



# Building an urban poor people's movement in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

## *Asian Coalition for Housing Rights*

The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) is a regional network of grassroots groups, NGOs and professionals involved with urban poor development processes in Asian cities. Over the past eight years, ACHR has marshalled teams from around Asia and Africa to help poor community groups, professionals and government officials in Phnom Penh develop and test community-driven solutions to problems of housing and poverty in the city. This photo-essay was prepared by Thomas Kerr and Maurice Leonhardt.

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**SUMMARY:** *This photo-essay shows how the urban poor and their organizations are working with government agencies, NGOs and international donors in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, to develop homes and neighbourhoods and income generation and, where needed, to manage relocation schemes. It also describes how the city's urban poor developed their own Solidarity and Urban Poor Federation, drawing on the advice of similar federations from other countries. The process was much helped by the interchanges between urban poor groups within the city and by the visits by urban poor representatives and city officials to projects managed by urban poor federations in other countries. The Federation's work centres on linking and supporting community savings groups that develop their own schemes. The Federation also supports community-mapping and surveys to document conditions in the city's many low-income settlements. The essay emphasizes the strengths and resources that the urban poor can bring to developing housing and jobs if external agencies allow them to do so and support their organizations.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY 1990s, Cambodia was practically starting anew, after decades of war, upheaval and dislocation. There were large numbers of NGOs and aid agencies in the country, most of them operating in the welfare mode, delivering what they felt the poor needed. There was a prevailing assumption that poor people were too weak to organize themselves, that they couldn't trust each other or articulate their needs. Because they had survived so much, the city's poor were, in fact, very strong but



◀ **Cambodia's** booming capital Phnom Penh continues to draw low-income migrants who come looking for work in the city's factories, markets and construction sites. Although its growing economy depends heavily on the cheap labour that these people provide, the city has been unable to offer them much in return by way of affordable housing or assistance and the urban poor have been left more or less on their own. Despite these big problems, the city's newfound energy makes Phnom Penh a city of hope, whilst the traumas of the recent past have resulted in a lack of rules and established practices that mean the state is more welcoming of new ideas and faster changing than many of its more consolidated Asian neighbours. Severe budget shortfalls have made the government increasingly open to unconventional ways of getting things done.

this strength was atomized and therefore latent. Harnessing this strength to create an organization which poor people owned and looked after, and building a broad-based support system for that organization, has been the goal of ACHR's contribution in Cambodia.

### II. CREATING AN ORGANIZATION WHICH POOR PEOPLE OWN . . .

THERE IS NO city in the world that has simply become loving and caring of its poor. Poor people need to be strong, need to know what they want, need to prepare themselves in order to negotiate with the city for what they need and to give the city good reasons to listen to them and become involved.

- ▶ **ACHR** has sought to catalyze a process to network the strength of the poor and channel it into clear activities to build a people's organization. This process has involved:
  - **First visits** to Phnom Penh to check out the situation, meet groups, identify some NGOs and community people and form a core group.
  - **A survey** of poor settlements across the city – a first in Phnom Penh – to establish new contacts.
  - **A seminar** held with key organizations – the municipality, the UN, NGOs and all the communities – to discuss the survey data together and build a common understanding.
  - **Savings and credit groups** started in several communities, linking communities on a regular basis, working together to meet their daily needs.
  - **An housing exhibition**, to explore people's ideas about how to find land, build decent communities and design affordable houses for themselves, and to use these plans to negotiate with government for secure land.
  - **Exposure trips** to other groups in the region.
  - **Setting up the Urban Poor Federation** as a concrete focal point of assistance, giving loans immediately, linking to savings groups and institutionalizing a partnership between the poor and the city.
  - **Projects** in housing, income generation and infrastructure to build confidence in the process and show everyone that anything is possible.



◀ **Since** it was formed from savings schemes in 1994, the Solidarity and Urban Poor Federation (SUPF) has worked to get communities to come together and work out their own ways of solving the problems they all face – problems of insecure land and housing, problems of flooding, inadequate provision for water supply and sanitation, problems of health and education, and problems of finding access to affordable credit for emergencies and for boosting livelihoods. The communities have experimented freely to find solutions that work for them. Such open and collective learning has been critical to helping communities recover from the past. People have had to rediscover their confidence in themselves and in each other.



