Secure Tenure for Urban Poor Waterfront Housing by Multi-Level Network Mechanism, Bangkok

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Abstract

This paper is derived from the author's experience in urban poor housing development project under *Baan Man Kong* program undertaken by Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) to upgrade urban poor living conditions, secure tenure, and community capacity building in Thailand. This pilot project is expected to highlight initial guidelines and strategies for urban poor settlements' redevelopment in the case of waterfront settlements. Planning process focuses on clarifying conceptual strategy in order to identify direction and working process in field practice and to provide some discussions and lesson learnt on planning and practicing interplay of working with community for other waterfront cases. One part of planning strategies highlights on the significance of network and participation of both institutional and community levels as a core mechanism of community capacity building, empowerment and sustainable development in economic, social and environmental aspects. This paper discusses on how the process of community building and empowerment have been undertaken and will be initiated, particularly in establishing various networks to ensure concerned authorities that community is capable of not degrading water quality and well maintaining good waterfront condition. Therefore, the expected result of this project is, of course not the zero-sum scenario, but the win-win scenario, including better waterfront condition.

1.   Introduction

The case study is located on Bangbua canal in Bangkok where, nowadays its perimeter has been settled and trespassed by nine illegal urban poor neighborhoods along its two kilometer-length. Being considered as one of the causes of flooding in Bangkok by water flow blockage, Bangkok Metropolitan Authority[1] (BMA) attempts to relocate all waterfront urban poor communities, but the solution leads to an argument between the community and BMA.

Having been settled illegally on Crown Property Bureau (CPB)'s land, Bangbua community is composed of 2,881 households from 100 to 500 households[2] by each neighborhood. Most of dwellers are both working in the

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[1] BMA's relocation policy has been planned to undertake in 2005 according to the transportation policy that both sides of canal will become double lanes road as usual execution to eradicate slums and squatters along the canals because of two main reasons, the first is that the settlements trespass and settle illegally and the last is that nowadays they are exceeding themselves into canal.

[2] Data derives from WGHBC's field survey, April 2004.

informal economic sector, i.e. hawkers, construction workers, taxi drivers, self-economic activities, and etc. The age of the community is not accurately presented. Nevertheless, some of its residents have been living in this area for at least two generations which was dated before Land Act was enacted[3].

The core problem of urban poor housing is that residents are lack of secure tenure.Then *Baan Man Kong* program[4], at national level has been undertaken by Community Organization Development Institute (CODI, 2004) aims to alleviate that problem. Meanwhile at operating level, Working Group for Housing in Bangbua Community[5] (WGHBC) was established as field team to encourage and evoke residents' participation in the program. However, CODI has been successful in creating cooperation and agreement about land tenure policy for illegal urban poor settlement with other government authorities, at which their lands have been invaded by urban poor community especially with CPB.

2.   Planning process and strategy: Formulating community network and frame work

By setting the goal to achieve waterfront condition betterment, WGHBC basically assumes that community tenure is guaranteed, thus community people would be willing to legally develop their habitations. In other word to meet waterfront betterment means to ensure their tenure. The overall strategy, therefore, as conceptualized in Fig. 1, is that two levels of mechanism, which are the institutional level and the community level, run simultaneously. In the institutional level, the tasks are mainly to interweave institutional network and enhance cooperation with other related institutes, especially universities as the source of experts in various related knowledge and local authorities[6]. WGHBC, who is the main project coordinator between policy level and operating level, mechanizes this working model. It, in this case at the institutional level attempts to integrate cooperation with concerned local district authorities and CPB to community. The project progress requires making specific understanding with both permission of construction and policy according to both relevant authorities. By local administrative authorities[7], the cooperation aims to loosen

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[3] Interview with a community member, March 2004.

[4] As part of national poverty alleviation policy, the program based on community building strategy aims to encourage all illegal settlement communities for their secure tenure.

[5] It is comprised of architect, CODI's staff, NGO's staff, university expert, and representative from Community Canal Network.

[6] CODI applies the model, which the educational institutes and local administrative authority as integrated mechanism for urban poor development under 'Bann Man Kong' program, see *Thairath,*(2003) November 27, 'Encouraging Universities and Government Authorities' Cooperation in Slum Upgrading'. (In Thai)

[7] Because of its length, Bangbua community is geographically governed by three different administrative authorities.

on permission of construction. This project will face a couple of limitations in order to obtain the authorized housing standard. By CPB, the issue targets on community's long-term land tenure (20-30 years) which will guarantee their legal settlements and to encourage people to improve their living conditions. CPB and CODI, respectively, do not allow individuals to commit rent contract or to allocate micro credits. Instead of each neighborhood separately requesting for tenure, the community forms another working group (community network) composed of members from each of nine neighborhood committee to undertake the land tenure's procedure because it is more consolidated and reliable. On one hand, in the community level as initially recognized, some disagreement and conflicts on this program are addressed at the earlier stage. On the other hand, WGHBC keeps encouraging all neighborhoods to join *Baan Man Kong* program by informing and inviting the dwellers to participate in program through public meeting and has discussed and made understood with some neighborhood leaders about the program in depth.
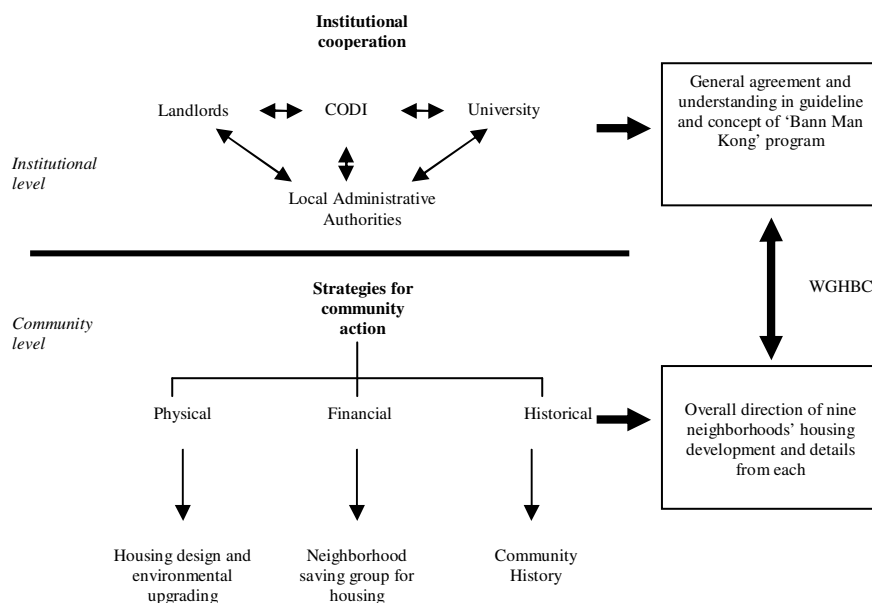

