



Akphivat Mean Cheay

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • JUNE 2020

The Akphivat Mean Cheay resettlement project was Cambodia's first demonstration of how effective it can be when cities and the poor work together to find solutions to the conflicting needs of urban development and affordable housing. The project allowed the city of Phnom Penh to proceed with its drainage improvement project at the same time it helped provide secure, healthy and well-located new housing for the roadside squatters that project displaced. It also showed a war-torn Cambodia that housing problems are solved better by partnership than by eviction.

- Project Akphivat Mean Cheay
- Location Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- Size 129 households
- Finished 2000
- Type Relocation of a roadside squatter community to free land provided by the municipal government, with individual land titles.

CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

The city:

Not too long ago, everyone in Phnom Penh was a squatter. After the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime fell in 1979, people began to tip-toe out of the jungle into an empty, broken down city. They huddled in empty buildings, lit fires to cook their rice. As things settled down, more people came. People occupied houses which they had grabbed themselves, or bought them from earlier grabbers. Land became a saleable commodity, like gold or rice. Trading was brisk, but strictly off the record. After all the houses and flats had been occupied, people set up house wherever they could - in open land, along roads, on rooftops. Even ten years of communism and state ownership of land didn't slow this informal market for land and houses.

By the 1990s, Phnom Penh was getting back on its feet, filled with the noisy energy of building, trading and growth. For those with nerve and resources, the city offered many opportunities to make money and almost no rules. For the growing population of poor migrants from other parts of the country, the city offered opportunities too. But what it didn't provide was any affordable housing. In absence of that - or of any entitlements or government assistance of any sort - Phnom Penh's first-generation poor had to devise survival systems of their own, to occupy land, to build shelters, to access water and electricity and to find work. But living conditions in the informal communities they built, on leftover bits of swampy land, along rivers and roadsides and even on the rooftops of inner-city buildings, were squalid and crowded. And as the city developed around them and land values climbed, many of these communities found their houses being demolished or burned in increasingly violent evictions.

To marshal their own resources and build their group power to tackle these problems, some poor communities in Phnom Penh began setting up their own self-help savings and credit groups and formed their own community network in 1994, with support from ACHR and some local housing activists. Then, in 1998, the Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF) was set up, under an MOU between the community savings network, the Municipality of Phnom Penh and ACHR, with a loan capital of only \$20,000 from ACHR. The UPDF was set up in response to an eviction crisis, and it financed the city's first entirely community-designed, community-managed relocation project, for a roadside squatter settlement, to land that was provided free by the government. This is the story of that historic housing project.

The community:

The Toul Svay Prey community was a roadside squatter settlement of 129 very poor families in Chamkar Mon District, right in the center of Phnom Penh. Their houses were built of palm thatch, cardboard, bamboo, tin sheets and plastic sheeting, and they worked as rag pickers, street vendors, moto-taxi drivers and daily-wage laborers.

Toul Svay Prey's colorful leader was a former soldier named Men Chamnan. His broad shoulders, fierce eyebrows and booming voice must have made him a formidable soldier. After being demobilized in 1984, he brought his family to Phnom Penh, to put his kids in school and find work in the city. At first he rented land and built a small hut. When that land was sold, Chamnan and several neighbors went to the Ward Authority and got permission to rebuild their huts outside the land, along the street, until they could afford to buy land elsewhere. But skyrocketing land prices nixed those plans, and their makeshift settlement became permanent. Nobody liked living in the street. It was dirty, cars roared by, and there was no safe place for kids to play. Nobody had electricity or water taps, and only two families had pit latrines. The others had no choice but to answer nature's call in the open areas nearby, but that was difficult, especially in morning and evening hours, when competition for private corners is fierce. During the rainy season, the unpaved road became a swirling river of mud and backed-up sewage.

In 1996, the city tried unsuccessfully to evict the settlement, to make way for a municipal drainage project. Nearby villa owners even tried to burn down the houses. But the settlement was close to schools, jobs and markets, and the people had no alternative, so they continued to stay, even though their tenure became increasingly precarious.

