

# SOUTH KOREA

## SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVES TO EVICTION IN THE NAME OF “DEVELOPMENT”



### ACCA in SOUTH KOREA :

#### PROJECT CITIES (total 4)

- Seoul
- Gwacheon
- Daejeon
- Busan

#### SMALL PROJECTS

Small projects approved : 20  
 In number of cities : 4  
 Total budget approved : \$60,000

#### BIG HOUSING PROJECTS

No big housing projects yet

#### SAVINGS (only in 4 ACCA cities)

Savings groups : 4  
 Savings members : 115  
 Total savings : \$25,242

#### CITY DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

No CDFs yet in Korea

#### IMPLEMENTING GROUPS

The ACCA projects in Korea are being implemented by the Seoul-based NGO Asian Bridge, in collaboration with the network of informal “vinyl house” communities in the four cities and with the Korea Coalition for Housing Rights (KCHR).

Korea is one of Asia’s most highly-developed countries, but in its cities, “development” means demolishing the affordable housing that already exists, evicting the poor tenants and turning over the land to big contractors to redevelop as high-rise real estate, with super-highways zooming between them. This is government policy, and every urban area can be demolished and rebuilt this way - even nice old neighborhoods that have nothing wrong with them. All this redevelopment generates a high GDP, but the poor are really suffering, because those new condo blocks are far too expensive for the poor and low-income renters who used to live there. Some manage to get into public rental housing, but growing numbers of poor tenants evicted from redevelopment areas end up living in crowded, far-away and sub-standard rental accommodation or making their own dwellings in informal “vinyl house” squatter settlements, named for the flimsy and flammable materials the houses are made from. About 50,000 households are living in these informal communities in Korea, built on leftover bits of public and private land, on low-lying and flood prone areas. Only 40% of the houses in these settlements have toilets, and many are vulnerable to floods and fires and poorly protected against Korea’s harsh winters.

The ACCA projects in South Korea, which are being implemented by the Seoul-based NGO Asian Bridge, have been used to survey and bring together these informal vinyl house communities, help them build a network, start savings, undertake small infrastructure upgrading projects and use their “group power” to begin looking for their own solutions to the serious land, housing and infrastructure problems they face. These vinyl house communities have used the small project funds from ACCA to lay drains and water pipes, pave lanes, install briquette boilers for heating, repair flood-damaged houses and build community centers and recycling stations in their communities. The communities have also taken part in international exchange visits to other Asian countries, through the ACHR/ACCA process, where they have learned more about the importance of community savings and the potential for even the most poor and marginalized communities to bring about change in their lives.

Their dream is eventually to build their own housing, rather than move into box-like units in the faceless high-rise apartment blocks which are increasingly the form which both public rental housing and market-sector housing in Korea takes. But the astronomical price of land is a major obstacle, and few want to move to remote sites far from the city, where land might be more affordable. Over the last five years, the vinyl house network has looked for ways to use ACCA big project funds strategically to either set up a revolving loan fund for improving their existing houses, or to leverage other sources of funds to finance some kind of community-driven housing pilot, but none of these possibilities have been realized yet.

The community network did score a considerable triumph in June 2009, though, when their 2-year court case against the government resulted in a Supreme Court judgment which allows them to register their vinyl house communities as legal addresses - an important prerequisite for getting legal water and electricity connections and accessing public entitlements like education and health care. The network has also begun organizing dialogues with local government about the various problems they face and the communities in Seoul have been successful in negotiating government subsidies for flood relief and private-sector fuel and cash donations.



ACHR was born in Korea, in the big evictions happening for the 1988 Olympics, and this publication describes a visit 20 years later, when the ACCA project was just getting started, to see what had changed and what was still the same.

## Community planning with VINYL HOUSE dwellers :



There are 38 informal “vinyl house” communities in Seoul, which are home to over 10,000 households. Over the last five years, several of these communities formed a network, started savings groups, implemented small ACCA-supported upgrading projects and lobbied to get ID cards. But how to get secure land and housing has been the big issue nobody knows how to tackle - even after Seoul got a progressive new mayor who actively supported cooperative housing as an alternative to the city’s long tradition of contractor-driven neighborhood redevelopment or faceless and expensive public rental housing in tower blocks. In November 2012, CAN, ACHR and Asian Bridge jointly organized a workshop in Seoul to help community members from three vinyl house settlements to brainstorm about alternative housing possibilities. During the four-day workshop, a group of Korean, Thai and Japanese architects worked with the people in these communities to look at possible strategies for securing their land (such as renting or buying land from the government, or from private landowners) and finding financing to develop their own cooperative housing, and then to explore some different housing design and settlement planning options for this new kind of social housing (including ground floor row-house developments, as well as low-rise apartment blocks).





