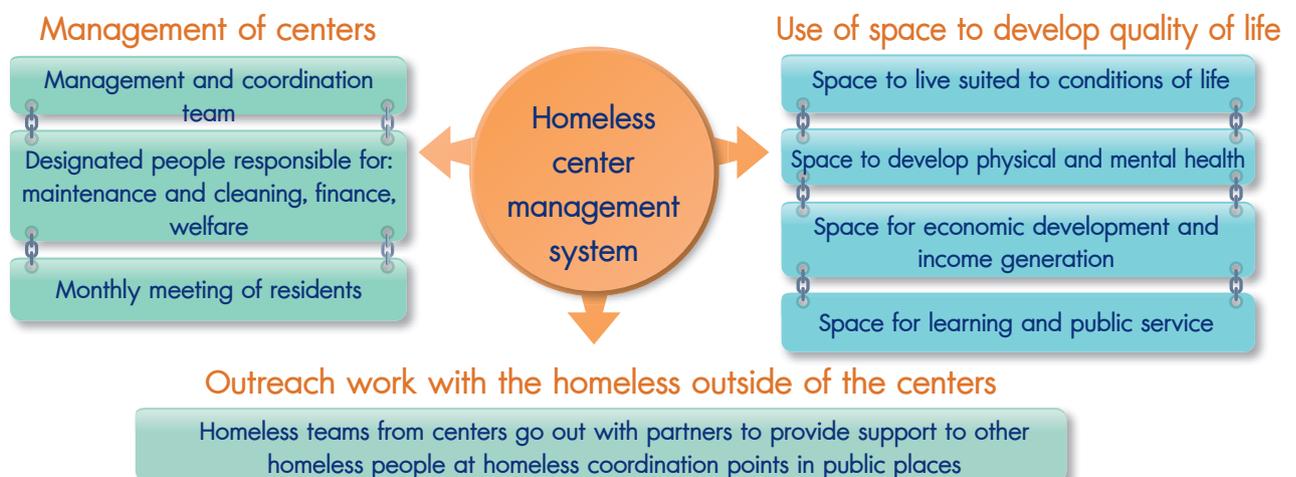
After the Council of Ministers passed a resolution approving the policy on housing for the homeless, the homeless established the Homeless Association<sup>5</sup> in order to receive state budget for the purpose of buying land and building homeless centers. Construction of the centers in all three areas has now been completed. The centers have all been named and officially opened: *Ban Teum Fan* in Chiang Mai, opened on 28 June 2018; *Ban Home Saen Suk* in Khon Kaen, opened on 17 January 2020;

<sup>5</sup> **The Homeless Association** was established on 21 December 2016. It is a legal entity created in accordance with the conditions set for receiving budget from the state to carry out the construction of homeless shelters following the Council of Ministers resolution. The Homeless Association is comprised of homeless people and civil society organizations that support their work. The chairperson of the association is a homeless person.

and *Ban Poon Suk* in Pathum Thani, opened on 29 August 2020. With the centers opened and homeless people coming to stay, meetings were held to come up with measures for living together and managing the centers:

- 1) Rules were set for living together in the centers, such as what residents should do and not do. Measures were specified to solve problems when people violate the rules, whereby it was agreed that people should be given as much of a chance as possible, and the method used for resolving problems should be talking and meeting together.
- 2) Residents agreed to take joint responsibility for center expenses, such as maintenance fees, water bills, and electricity bills.
- 3) Teams and a system of work were set up with a division of roles and responsibilities for managing the centers. Each center has its own bank account and a record of expenses, and a report is made every month at a meeting of residents.

## Management of the homeless centers



Developing the capacity of the homeless teams doing the work has been important. Moreover, residents in the centers themselves have had to adapt, develop themselves, and learn how to live together under a common agreement. For its part, the HSF team has provided continual support.

Aside from managing the centers, work to develop quality of life of the homeless living in the centers also had to be done. This has included facilitating access of the homeless to basic rights and welfare benefits; developing livelihood capacities, such as through revolving funds for the support of livelihoods or using some space in the centers to create a market to generate income; as well as providing welfare benefits to take care of members, such as by allocating part of the center's maintenance fee for welfare benefits for the elderly, the ill, or members experiencing other hardships.