Initiating the project:

With support from their leader Men Chamnan, the community joined the newly-established network of poor communities in Phnom Penh, and organized themselves through a women's daily savings group, which used their small collective savings to give each other loans for household needs, emergencies and their small vending businesses.

At that time, there was a very active and good-hearted District Chief in Chamkar Mon District named Lor Ry, who was anxious to find solutions to the problems of squatters living in squalor and insecurity in his district.

He knew many of them personally, from the experiences they had so recently shared surviving the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. He had traveled to India and Thailand on the city's first *integrated* exposure trip, organized by ACHR, along with leaders of the new slum community network, where they saw collaborative housing projects being built by poor communities, with support from their local governments and other actors. When he got home, Lor Ry brought Chea Sophara, the Vice Governor of the Phnom Penh Municipality, out to visit the Toul Svay Prey roadside community, and secured his help in negotiating for alternative land.

In the coming months, Men Chamnan went around with Lor Ry "shopping for possible land" for resettling the roadside squatter community. They identified a one-hectare piece of open land at Akphivat Mean Cheay, in Mean Cheay District, just two kilometers away from the settlement and close to a developing industrial site. Community members visited the land, and because it was close to markets, jobs and schools, gave it the thumbs up. The Phnom Penh Municipality then bought the land, and in November 1997, the Vice Governor officially allotted the new land to the 129 households of the Toul Svay Prey roadside settlement, with each family being given land title to a 54 square meter plot - for free. That was the first case of the Cambodian Government giving land to poor families living in a roadside squatter settlement.

Support groups and partners in the project:

The Akphivat Mean Cheay resettlement project was training for everyone involved, and was the city's first chance to see how effectively poor communities can plan and undertake a voluntary resettlement process which works for everyone. The project was officially inaugurated by the Prime Minister on April 20, 2000 and made a strategic first case for the UPDF because of the collaboration it involved.

- **The Community** searched for alternative land and chose the Mean Cheay District site from nine options.
- **The Municipality** purchased the land for the people, using funds from the drainage project budget, and granted each family individual land title.
- **The Urban Resource Center (URC)** and its team of young architects helped the people to draft the layout plan for the new community, which included 54 square meter plots for all the families, a community center and several water points.
- **The Cambodian Appropriate Technology Development Group (CATDG)**, a group of young architects and engineers, assisted in the participatory housing design process and developed one set of core house models.
- **The UN-Habitat project** (called UNCHS at that time) provided land-filling and basic infrastructure in the project, as a grant, through a system of community contracts.
- **The District Chief** of Chamkar Mon District, Mr. Lor Ry, helped negotiate the whole process.
- **The Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF)** provided housing loans of US\$ 400 to many of the 129 families in the project.
- **The community people themselves** built their own houses together in groups. Many followed the low-cost "core house" models (with loft) they had developed with young architects from the URC.
- **The Community Savings Network** turned each step of the process into training and inspiration for communities around the city, through a constant stream of exchange visits.
- **The community women's savings group** collected the housing loan repayments daily, weekly or monthly, depending on people's earning, with 20% of the repayment going into mandatory saving, as a pad against any repayment problems. Repayments for the whole community were made once a month to the UPDF.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

Land tenure:

Before the project, the 129 families were squatters living in make-shift shacks on public land, along a flood-prone road, with no legal rights or access to legal basic services or basic infrastructure. In the new project, they became owners of their own houses and small plots of land, with full infrastructure and a strong community support system. The 1 hectare land for resettlement, in Mean Cheay District, was purchased by the Phnom Penh Municipality and given free to the families, with allotment papers (which were then the equivalent of title deeds) being issued to each family individually. Everyone involved would have preferred some kind of collective or cooperative land ownership arrangement, to bolster the community spirit and stave off future buy-outs and gentrification. But at that time in Cambodia, there were no laws to allow for cooperative or collective ownership of land, and individual land titles were the only legal land ownership option.

PROJECT FINANCING

Project costs and who paid for what?