# Making new political space for communities:

The ACCA projects in Korea have come at a time when growing numbers of people are finding it impossible to find decent, secure, affordable housing in Korean cities, when Korea's public rental housing policies and its market-oriented housing delivery systems are being questioned, and when the metropolitan governments in Seoul and other cities are searching for more community-based, more participatory - and more "Korean" - housing alternatives. There have also been some developments in the political sphere which have created unexpected opportunities over the last few years, and ACHR has worked with the team in Seoul to make use of these openings - both through the ACCA projects on the ground and through some more system-level interventions at the political level, which summon the ACHR coalition's regional experience to offer help and new ideas in Korea, as it did 25 years ago.

## 1 INCLUSIVE CITIES WORKSHOP IN SEOUL, AUGUST 2012

In August 2012, ACHR organized a workshop on "Inclusive Cities" in Seoul, in collaboration with Citynet, Asian Bridge, the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the "Vinyl House" community network. 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 urban poor communities to discuss possible solutions with Seoul Metropolitan Government - especially with its progressive new mayor, Won-Soon Park, who was elected the year before. Mayor Park, an active human rights lawyer, was already bringing about big changes in the city and moving the focus from a developer-driven to a more humane, more people-driven development. His tenure as mayor created a new political space for Seoul's urban poor and a golden opportunity to explore alternatives to Korea's brutal redevelopment policies, which pushed thousands of low-income tenants into informal "vinyl house" squatter settlements and squalid daily-rental rooms.

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 field visits to some of the vinyl house communities and "jokbang" daily rental rooms around Seoul.

After the meeting, Kirtee Shah met with Mayor Park, on behalf of ACHR and Citynet, 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 detailed proposal to the mayor, which is now being followed-up by the team in Seoul.



## 2 CITYNET CONGRESS IN SEOUL, NOVEMBER 2013

Citynet is an association of municipal governments and civil society organizations from 83 cities in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2012, Citynet's secretariat was moved from Yokohama to Seoul. ACHR, which has been active in Citynet for many years, had long been strategizing with its Korean partners how to use this move (which brings considerable honor and attention to the city chosen to host the secretariat) to highlight the city's housing problems and to promote more participatory and less impoverishing alternatives. In November 2013, Citynet held its annual congress in Seoul, which its website described as "a unique opportunity to meet face-to-face with high-level city officials, civil society leaders, and urban activists from across the Asia Pacific and beyond." Kirtee Shah presented ACHR's work at the meeting, and the ACCA Program (and the citywide and community-driven slum upgrading it supports) was one of the "Best Practice Briefings" during the Congress, and was featured in the Citynet newsletter.



## New option: housing developed by COOPERATIVES

One of the exciting policy breakthroughs in Korea recently has been the taking out and dusting off of the old cooperative model to add a new, non-profit option for people to rent or develop affordable housing as a group - which they could only do previously as individuals. The rental housing laws have been revised, and soon it will be possible for groups of people in need of housing to register themselves as cooperatives, and then apply to the government for housing loans and subsidies (which usually go only to the big developers who construct Korea's high-rise public housing blocks) to help them design and develop new forms of affordable housing for their members. Under the new laws, this housing (or the land it is on) could either be owned by the cooperative or rented from the government by cooperatives, at subsidized public housing rates.

One of the first groups to seize this opportunity was the network of vinyl house communities in Seoul, Gwacheon and Busan, who had first come together through the ACCA process. In 2013, with support from KCHR and Asian Bridge, they registered themselves legally as the Ssi-AI Housing Cooperative. Ssi-AI is a word in the indigenous Hangeul language that describes the kind of peace and love that treats all people equally: an appropriate word for a cooperative which is jointly-owned, democratically-controlled and provides decent, affordable housing to its low-income members. So far, 130 families have joined the cooperative, and they are already searching for possible public land to rent cheaply for their first housing project, much inspired by the community-driven housing projects they have visited in other Asian countries, during various ACHR and ACCA meetings and events. But housing is not the only tune a cooperative can play, and the Ssi-AI Cooperative has already launched a community vegetable growing enterprise in Seoul and opened their own cafe in a vinyl house community in Busan.