In addition to being places that support the development of the quality of life of the homeless living in them and the homeless still

living in public spaces, the homeless centers also serve as places that support other vulnerable groups in the city who are experiencing crises in their lives. For example, both people affected by the COVID situation who lost their jobs and homes, as well as people experiencing other economic or social problems have been able to come and rely on living in the centers until they could get settled, recover, and then go back to living their own lives again. Today, even government agencies and various medical facilities contact the centers to request their support in accepting the referral of people experiencing problems who need a place to stay



## 5

### Surveying information about the homeless

Having an overview of the homeless population around the country is essential. It is a key part of being able to analyze social phenomena as well as the situation of the homeless in order to be able to devise work with the homeless that is appropriate. Furthermore, it is also necessary to conduct homeless surveys periodically to be able to compare the changes that occur over time. However, surveying the homeless is more difficult than surveying the general population, since

homeless people often move across areas and across provinces, creating the risk of double counting. Care must also be taken in surveys to avoid mistakenly identifying someone as a homeless person. Finally, surveys must not be undertaken during festival periods when homeless people travel, such as annual festivals or various merit making festivals, where homeless people go to receive handouts, get free food, enjoy performances, etc.



### First nationwide homeless survey

The first official nationwide homeless survey covering all 77 provinces in Thailand took place in 2019, with the Council of Ministers having approved budgetary support for the survey along with the policy on housing for the homeless on 8 March 2016. The budgetary allocation for the Homeless Association to conduct the survey together with several agencies was 3 million baht. The main team consisted of the Human Settlement Foundation, the Homeless Association, Four Regions Slum Network, CODI, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, and the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, who were supported by an additional 86 civil society organization and educational institutions that assisted in local areas.

The homeless survey employed the one-night count method and was carried out simultaneously from 7:00 pm to 10:00 pm in each area. This method reduces the risk of

double counting the homeless in each city. The survey focused on recording the number of homeless people and their characteristics that were clearly visible, including age range, gender, grouping and lifestyle characteristics, clearly visible disabilities, and readily apparent mental illness. The survey was divided into two periods.

The first period was the preparation. Several teams went out to local areas to identify the places where homeless people could be found. In this process, the most important source of information was the homeless themselves, who lived in these areas, followed by other others with knowledge of the city, such as market vendors, security guards at bus and train stations, local police officers, etc. The information gained from these sources was used to make a map and identify the routes that the surveyors should follow in the actual enumeration process.

## หามาข้อมูลในพื้นที่ กำหนดเส้นทางการสำรวจล่วงหน้า



The second period was the actual survey, during which the enumeration of the homeless was done. Teams were set up and then went out to local areas to conduct the survey following the routes and places that were identified in the first period. However, this actual survey work was carried out on two different nights separated by less than a month due to an insufficient number of surveyors:

On the first night, we surveyed municipal areas simultaneously in various provinces where the homeless are known to not move (i.e., homeless people who regularly stay in the same area).

On the second night, we carried out surveys simultaneously in provinces where homeless people are known to move around (i.e., provinces with transportation routes connected by train).

The results of the survey enumerating the homeless in May 2019 indicated that there were a total of 2,719 homeless people living

in public spaces in 136 urban districts of all 77 provinces of the country. Bangkok was the province with the highest number of homeless people, at 1,259.

### Second nationwide homeless survey

The second nationwide homeless survey was conducted with the Department of Social Development and Welfare (MSDHS) as the main host, but in collaboration with a network of partners from all sectors, including the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, the Institute of Asian Studies (Chulalongkorn University), the Human Settlement Foundation, the Issarachon Foundation, and the Mirror Foundation. The one-night count survey of the homeless in each area on 23 May 2023 found 2,499 homeless people. The province with the highest number of homeless was Bangkok, with 1,271.

## Lessons learned from working with the homeless

### Lesson 1:

#### The importance of groups and networks

Building groups and networks has been extremely important for the homeless, because coming together and being united has solidified the identity of the marginalized and created a space for them in society. The existence of the homeless network and its concrete work have been visible as proof that the homeless are a group that is working hard to change their own lives and build a better society. Moreover, creating the homeless network has also had the effect of rehabilitating people, since forming a network is a way of building new relationships, helping and caring for each other, and building trust among the homeless themselves. These are the same people who have gone through the experience of being abandoned by their families, communities, and society. Finally, being a part of a network has provided the homeless with the encouragement, strength, and confidence to move forward and have hope in life once again.