- **Land:** The one-hectare land for relocating the Toul Svay Prey community was purchased by the Phnom Penh Municipality, at \$3 per square meter = total \$30,000.
- **Site development and infrastructure:** The cost of filling the site and developing basic infrastructure (roads, drains, tube wells, washing places, individual pit latrines, electricity, bank stabilization and tree planting) came to about \$60,000, and was paid for as a grant to the project from the UN-Habitat (UNCHS) project.
- **Houses:** Each family built and paid for its own house, and all the houses were different, costing between \$200 and \$2,000, with most costing about \$400, which was the maximum amount each family could borrow from the UPDF, and which was enough to build the URC's core semi-detached house model. A few families with more money or access to other loans built more substantial or fancier houses, while some who were reluctant to take loans at all built very simple shelters for themselves and recycled some materials salvaged from their old houses on the roadside.

Financing:

Housing loans from the UPDF: The Urban Poor Development Fund was set up in 1998 specifically to respond to the eviction crisis at Toul Svay Prey and to help finance this first-ever community-driven and collaborative housing resettlement project in Phnom Penh, in a context where there was no form of housing finance for the poor (or for anybody) at all in Cambodia. The UPDF set a target of raising a lending capital of \$1 million, in order to finance many more such housing projects. But the new fund began with an initial capital of \$75,000, of which the first \$5,000 came from the collective savings of communities in the Phnom Penh savings network. The community network's \$5,000 contribution made them the first share-holders in the new fund, and network representatives have continued to sit on the UPDF's governing board in subsequent decades. This loan capital from the grassroots was matched by \$25,000 from the Municipal government, \$35,000 from ACHR (grant funds from Misereor and the Selavip Foundation) and \$10,000 from Slum Dwellers International (SDI).

The availability of housing loans from the new UPDF was one of the key factors in persuading the municipality to give land and the UN Habitat to provide infrastructure. With such housing loans available, there was no reason all these collaborative elements couldn't come together again in more projects. To borrow architect's language, with these first housing loans, the function determined the form of what UPDF was about. From day one, everyone agreed the UPDF would work only if the people felt the fund was their resource, and only if they were involved in it fully.

How the housing loans were managed:

Housing loans from UPDF went to the families only after they had physically moved to the new site and taken occupation of their plot. In the system everyone agreed to, the money first went to the community's finance management committee, then to the materials committee, which purchased all the construction materials in bulk, to get better prices. The maximum housing loan was for \$400 and came in the form of materials (gravel, sand, bricks, wood, tin sheets, concrete, steel bars). Each family got precisely enough materials to build the basic semi-detached "core house", and could then make adjustments and finish the house according to its own capacities and ideas.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Design process:

In a series of participatory planning workshops, the community members worked with the young architects from URC and CATDG to draft a layout plan for the new 1-hectare (10,000 m²) site, and to develop a variety of house models which could be affordable to families of different incomes.

House design and layout plans:

The site layout changed 20 times during the planning and development process, which took about six months and involved dozens and dozens of noisy meetings with the community members, the architects, the municipal government guys, the UN-Habitat project staff, district officials and a half dozen community dogs. The first layout plan was drawn up by the municipality, with very wide roads and house plots placed right at the edge of the land. But after the 2-meter land-filling, lots of the 1-hectare area got lost in the sloped embankments around the edge. So a series of subsequent plans were developed, with roads around the edge of the site and various layouts of plots and plot sizes within. In the site plan that was finally agreed to by everyone, there was a ring road around the whole site and 135 slightly smaller plots of 54 m² each (6m x

9m), arranged along 4-meter wide lanes within and encircling the new community. 129 of the plots were for the people's houses, 4 plots for a pre-school, 1 plot for a community center and 1 plot for a clinic. Several pumps and communal washing areas were also planned throughout the community. The community leader Chamnan persuaded adjacent landowner to agree to let the access road go along the edge of his land. Each of the 129 families drew numbers in a lottery to determine which plot they would get in the new layout. The whole process took about six months.

