

## WORKSHOP ON "INCLUSIVE CITIES" in SEOUL, KOREA



The "Inclusive Cities Workshop" in Seoul finally happened on August 10 2012, as a collaboration between ACHR, Citynet, Asian Bridge, the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the network of "vinyl house" communities in Seoul. The one-day workshop was an attempt to help find solutions to the urban poor housing situation in Korea and to provide a platform for the urban poor communities to discuss possible solutions with Seoul Metropolitan Government - especially with its progressive new mayor, Won-Soon Park, who was elected last year. Mayor Park, who is an active human rights lawyer, is already bringing about some big changes in the city, and changing the focus to a more community organizing style of community development, as an alternative concept to the "New Town" style redevelopment and the big evictions that invariably go with it. His tenure as mayor is creating a new political space Seoul's urban poor and represents a golden opportunity to

explore alternatives to Korea's brutal redevelopment policies, which pushing thousands of low-income tenants who cannot afford housing in their redeveloped neighborhoods into informal "vinyl house" squatter settlements and squalid daily-rental rooms.

**It came out during the meeting that Korea's newest national hero - a gymnast who had just won a gold medal at the London Olympics - had grown up in one of Seoul's "vinyl house" squatter settlements, which are home to 18,000 people.**

The meeting was a chance to connect with key ACHR friends like Professor Ha, Father Mun-Su Park and friends at KOCER and KCHR. ACHR's team of participants included community leaders and their supporters from 11 Asian countries, who came to learn and to add their voices and their on-the-ground experiences with citywide and community-driven upgrading and housing development to the discussion with the Koreans and with a receptive Mayor Park. The day before the meeting, Asian Bridge organized a day full of field visits to some of the vinyl house communities in and around Seoul, as well as a visit to one of the low-income districts where a concentration of the city's "jokbang" (daily rental rooms) are located.

**REGIONAL FOLLOW-UP AFTER THE MEETING :** The day after the meeting, Kirtee Shah paid a "courtesy call" to Mayor Park, on behalf of ACHR and Citynet, to thank him for joining the workshop and to follow up on some of the possibilities that were raised in the workshop - particularly our proposal to the mayor to consider setting aside government funds for 5,000 housing units, to be used to develop a fresh approach to low-income housing project design and development which is community sensitive, participatory, cost effective, socially responsive - and replicable. This meeting was followed up a week later with a letter and more specific proposal to the mayor, which included the following elements:



1. **Survey all the urban poor** who can't afford or don't want to live in public rental housing, including vinyl house communities and "jokbang" room renters.
2. **Develop more new forms of housing supply** (such as community-designed housing, cooperative housing and on-site upgrading of informal settlements) in order to reach out more particular types of groups like these vinyl house or renters.
3. **Make finance available, in the form of an "urban poor housing fund"**, which could function as a new, flexible financial tool to help urban poor organizations develop these new housing new possibilities. The funds would provide soft loans and infrastructure grants. The fund could start with a capital of about US\$ 100 million (which represents the per-unit government public housing subsidy of US\$20,000 x 5,000 units) to start with.
4. **Make land available for the first housing pilots.** The land could come from public, private or church owners by the city government or be identified and negotiated by the urban poor, and it could be leased or sold to the community groups, with loans from the fund. If we target at least 10 hectares of land from all these options, that could house about 2,000 families (in 2-story row houses on 35-40 m<sup>2</sup> plots).
5. **Let the urban poor and their support organizations be the key actors** in initiating and implementing these new housing solutions. This includes building strong and collective community organizations, starting savings or housing to build people's collective fund systems, developing social programs in communities to develop community-based systems for dealing with poverty and welfare needs, and build strong community networks and partnerships.
6. **Mobilize civil society groups and universities** to support this process of developing new housing options for the poor.
7. **Build joint mechanisms** which allow the urban poor to become active participants in this housing development and which allow the government's working culture to be more inclusive and participatory.
8. **Make this development of new housing options for the poor a clear policy agenda for Seoul**, getting everybody to help - the central government, church groups, private sector, international agencies, universities, civil society, communities, media.