We have found that the process used in working with the homeless also needs to emphasize rehabilitating people's internal stability, so that they can have hope in their lives and regain their human dignity. If the work is successful in this area, then it is easier to solve the problems in other areas too.

### Lesson 2:

#### Advocating for a policy on housing the homeless has consisted of two main steps

The first step was policy preparation. Particular awareness of three key points was required in making the policy:

- 1) The policy must be developed from working with people who are directly experiencing the problem.

In the course of our work, we found that there were obstacles and gaps that required the support of policy measures to increase opportunities to improve the quality of life of the homeless. These gaps served as the starting point, enabling us to invite the group experiencing problems (in this case, the homeless) to set up a process to devise and develop a policy together. It was a policy that came from those directly experiencing the problem, which guaranteed that the policy was appropriate and really responsive to solving their problem.





2) It must be a policy that people experiencing the problem truly want.

If the people experiencing the problem have the genuine need, then this policy will be powerful, since the people will feel ownership and be enthusiastic about presenting their needs and their necessities themselves in a lively manner.

3) There must be confidence that the policy can solve the problem and be put into practice.

It has been necessary to build confidence among partners, who have joined in advocating for the policy, and also the administration, which issues the policy. They had to be sure that the policy would solve the problem and could actually be put into practice.

Confidence comes from working to create concrete solutions in local areas that are readily apparent. In the case of the homeless, we created concrete solutions to the problems of housing and developing the quality of life of the homeless through the construction of

a homeless shelter that is managed by the homeless themselves, the Suwit Watnoo Homeless Center. We piloted the center on a trial basis starting from 2008, when homeless people moved into the center and joined activities together to develop the quality of various aspects of their lives, from livelihoods to income and accessing basic rights. After becoming confident that this approach could improve people's quality of life, we developed the approach into a policy proposal that we presented to the government. In addition to confidence, it has also been necessary for us to have additional persuasive elements to increase the strength of our advocacy. These elements have included information; principles and reasons; international agreements, policies, or examples from other places that we could cite, whether domestic or international.

The second step was the advocacy for the policy, or everything that had to be done to succeed in getting the policy adopted, which consisted of three main elements:

- 1) It has been necessary to get the politicians, the executives, and state agencies to agree with the policy and support it.

The most important thing is that if the politicians who comprise the executive understand and agree, then it is easier to advocate for the policy. Therefore, it has been necessary to make them go to local areas to meet and speak with the group that is directly experiencing the problem, have them see the various aspects of the development work, including on the issue around which we have been pushing for a policy, so that they too become confident that the policy that we are proposing is feasible and, if is adopted, will really solve the problem.

Another agency that must be worked closely with is the main agency that has responsibility for the particular issue, which

will be the agency that pushes for the policy proposal to be considered by the Council of Ministers. We have had to create an understanding and work together with this agency.

A great deal of patience has been required to explain the various issues to agency officials and executives, as policy advocacy takes time, but agency officials and executives change and move all the time, so explanations have had to be given again and again.

- 2) The people experiencing the problem, or the vulnerable group in question, must be the main force doing the advocacy rather than relying on other people to do it for them.

Members of the vulnerable group themselves must be the ones who speak out and communicate with the public and state agencies. If the owners of the problem





themselves do the speaking, it really reveals the facts of the matter and gives weight and legitimacy to the policy proposal. State agencies and the people in society will listen. Moreover, if those experiencing the problem stand up and advocate for the policy themselves, they will work hard to push for success. When they succeed, they will follow up so that the policy generates practical results or, if it is not easily accomplished, they will not give up, but rather wait patiently and continue with their advocacy.

3) It is necessary to have the power of various networks as support.

Support from various networks has been important, whether it is the people's network, academics, mass media, students, or members of the public in general. If support is received at the right moment, the policy advocacy will be strong and can succeed faster. It is therefore necessary to work with partners and various networks.

### Lesson 3:

#### Principles and beliefs in work

- 1) Every person can change. Even the most vulnerable have capacity and can create change.
- 2) Respect human dignity. Work with respect for the dignity of others. Do not view them as “receivers” and ourselves as “givers,” but work to empower them, to make them feel proud of themselves. If we do this, then we too will be empowered.
- 3) Believe in the power of the group. It is not change brought about by individuals. Emphasize working to support the formation of groups by people experiencing problems. Build organizations. Build an identity that is socially apparent so that change can be created by the group itself.