◀ **Mapping:** Here, community people are mapping houses, pathways, services and problems in the sprawling Basaac riverside slum. Low-income communities understand their own problems best and, when they collect the data, analyze problems and develop solutions, they become the driving force behind community development, not the recipients of someone else's idea of what they need.



◀ **Savings:** When people in low-income communities save their money together and make collective decisions about how to use that money, they are acquiring the management experience and negotiating skills that they will need to tackle larger development issues. When you boost savings and credit on a large scale in Phnom Penh, you boost the basic mechanism by which poor people will begin to deal with their problems collectively, with strength rather than in weakness and isolation, with trust rather than with suspicion.

Box 1:	Defining a universe: who are we and what are our problems?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About 35,000 families (180,000 people) live in 502 low-income settlements within Phnom Penh's seven municipal districts.</li> <li>• Five per cent of these families live along railway tracks, 5 per cent along roadsides, 9 per cent on rooftops of downtown buildings, 26 per cent on river banks and along canals, and 40 per cent on open land.</li> <li>• In addition, there are growing numbers of poor tenants who rent makeshift shacks around the factories or who live in crowded sub-divided rooms in the city centre or in isolated but insecure circumstances. Adding these would raise the total to about 450,000 people or about 40 per cent of the city's 1.1 million population.</li> <li>• Forty-four per cent of the families living in low-income settlements have no toilet, 70 per cent have to buy their water from private tankers at eight to ten times the municipal rate and 60 per cent have to buy electricity from private sources at 10-30 times the official municipal rate.</li> <li>• These people include factory workers, construction labourers, skilled tradespeople, market and street vendors, cycle-taxi and motor-taxi drivers and scavengers among others, and earn an average of US\$ 1 per day.</li> </ul>	

**Surveying:** Since 1994, SUPF has carried out no less than five surveys of Phnom Penh's informal settlements. Each has been more accurate and more comprehensive than the last and each represents a further refinement of the poor's understanding about their own lives and communities. Each survey has further strengthened the Federation and created the city's most reliable database on the lives and living conditions of the city's poor. Box 1 gives a few statistics from SUPF's most recent 1999 survey of the city's poor settlements.



◀ **Cambodia's** recent history has left communities almost at the same level as the government in their experience of managing cities and has more or less leveled social differences between high-level municipal officers and poor people. Because both communities and the government are eager to learn, there has been an opportunity to help build their knowledge together, through joint exposure visits to other countries, through collaborative housing projects, through joint management of the development fund and through district-level community programmes.



◀ **Partners not adversaries:** As the political situation stabilizes, Phnom Penh manifests the same contradictory forces we see in cities across Asia – a demand for lots of cheap labour, increasing pressure on urban land, escalating land prices and increasing conflicts between the poor's housing and the city's development needs. With no mechanism to provide other options for low-income communities displaced by development, the city finds its own plans difficult to implement. The government has a big stake in seeing these conflicts resolved and if communities can show them ways of doing so which work both for the poor and for the city, they will go along with them. This 1997 model house exhibition was SUPF's first big, public presentation of their housing ideas to the government and the government's first chance to see the poor not as adversaries but as potential development partners. The people's message was simple: *"We can design our own communities and build our own houses. All we need is secure land."*

### III. SHOWING GOVERNMENT THAT THE POOR CAN MAKE GOOD DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

IN 1994, THE Phnom Penh municipality's only way of dealing with the residents of informal settlements that were in the way of development projects was to evict them, and the only way the poor and the city related to each other was as adversaries. Eight years later, the municipal and national governments are working in close, friendly partnership with the Federation on a variety of housing, infrastructure, planning and income generation projects at city, district and community levels. Evictions without other options have all but stopped. This considerable transformation hasn't happened by accident . . .