The architects from URC and CATDG also helped the community people design several model houses, which individual families could follow or not follow, according to their affordability. Finally, two core houses emerged as the most popular: one extremely inexpensive model that was designed to be affordable to the poorest community members, and one more finished model:

- **An unfinished semi-detached "core house" model**, with one common wall, three reinforced brick columns on each side, and a roof - ready for filling in front and back walls and loft inside, using conventional construction materials available in the local market. **(COST: \$350 per unit)**
- **A 2-story semi-detached house model** built with load-bearing compressed earth blocks and steel reinforcing. Two units were built on the site to test the earth blocks construction system, and one of those units later became the community office during the construction. **(COST: \$650 per unit)**

Housing construction:

The community decided that each family would build their own house, beginning with the semi-detached "core house" model, and then would finish and upgrade the house according to their needs and capacities. Families built their houses in groups of four or five at a time, all helping each other. There were many skilled carpenters and masons in the community, so there was no shortage of technical help with the construction work, which most families did themselves. A few families with very little money built their own houses, using some materials salvaged from their old houses, and could improve them later. Finally, the finished community looked a little less like a proper "housing project" than a slightly shaggy low-income neighborhood when it was finished. But keen-eyed visitors could spot the difference in the smiling pride of those house-proud former squatters when they welcomed guests to have a look at their houses.

The development of the site and the construction of the infrastructure at the new land was more interesting, since all of the work was subsidized by the UN-Habitat project, and some parts were done by the community members themselves, who were paid for their labor under a "community contract" system. The idea of a community contract is that the benefits of the contract go to the skilled and unskilled workers in the community itself, instead of going to an outside contractor, middle man or development agency. All the management and quality control was by the community, and this lively and highly participatory system ensured that the project become a training ground for other communities down the redevelopment pipeline. The work included:

1. **Land-filling:** The first step was raising the land (which had been a rice paddy) above flood level. That involved trucking in a whopping 2-meters of fill and leveling it with heavy machinery, at a cost of \$30,000. This part was not done by the people but as a private contract to a local contractor.
2. **Tube wells and paved common washing spaces** throughout the community were all built as a community contract, with people doing all the work.
3. **Toilets:** The UN-Habitat project provided all the materials as a grant, and each family dug a 4-meter deep pit and constructed their own pit latrine and enclosure, at the back of their house plot, using their own unpaid labor, and with assistance from a technical organization called SAWA that was hired by the UN-Habitat project.
4. **Electricity:** The community and UN project explored many options, for back then, electricity infrastructure in that area was poor. Finally, they decided to buy two second-hand generators to power the community's lights and fans, with the UN-Habitat project subsidizing the cost of the generators.
5. **Embankments:** Special grasses and small shrubs were planted to help stabilize the embankments on all four sides of the community. This work was done as a community contract.
6. **Roads and storm drains:** The roads and storm drains were also built by the community members, as a UN-Habitat community contract, according to specifications worked out by SAWA and the technical committee. The contract included a bitumen-paved "ring road" on three sides of the site, plus inner lanes and the access roads paved in laterite. One person in the community named Heng Sokam used to work for the Municipal Public Works and was very skilled in road laying and he helped ensure the roads were well built.

COMMUNITY AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Timeline:

- **June 1997:** Exposure team from Cambodia (community leaders and local government officials, including Municipal Cabinet Chief Mann Chhoeurn and Chamkarmon District Chief Lor Ry) to India and to Thailand, to visit community housing projects and to. Good bonding and idea that these problems can be solved.
- **July 1997:** Municipal Cabinet Chief Mann Chhoeurn invites Jockin to speak to meeting of district chiefs about working with poor communities to solve problems of housing. Lor Ry anxious to address housing problems in his district.
- **August 1997:** Land search by Toul Svay Prey community starts, with Lor Ry. Find land at Akphivat Mean Cheay, just 2 kms from old community. Land is purchased by city.
- **November 1997:** The Governor of Phnom Penh Municipality officially allots the new land to the 129 families of Toul Svay Prey.
- **December 1997:** New land is filled by two meters, to bring it above flood level.
- **January 1998:** Land is surveyed and the house plots and roads are pegged, according to the community's layout plan.
- **February 1998:** First four model houses are built on the site. Infrastructure work starts: 4 wells and 129 pit latrines are constructed.
- **March 1998:** Community savings network organizes 2-day workshop with Toul Svay Prey community to talk about how to design the new community layout, what common amenities to make room for, how to build good, inexpensive houses.
- **April 1998:** The UPDF is officially launched, with a capital of \$75,000, of which the first \$5,000 comes from the communities and another \$25,000 comes from the Municipality.
- **December 1998 :** Loans from UPDF go to the first 55 families, who have now moved to the site. Nine houses are finished, 26 are under construction and 20 about to start.
- **February 1999 :** Community leader Men Chamnan presents community contract proposal for developing roads, grass and tree-planting, electricity, water supply, community center to the UN-Habitat project, through the community network's district committee.
- **March 1998:** Families start building their new houses, after the rainy season ends.
- **March 1999 :** The people finish planting trees and special grass to stabilize the steep earthen banks along the sides of the new site.
- **April 1999 :** 120 families are now living on the site, the place is like a beehive. 70 houses are finished, and the rest are under various stages of construction. Streets are starting to look like streets, and everywhere are piles of bricks, sand, gravel and steel. Special house-blessing ceremony ("Sangkateein") is held on Khmer New Years day, and the community invites nine monks to have lunch and bless the new community.
- **June 1999:** Community contracts to pave roads and lay drains continue.
- **April 2000:** Gala inauguration of the project by the Prime Minister of Cambodia, with big team of international visitors from Asia and Africa and cities all over Cambodia.

IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT

This complex resettlement process brought together a wide range of stake-holders. For the very young community network in Phnom Penh, the Akphivat Mean Cheay resettlement project was the first fruit of years of saving, organizing, planning, network-building and partnership-building. For the municipal government and for the city's 60,000 poor families, the project made community-managed, government-supported resettlement a known, viable option and a more humane and lasting alternative to eviction.

The project also showed that relocating poor communities to undeveloped land on the city's periphery was a very costly solution, for both the poor and the city, and that in the long term, there was an urgent need to explore more on-site community redevelopment strategies in Phnom Penh. But the project also provided a much-needed live laboratory for poor communities to experiment with ways of working together, managing money, constructing affordable houses and basic services, and testing innovations in a city where there were still very few known solutions to the problems of poverty and housing.

MORE INFORMATION ON THE PROJECT

For more information about the housing project at Akphivat Mean Cheay, please contact ACHR.
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PHOTOS



That's what the roadside squatter community at Toul Svay Prey looked like in 1997, when the project began.



The first ACHR supported exposure trip of a mixed team from Phnom Penh to visiting community-built housing project by the SPARC, Mahila Milan and NSDF in Mumbai, India.



Surveying and mapping the community, with every house and family getting a number painted on.



The Urban Resource Center NGO organized several meetings in the Toul Svay Prey community to get the people thinking about options.



Setting up a women's savings and credit group in the Toul Svay Prey community was essential, to learn to collectively manage money.



After the survey, the community began looking for alternative land and locating possible sites on the map of the city.



Looking at the possible new site for the housing resettlement project. At that time, land was still quite cheap in Phnom Penh.



Jockin, the NSDF president from India, helped to negotiate with the District Chief, Mr. Lor Rhy, about buying the land for resettlement.



The Toul Svay Prey community members join a housing design workshop, and build models of their own dream houses.



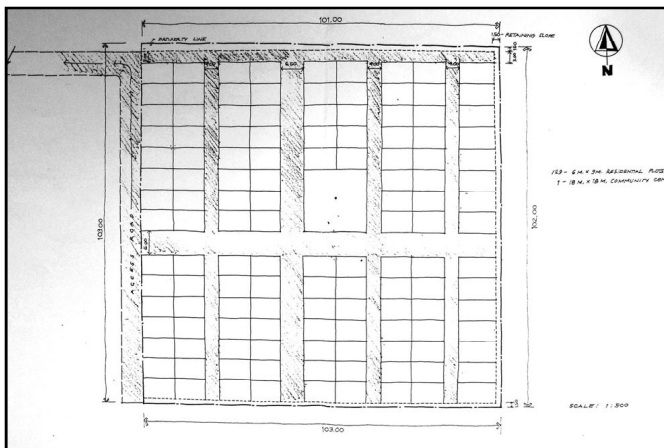
For people who live in thatched shacks on the side of the road, imagining a proper concrete house with its own toilet and kitchen can be a powerful first step towards getting that house.