# Urban Land Reform in Areas of the State Railway: The Experience of Slum Dwellers’ Struggle in Thailand

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## 1 Insecurity of Settlement: the Core of the Slum Problem

Slums in Thailand are a result of the unbalanced approach to national development that began with the first National Economic and Social Development Plan of 1961. The direction of national development emphasized economic growth, the development of the industrial sector and cities, while neglecting the sustainable development of agriculture in rural areas. Consequently, those who experienced bankruptcy in the agricultural sector entered the cities in search of work and life opportunities, whether in Bangkok or other regional urban centers. When those who migrated from the countryside were unable to find housing since land prices were high and the state failed to adopt adequate measures to accommodate

their housing needs, they had to become pioneers in establishing settlements on vacant land close to their places of work. These areas subsequently expanded and, in the end, became slums.

In consideration of the origins stated above, slum dwellers are actually pioneers in urban settlement. They have invested in building low priced residences to serve as their homes. Even though their settlements are congested and look disorderly, they nevertheless provide a huge economic contribution by relieving the government of its budgetary burden in the area of housing. In addition, slum dwellers' existence is also



tightly connected to the economic prosperity of the city. The production sector, commerce, construction and services all rely on labor provided by urban poor communities. The heavy work and undesirable jobs are all carried out by slum dwellers, such as garbage collection, street sweeping, driving buses, etc.

Nevertheless, the state does not take these facts into account when considering the situation. Instead, state agencies primarily adopt a legalistic view in addressing the problem. Slum communities are therefore branded as “trespassers” and consequently receive basic public services at a standard lower than ordinary citizens, such as being given only temporary household registration and being charged higher than the normal metered rate for electricity and

water. Ultimately, slum communities often end up being evicted and demolished through the application of legal measures.

Aside from problems related to economics, income, and basic infrastructure, the problem of insecure housing or, stated simply, the problem of eviction, may be considered the key issue faced by slum dwellers. In an era emphasizing economic growth, evictions usually stem from both state agencies wanting to use land for urban infrastructure development, such as expressways, roads, bridges, elevated railways, etc., as well as the private sector wanting to use land for business purposes, investment, or property speculation.

## 2 On-Site Community Improvement, Guarantee of Land Security: Slum Dwellers' Settlement Strategy

Solving the problem of insecure settlement in a way that meets the needs of slum dwellers themselves entails carrying out on-site improvements to the settlement or, in case it is genuinely necessary to move the community, to arrange for an in-city resettlement area close to the original location so that the slum dwellers can have security of settlement and be able to sustain their existence as part of the urban labor force.

The method of problem solving that focuses on on-site improvement of the settlement was used in the past by Senggi Community in 1986-1987. At that time, community residents, who were experiencing insecure housing problems, negotiated to be able to purchase part of the land on which they were living from the Crown Property Bureau in a land sharing agreement. This arrangement represented a compromise between the land owner and the community. The Crown Property Bureau consented to sell some of its land to the community residents, who would pay by installment at a rate below market price. Community residents designed a new orderly settlement plan for this area, reducing the size of individual housing plots to 21.6 square meters and 40 square meters. The new community plan left an area remaining that was returned to the land owner, who was then able to use this land for commercial benefit.

Aside from the project to develop the settlement of the Senggi Community, other slum communities in that era also used the method of land sharing to resolve their insecurity of settlement and develop their communities. Examples include the Wat Lad Bua Khao Community, the Community behind Ban Manangkasila, and the Seventy Rai Community in Khlong Toei. Wat Lad Bua Khao Community used the method of requesting to purchase part of the land from the private land owner. As for the Community behind Ban Manangkasila and the Seventy Rai Community, because they were located on land owned by state agencies (the Treasury Department and the Port Authority, respectively), they used the method of requesting to rent the land from their state agency landowner.

However, it is quite unfortunate that these model projects, which emphasized on-site improvement and development in order to enable slum dwellers to be a part of the life of the city, were unable to become the mainstream approach to solving the problem of slums. Their inability to do so stems from the obstacle of land. State agencies did not wish to share their land by renting it out to communities for long-term settlement because they wanted to use it for business purposes and state development projects instead. As for the private sector, the enormous profits to be reaped from the land and real estate business were the reason it chose to pursue slum clearance as the solution.