◀ **One of** the best ways to create a common vision of what's possible is to invite officials from the municipal and national governments along on exposure visits to community-driven initiatives in other countries. After the model house exhibition in 1997, the first "integrated" exposure trips were made to India, South Africa and Thailand, in which NGOs and high-ranking district and city officials travelled together with slum dwellers to other countries to see community-driven housing projects. This was a departure for everyone in the region – something unthinkable in many Asian countries – and has provided an example to others. These learning excursions have gone a long way in expanding everyone's options, creating a common vision of *what's possible*, strengthening friendly working bonds between officials and community leaders and have paid off in almost immediate, on-the-ground collaborations back home.

▶ **In all** the federation-managed housing projects so far, the government has unambiguously acknowledged that providing secure land for the urban poor is a public responsibility and it has found ways of providing free, secure alternative land for families displaced by development projects – *despite the government's extremely limited finances*. This concrete step represents a genuine commitment to supporting this kind of community-centered development and has helped to re-orient many key institutions away from a confrontational approach towards a more constructive problem-solving approach to providing secure land and housing for the city's poor.





◀ **A city of squatters:** Not too long ago, everyone in Phnom Penh was a squatter. In 1979, when people first began to emerge from the jungle into an empty, dilapidated city, they camped out in empty buildings and lit open fires to cook their rice. When all the houses and flats had been occupied, newcomers built shelters wherever they could find space, along river banks and railway tracks, on streets, in the areas between buildings and on rooftops. These became thriving communities and home to a new generation of city builders and were the only solution to the city's critical shortage of affordable housing for the poor – a solution increasingly at odds with the city's development plans.

#### IV. AFFORDABLE PEOPLE-MANAGED HOUSING OPTIONS

FOR MOST OF Cambodia's urban poor, secure land is their first priority. Most of SUPF's energies have gone into preparing for the day they obtain secure land – saving for housing; making inventories of potential housing sites; planning affordable house models; and exploring land tenure options through dialogue with the city, NGOs and aid organizations. The Federation has now completed three housing relocation projects and is working with the city, NGOs and aid agencies on several others around Phnom Penh.

► **In just 20 years**, that abandoned, broken-down city has become a market-oriented boom town. State ownership of land has given way to extensive land speculation in which market forces and an uncertain land registration system have been bad news for the poor, who are evicted, pushed aside, bought out for a pittance and forced to find shelter in increasingly insecure circumstances. SUPF has been critical in developing alternatives.



◄ **Training for everyone:** Making the Akphivat Mean Cheay relocation project a reality involved the close collaboration among members of a wide-ranging group: the land was chosen by the community, purchased by the municipality and developed by UNCHS according to plans the community designed with young architects at the Urban Resource Centre. The district chief helped negotiate, the Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF) gave house-building loans, the community built their own houses and SUPF turned each step of the process into training for communities across the city. The Urban Poor Development Fund is a community-managed loan fund that was seeded by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights and the municipality.

► **Community contracts:** The work of filling the new land, building latrines, digging wells, laying roads and planting trees to stabilize the banks was carried out efficiently and inexpensively by community members with UNCHS funds, by "community contract". Instead of hiring outside contractors, this system draws on community skills and keeps profits in the community. In addition, low-income families get a chance to earn a little extra cash while building up their own community's infrastructure.







◀ **People-to-people learning:** When poor people travel to cities in other countries and see for themselves how people in similar circumstances have dealt with problems of eviction, housing, basic services and credit, it opens their minds, expands their options and creates a far-flung solidarity which crosses borders. It's unfiltered learning, direct from the source to those that need it most.

## V. TAPPING THE REGION'S POOL OF COMMUNITY WISDOM

IT'S NO ACCIDENT that Phnom Penh's urban poor have found that their best guides and strongest allies have been low-income people from federations of slum communities in other parts of the world who have offered their experience to friends in Cambodia. People-to-people exchanges continue to be a key strategy in helping build, strengthen and scale-up the community development processes in Phnom Penh.

▶ **The pool of community development experience** in Asia and Africa is immense. Cambodian community members have travelled to look at pilot housing projects, savings and credit programmes, model house exhibitions, toilet-building projects and government negotiations in India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Africa and Zimbabwe. At different stages, people have brought ideas back from all these places and almost immediately have applied them in the Cambodian context. Ideas that worked were adapted, refined and scaled-up. Ideas that didn't work were dropped.







