MDGs Cluster Bangkok, Thailand
Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)

UNLOCKING THE PROBLEM-SOLVING FORCE OF ASIA'S URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES

The Experiences of the Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) Program

One of the most serious issues in many cities in Asia is the problem of slums and squatter settlements. As Asian cities become more prosperous and populous, and attract increasing development investment as the true "engines" of Asia's phenomenal economic ascendancy, why do so many hard-working, poor families still live in misery and squalor? Why do they live without secure housing or access to basic services? Why are they denied their rights as citizens simply because they can't afford the most minimal formal market housing?

Despite decades of scattered efforts by governments to evict or relocate them into "low-cost" housing blocks, by development agencies to help them to slightly improve things with a few water pumps or a communal toilet, and by activists to organise them into anti-eviction campaigns, the problems of urban poor housing are still enormous. The millions of people who actually face those problems personally are strangely absent from the search for solutions.

The Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) Program is a region-wide experiment happening in 19 Asian countries. ACCA shows how poor communities themselves can be the greatest force of change when they have support to develop their own plans for upgrading the slums in their cities, starting with some very modest funds which they control themselves. The ACCA program is being implemented by local community networks and their supporters, with support from the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and the International Institute for Environment and Development.

Each city will have a budget of about US$58,000. This includes $3,000 to help them survey and map all the slums in the city, start savings groups and form community networks, $15,000 to implement the first round of five

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or six small infrastructure upgrading projects, and $40,000 to seed a new city-wide urban poor development fund and partly finance an initial community housing project.

It may sound impossible that such a small amount of money could be anything more than a drop in the bucket, but in 165 cities around Asia so far, poor community networks are using those small funds to leverage huge resources in free land, cash, materials,

government support and goodwill from many local stakeholders who never before had anything to do with the poor in their cities. Why has this been possible? Because the funds go straight into poor people's hands, and help them link together, work together, plan together, cultivate new allies together and negotiate for land and support to scale up their housing solutions.

Although, the ACCA support is just a start, the program is producing ample evidence that the huge problems of slums and squatter settlements in our cities can be solved, when the immense energy and creativity of the poor themselves is unlocked and put to the task of solving these problems, throughout their cities, in collaboration with their local governments and other stakeholders.

The ACCA Program has been well documented, and most of the reports, articles and field notes that describe the process in detail can be downloaded from the ACHR website (www.achr.net).

THE ACCA PROGRAM IN ACTION

Here are a few examples of the ACCA-supported process across Asia:

In Cambodia, thrifty community networks have used the modest support from ACCA to strategically attract other supporters and cover as many

"These housing projects give us secure land and simple, basic houses that we can all afford — even the poorest squatters — without going into heavy debt. The houses aren't very fancy, but houses are easy to improve, and for us, a house means ownership, stability and security. Most of us have come from a very, very bad situation as squatters and renters, and our lives have totally changed in the last three years."
(One of the female members of the ACCA-supported housing project in Yangon, Myanmar).

Poor communities almost never have the chance to manage —or even touch —the money in the community development projects that are supposed to benefit them. But when they do manage the money and implement every aspect of the project themselves, as in this ACCA-supported housing project in the Philippines city of Mandaue, you can bet that every nail that comes from the shop gets counted and every bill gets scrutinised.

centers, tree plantings and building centers) in 147 poor communities.

In Myanmar, a new network of women's savings groups began by using ACCA support to plan and carry out an extremely rapid and efficient process of rebuilding their houses and reviving agricultural livelihoods that had been destroyed by Cyclone Nargis. From the storm-hit villages, the community-led process spread to urban areas in Yangon, where some of the city's poorest and most marginalised squatters and renters used the support from ACCA to develop the country's first community-planned and community-built land and housing projects in three townships.

In the Philippines, the Homeless People's Federation is working in close collaboration with local governments in 16 disaster-prone cities to develop citywide plans for securing the tenure and upgrading communities *in-situ*, wherever possible. They are also negotiating "in-city" relocation to nearby government land where the communities are in disaster vulnerable zones or in the way of necessary urban infrastructure projects. These projects are all based on citywide surveys and action plans developed by networks of poor communities themselves. In these ways, the urgent issues of slum upgrading and climate change resilience are being addressed at the same time, by the most vulnerable communities, in collaboration with their cities.

communities as possible. They used a budget of $393,500 from ACCA to provide housing loans to 630 households to plan and build housing projects in 12 cities. In the process, they leveraged another $700,000 from communities, $500,000 from other donors and a staggering $7.9 million worth of free government land, which has provided secure housing and tenure to more than 2,000 families. They have also used $211,000 from ACCA to implement 147 small upgrading projects (like roads, drains, water supply, toilets, bridges, community

These 2-story duplex houses are being built by members of the Homeless People's Federation in Iloilo, for riverside squatter families whose houses were destroyed by Typhoon Frank in May 2008. This safe land nearby for relocation was provided at no cost by the city government, and the people designed, built and paid for the houses themselves, using cost-saving bamboo and compressed-earth blocks they manufacture on site.