### 3 Urban Land Reform in Areas of the State Railway of Thailand: Four Regions Slum Network Pushes Forward and Realizes the Settlement Strategy

In order to carry on with the slum dwellers' strategy on settlement involving on-site settlement projects, Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN) campaigned on this issue once again by pushing for long-term (30 year) leases of land from the State Railway of Thailand (SRT).

The SRT is a state-owned enterprise under the Ministry of Transport that owns more than 32,000 hectares of land, out of which as much as 8,000 hectares are located in urban areas and can be put to beneficial use. However, the SRT often rents out this land to the private business sector, which uses the land for profit-making projects, such as commercial centers, hotels, and entertainment venues. As a consequence, the original slum residents living on this SRT land are always driven out.

Aside from renting its land to the business sector in Thailand, the SRT has also auctioned off land to international investors who have been granted concessions, such as in the case of the Hong Kong company, Hopewell. Hopewell won the bid to carry out an electric railway project and develop the area on both sides of the railway in 1995. Even though the project was never completed and ultimately went bankrupt, almost 3,000 slum dweller families were driven out and resettled on distant National Housing Authority land located around 40 kilometers away from the original location.

In 1998, the SRT issued an announcement inviting investors to rent its land, claiming that the experience of crisis stemming from

continual losses amounting to 40 billion baht made it necessary to find money through renting out land in order to compensate for these losses. The policy to auction its land at that time created anxiety on the part of slum dwellers living in SRT areas, who numbered more than 17,000 households in around 110 communities. This was because the significance of opening up land at auction for investors to rent was that communities settled on this land would be driven out, since those areas with investment potential were the same areas on which slum dwellers had pioneered their settlements.

In order to strike back at the impending situation of eviction and demolition, FRSN coordinated with communities on SRT land and engaged in consultations with them until

a proactive approach to solving the problem was reached. According to this approach, the communities would have to hasten to seal a land rental contract for the land they were settled on, rather than waiting and letting the investors make their bids to rent the land and drive the communities out, as in the past. Sixty-one communities, composed of 9,139 families, joined this struggle under the leadership of FRSN.

The process of negotiation with the SRT to rent the land in order to improve the settlements took 22 months and covered tactics including holding public forums together with academics and journalists to critique the policy of using SRT land to serve the particular interests of capitalists; sending representatives to engage in negotiations with the Minister of





Transport in order to propose a solution to the problem; surveying community data with the SRT; coordinating with the state railway workers' union to have them help lobby the SRT management; and adopting more extreme methods in order to achieve a decisive victory for the slum dwellers, namely holding a demonstration of more than 3,000 people to exert pressure in front of the Ministry of Transport on 7-8 June 2000. In the end, a settlement was reached on policy to jointly rent the land.

However, because this settlement lacked a resolution of the SRT board of directors to back it up, FRSN had to hold a second demonstration to bring pressure to bear on 13 September 2000. As a result of this action, the SRT board of directors was compelled to pass a four-point resolution to support the leasing out of SRT land in order to solve the problem of slum communities. The four points were as follows:

1. In the case of communities living on SRT land in areas more than 40 meters away from the railroad tracks or communities living on land that the SRT stopped using for train operations but that is still not included in the master plan as land to be put to use, these communities shall be able to sign a land rental contract so that this land can be used for long-term settlement of 30 years; furthermore, prior to signing the contract, the SRT and community residents shall jointly make a plan showing land use.
2. In the case of communities living on SRT land in the zone between 20 and 40 meters away from the middle of the railroad tracks, these communities shall be able to sign a land rental contract so that this land can be used for settlement for a period of three years at a time; upon expiration, the contract shall be extended each time for an

additional three years until the SRT has a project involving use of this land for train operations that has been approved by the Council of Ministers, or has a clear operation plan precluding extension of the contract, in which case the SRT shall provide a resettlement area located no further than five kilometers away from the original location.

While this land is being rented, the SRT shall allow agencies to enter the area and develop the community. For example, the electric and water companies shall be able to erect power poles and lay pipes serving the community, and other agencies dealing with community development shall be able to enter and carry out improvements in the community. In this regard, the communities must cooperate with the SRT in managing the area so that it remains in an orderly condition.