▲► **Good friends in India and Thailand:** It was sidewalk slum dwellers from Mahila Milan women's savings collectives in Bombay who helped the Cambodians set up their first savings and credit groups in Phnom Penh and who showed how saving is vitally linked to getting secure land and housing. In Thailand, which is culturally similar and something of a "big sister" to Cambodia, community leaders saw negotiated alternatives to eviction such as land-sharing and on-site reblocking in canal and riverside settlements. Later on, it was leaders from the Thai Community Network and staff from UCDO who helped set up the jointly managed Urban Poor Development Fund in Phnom Penh.



◀ **"Integrated exposure visits"** to community initiatives in other countries have included municipal officials and NGOs from early on, offering people at community, government and NGO levels a chance to learn together. Over the past five years, at least 100 community leaders have gone on exposure trips, along with 20 professionals from NGOs and 25 municipal and district officials from various levels. All seven of the city's district (*khan*) chiefs have now been on exposure trips and all are working with community and NGO representatives on development committees at *khan* level. This form of joint functioning is becoming increasingly acceptable in the city.

► **The problems** of land and housing for Phnom Penh's urban poor are too large and too complex for any group to solve alone. Communities may be very well organized but without the cooperation of city managers, without resources, without land, they cannot make decent, secure communities for themselves. City managers, on the other hand, may have good redevelopment policies for informal settlements and all the best intentions but, without the central involvement of the organizations of the poor in the redevelopment process, the clashing requirements of urban development and low-income housing will never go away. Complex problems require complex solutions and complex solutions involve lots of people and careful collaboration.



### VI. DOING TOGETHER WHAT NO GROUP CAN DO ALONE

OVER THE PAST six years, SUPF has not worked in isolation. The elements of comprehensive, lasting and large-scale solutions to Phnom Penh's urgent problems of land, housing, basic services and livelihood require cooperation and partnership – partnership with other stakeholders in the city development process, with the municipal and national governments, with professionals, with NGOs and with national and international development organizations. Partnership-building has been a big theme in all the work in Phnom Penh.



◄ **Making friends:** After spending a few days with Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation in Bombay along with community leaders from settlements in his own district, the district of Chamkarmon chief, Mr Lor Rhy, and community leader Men Chamnan came back home and wasted no time in starting to collaborate, which eventually led to the Akphivat Mean Cheay relocation project.



▲ **Urban Resource Centre:** The team of young professionals at the Urban Resource Centre has become one of SUPF's closest partners, helping communities to develop housing layouts, explore cost-saving construction techniques, formalize settlement maps, produce working drawings for municipal permissions, computerize survey data, interpret during exposure visits and document community projects.

▲ **Urban Poor Development Fund:** This Fund was set up in March 1998 with an initial capital of only US\$ 60,000, of which the first US\$ 5,000 came from people's own savings. The fund provides loans for housing and income generation through savings groups and community federations and, because it is jointly managed by the poor, the city, NGOs and regional support organizations, it helps strengthen partnership. To date, the fund has provided house-building loans to 300 families in five relocation projects and income generation loans to 1,200 families in all seven districts.



◀ **District Community Development Management Councils:** Over the past year, community development management councils (CDMCs) have been established in each of Phnom Penh's seven districts. The objective of these councils is to create space for community leaders, district officials, local NGOs and other stakeholders to work together in ways which strengthen the people's process and increasingly systemizes and makes routine their involvement in planning decisions which affect their lives, their districts and their city.



The work in Phnom Penh has involved the sustained support of many groups outside the country. Five aid agencies in particular – MISEREOR, the Department for International Development (DFID), SELAVIP, Homeless International and Oxfam – have provided support to the Urban Poor Development Fund's revolving loan fund and management, to the Solidarity and Urban Poor Federation's operation, to young professionals from both inside and outside Cambodia who have worked with communities as part of the Urban Resource Centre, and to the many exchange visits to and from other countries in the Asian and African regions.