During the housing design workshop, the community people also mocked up full-scale boundaries for a house, with cloth and poles, to get a sense of how big the rooms are.



Several months later, the community federation built two models and showed them to the whole city in a gala house model exhibition.



Once they had gotten the new land clear, the people began working with the architects to develop a layout plan for the 129 houses.



This is the signing of the MOU between ACHR, the community network and the Municipality of Phnom Penh, to establish the Urban Poor Development Fund, whose first loans went to the Akphivat Mean Cheay housing project.



The new land had been rice paddy and was prone to floods, so the first step was to raise it by almost two meters.



Things start to happen on the new site: the pit latrines are built, the well is dug, and a few model houses are built to show options.



There was no piped water at that time, so these concrete platforms turned the water pumps into cheerful shared bathing and washing spaces.



Here the community architects are overseeing the construction of two "core house" units, which were designed to be cheap and simple.



The one set of core houses were semi-detached and the families could fill in the walls and loft themselves, later, when they had more money.



There is the finished pair of semi-detached "core houses" designed by one set of the community architects who helped on the project.



Another pair of model houses was designed and built by another team of young architects, using compressed earth blocks.



The compressed earth block models were more expensive than the core house, but one became the community office.



Keeping track of the project budgets in the community office on the site. All the finances were managed by community committees.



The families were all free to build their own houses, and construction started right away with the more energetic families.



The family who built this 3-story house turned their house into an income-spinner, with many rental rooms for factory workers.



A lot of the families didn't want to take very big loans, so they built incrementally, starting with a sturdy concrete frame and finishing later.



Here is a little grocery and provisions shop being run out of a half-completed house on the site, so the profits can go right into building materials.



This kind of two-story house with concrete frame was quite common. Note the Khmer-style roof with space for ventilation.



Another two-story house with an external stairway, which makes the upstairs possible for a separate family or a rental unit.



It's not necessary that the house be completely done to feel proud of it, and to decorate it with flowers and herbs in pots along the front.



That's Kosal and Chamnan supervising the "community contract" to build the roads, with funding from the UN project and community labor.



All the roads, drains and toilets were made by "community contract", so the community members benefitted from the contracts, not some outsiders.



Gradually, those with more resources began putting colorful facades on their new houses.



When all the houses along each lane were finished, this is how the lanes started to feel, full of water jars, vendor carts, children playing and spirit houses.



Here is a modest one-story house, which is nevertheless crisply painted in white and blue, with a vented Khmer-style roof.



From roadside squatters with no security or status in the city, to proud owners of their permanent housing - this family shows it all.



This spirit house stands at the edge of the one of the embankments that slope down to the unfilled land, on all four sides of the project.



Caption goes in this place. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country. Now is the time for all good men.



These members of the women's savings group manage all the housing loan repayments and are the financial backbone of the new community.



The gate and welcome sign over the road that comes into the new Akphivat Mean Cheay community.



Hundreds of poor families from all over Cambodia came for the inauguration, to see what is possible for even very poor roadside squatters.



That's Chamnan, the community leader at Toul Svay Prey, addressing the big crowd and national TV at the project inauguration.



The project was inaugurated by Cambodia's Prime Minister, Hun Sen, who is seen here peeking into a model of one of the new houses.



When all the houses were finished, the architects made a beautiful model of the whole community, to show at the inauguration. The model was especially popular with the children, who made a game of finding their own houses on the model.



There's a good shot of the support team behind this extraordinarily collaborative project - the architects, the local government officers, the ACHR team, the UPDF team and the Urban Resource Center team.