3. In the case of communities living on SRT land within 20 meters of the middle of the railroad tracks, if the SRT views the land as inappropriate for long-term use as a settlement, the SRT shall provide a resettlement area for the community to rent within five kilometers of the original location; a joint committee shall carry out the arrangements pertaining to the resettlement area.
4. FRSN representatives shall participate with the SRT in drafting the rental contracts and stipulating a rental rate that is appropriate and fair.

Even though the SRT board of directors passed a resolution in 2000 that served to open the path for certain slum communities to rent its land, the issue was not as easily resolved as one might think because, in the end, signing land rental contracts with the SRT in order to conduct on-site improvements in community settlements was a class struggle between the rich and the poor, in which the issue of urban land was at stake. Therefore, in practice, in order to secure rental of the land, the slum dwellers had to go through negotiation processes with the SRT just as the previous time, when FRSN negotiated with the Ministry of Transport in order to get a policy proclaimed on land rental.

Currently, FRSN member communities living on SRT land have been successful in getting 63 land rental contracts from the SRT. When these communities sign their rental



contracts, they are able use the rights gained through the contract to apply for budgetary support from the *Ban Mankhong* program of the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI). This budgetary support allows for the development of public infrastructure in the settlement.



#### 4 Uniting the Forces of the Poor, Round 2: Urban Land Reform in Areas of the SRT for Communities Living on SRT Land around the Country (aside from the 61 Communities)

At present, the Thai government has a policy to develop the rail infrastructure in all regions of the country, whether it is the project to build dual rail tracks, high-speed railways, or an electric railway line to connect three airports. This policy affects slum communities with houses located on SRT land in all regions of the country, which will have to be demolished and move away. As a consequence, Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN) and other communities located along the railway, especially those in Bangkok, which are affected by the electric railway project to connect three airports and later joined together to form the Network of Urban Communities Affected by the Railway (NUCAR), stood up to join the struggle. They presented demands to the SRT and the government to adopt a solution to the problem based on the guidelines contained in the 13 September 2000 SRT board resolution.

As a result of the struggle, FRSN, various community organizations, and CODI jointly surveyed the communities located on SRT land once again. After that, they confirmed

the information gathered with the SRT. In summary, they agreed there were 300 affected communities in 35 provinces with a total of 27,084 households. Furthermore, the Council of Ministers passed two resolutions that represented important progress in solving the problem:

1. The Council of Ministers' resolution on 1 February 2022 authorized the SRT to use the 13 September 2000 SRT board resolution as the framework for solving the problem of settlement of communities located on SRT land around the country.
2. The Council of Ministers' resolution on 14 March 2023 allocated budget to CODI for *Ban Mankhong* projects carried out by communities located on SRT land around the country. This budgetary support amounted to 160,000 baht for each of the 27,084 households in all 300 communities.

After the 1 February 2022 Council of Ministers' resolution authorizing the SRT to use the 13 September 2000 SRT board resolution as the framework for solving the problem of settlement of communities located on SRT land around the country, the SRT board held a meeting on 18 May 2023 and passed a resolution in accordance with the aforementioned Council of Ministers' resolution.

Today, the surveyed communities are in the process of preparing to submit requests to rent land from the SRT. After they receive rental contracts, the communities will be able to develop their settlements and obtain security of tenure, having access to the above-mentioned budget approved by the Council of Ministers.



## 5 The Experience of the Network of Urban Communities Affected by the Railway (NUCAR) in Solving the Problem of Insecure Housing

The Network of Urban Communities Affected by the Railway (NUCAR) was formed through the coming together of ten slum communities located on land owned by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). These ten communities began to come together in 2020 because the SRT had a plan to implement a railway project connecting three airports (U-Tapao, Suvarnabhumi, and Don Muang

Airports) that would cause the communities along the rail line to be demolished. There was also another project to rent out SRT land to private companies under the motto “smart city,” such as in the case of communities in the Phahonyothin area close to Chatuchak Weekend Market. But the real objective was to allow capitalists to rent, thereby enabling the collection of a greater amount in rent than

could be collected if the land were rented to the poor. As a consequence, communities in the original area would have to be demolished and moved.

Previously, communities living on SRT land that were members of Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN) had mobilized to demand the right to rent land for housing in the city from the SRT starting from 1998. Their demands were finally met when the SRT board passed a resolution on 13 September 2000 containing 3 principles: 1) communities located beyond the railway zone (more than 40 meters from the railway tracks) could adjust their community plan and rent the land with a long-term lease of 30 years; 2) for communities located in the railway zone that had to be demolished and moved due to the SRT having a project to use the land for actual train operations, the SRT

would arrange land for relocation not more than five kilometers from the community's original location; and 3) communities would participate in determining the rental rate, whereby the communities requested to pay rent at a rate for people with low-income. The rental rate was subsequently set at 7-20 baht per square meter per year, or approximately 150 baht per month for rent in Bangkok.

The resolution of the SRT board in 2000 represented important progress: 1) it was the first time that communities could rent land from the SRT for a long period of 30 years, since previously, the SRT was usually evasive and did not want to rent its land to the poor or, if it did, they were only short-term year-to-year leases, which made for a lack of stability; 2) it bound the SRT to providing resettlement land not far from the original location; and 3) it set



a cheap rental rate that enabled the poor to have access to land in the city, since if an auction for the land were held, poor people could not compete with large-scale capital.

However, this resolution of the SRT board only covered the 61 communities that joined in mobilizing together with FRSN in 2000. Consequently, other communities that were not included in these 61 communities could not cite the 2000 resolution. Moreover, in 2020, the SRT evicted communities in order to turn the land over to private companies that had been granted a concession by the SRT project to construct a railway connecting three airports. In evicting these communities, the SRT used more clever methods. They came to “survey the needs” of community residents, finding out if they had to be demolished and moved, how much compensation would they need? They asked to take photos of residents’ national

identification cards, and then used the photos to file lawsuits against the community residents for damages resulting from trespassing. As a consequence, residents who were afraid of being sued had to demolish their houses in exchange for having the lawsuit withdrawn, and received approximately 5,000-20,000 baht in compensation.

Bunromsai was the most affected community, as the entire community was evicted. Also affected were Soi Daeng Bu Nga and Lang Krom Thangluang Communities. It therefore became necessary to resist evictions together and, with the support of other NUCAR communities, demand that the Ministry of Transport set up a committee to find a way to solve the problem. But at the local level, there were still officials who came to pressure the community residents, so it was necessary to have methods to stop the evictions: 1)





people went to the court to request relief and informed the court that the community was in the process of coordinating with the Ministry of Transport and the SRT to find a solution together; in some cases, the court granted an extension of time but in others, it did not; and 2) members gathered together in a group and waited by the street where SRT officials would enter the community in order to prevent the officials from pressuring the residents; while community representatives negotiated with the officials, residents would wait around to hear the results; this gathering together of residents also prevented workers from entering the community and doing work that would affect the residents.

As a result of the pressure, on 7 June 2022, SRT Governor Nirut Maneepan came to see the area in order to understand the problem. He promised to allow the residents who were being sued to rent the land for

housing temporarily while land for long-term resettlement in Makkasan was being prepared. If residents rented the land legally, the legal proceedings would be suspended. But after that, on 25 July 2022, SRT officials came to pressure community residents by putting enforcement orders for the eviction on their houses.

So on 1 August 2022, NUCAR members from all communities went to hold a demonstration in front of the SRT office. As a result, the SRT governor issued a document certifying that community residents could temporarily rent land for housing along the railway that did not affect the railway project connecting three airports or the gas pipeline project. This was a basic victory that was able to stop the evictions. Currently, residents have started the process of a *Ban Makhong* project at Beung Makkasan that will serve as their long-term resettlement site.



As for the long-term solution, an SRT board resolution on 19 May 2023 set out guidelines to solve the problems of a total of 300 communities living on SRT land following the framework originally contained in the 13 September 2000 SRT board resolution, whereby implementation of the solution would need to be completed within a period of five years. If any community did not cooperate in upgrading itself in order to rent the land, the SRT would resort to taking legal action to evict the community.

for housing, which is socially beneficial, rather than just using it to generate economic profit. The issue of land for housing is an important issue. Therefore, the government must have a policy for state agencies that have land and communities already living on it to rent the land at a low price to the communities so that they can build secure housing.

The lesson learned from solving the problems of NUCAR lies in the importance of struggling to gain land, as this is the most difficult step. State agencies that are owners of land usually think that land in the city is expensive, so they should choose to rent to capitalist groups. Therefore, the poor have to come together to propose that the state sector change its vision and consider using land