Figure 1: Strategy in Bangbua communities upgrading project

In the policy and decision making level, the project complicatedly deals with national development policy and authorities, which requires conducting general agreement together among related authorities; they are CODI as the program's main mechanism, CPB as landowner, District offices, under BMA, as local administrative body and a local university as an expertise provider. After partnership building, the plan is to mobilize together nine neighborhoods for more collaboration. The strategies are;

❑   Coordinating with CPB for long term land tenure.

❑   Making Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among CODI, university and community network organization for financial resources and exchange of experts.

❑   Extending and adopting conceptual strategy to other areas through community network mechanism (with adjustment of some details).

In community level, WGHBC strategically focuses on three areas which are physical condition improvement as core outcome, founding of saving group as economic mechanism, and historical representation of community as community discourse and identity (Fig. 1).

3.   Methodology: Field report

After initiating strategies and plans based on the applications from Hamdi and Goethert (1997) and Sanoff (2000), WGHBC has adopted them in practice and the process can be divided to two levels;

Community Network[8] level: Nine neighborhoods' committee

The aims of this framework are to represent all nine neighborhoods as consolidated unit and to gear all neighborhoods toward the same direction. Naturally, each has its own different degree of readiness and acceptance to join *Bann Man Kong* program, this, therefore, needs to be tuned to attach the basic understanding and program concept through learning interchange. The process of community network level was implemented through community network committee and WGHBC according to the following applications. They are**;**

❑   Informing the project: The first step for the project is to inform the project to communities by forming a public meeting, which is opened for everyone in community, to participate and discuss.

❑   Encouraging each neighborhood to form a saving group: After certain duration, some can formulate and start launching saving group which gradually collects from the members by monthly or bimonthly.

Neighborhood level: Particular neighborhood committee and working team

There are some competencies each neighborhood has to undertake on their own distinguishably. That means each will not proceed simultaneously depending on the degree of collaboration and efficiency of neighborhood leader. The issues that each neighborhood would particularly undertake are;

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[8] See details about the meaning of community network as joint development mechanism in Boonyabancha, S. (1999) 'Citizen's Network to Address Urban Poverty in Thailand', Manila Social Forum: The New Social Agenda for East and Southeast Asia, November 8-12.

❑   Surveying neighborhood

This, on one hand, requires initial data for developing housing and housing characteristic in order to meet neighborhood's need, while, on the other hand, it is the strategy, which increases the awareness of the dwellers to participate and pursue positive atmosphere. Each neighborhood committee distributes tasks to each household to inform committee the basic information as well as surveying. People can participate by forming small working groups with university's architectural students[9], which acts as the working group dominators. This cooperation between community people and sub-working group of WGHBC is quite effective in point of departure that it becomes an exchanged learning process between community and institutes.

❑   Bringing to consensus

Initial housing schemes[10] were decided and applied in particular. They can be summarized as below

- Reconstruction model; it means all existing buildings will be demolished and newly constructed with redistributed land plot and size without any overstretching and extension to water body.

- Partly reconstruction and reblocking; it means the buildings, trespassing to water body have to be demolished and be rebuilt on the residual space of the opposite side by redistribution of land plot.

- All community members want low-rise housing (2 stories) on their own land and completely reject high-rise housing scheme like flat or apartment, in which does not associate with their economic activities.

❑   Discussing housing scheme: Design process

The process is that groups of community people were autonomously divided into 15-30 dwellers based on their friendship and kinship to re-cluster the new social and economic groups (in case that community chooses the reconstruction model). The WGHBC, lead by university's experts have daily worked on small groups through details of community masterplan, housing design, housing character, and building design under their budgets and limitations. Infrastructure system is concerned whereas neighborhood regulation is discussed in order to be a tool to maintain waterfront boundary. Local sewage system has been developed by community and would be installed to prevent untreated wastewater discharge[11].

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[9] University, by school of architecture supports students to help surveying community.

[10] See more details in low-income housing development option in Yap, K.S. (1992) *Low-Income Housing in Bangkok: A Review of Some Housing Sub-Markets,* Bangkok: Division of Human Settlements Development, Asian Institute of Technology.

[11] See some applications and strategies in Boonyabancha, S. (1999) 'The Urban Community Environmental Activities Project and its Environmental Fund in Thailand' *Environment and Urbanization* 11, No. 1, (pp.101-15).

4.   Summary

Lesson from practicing reminds that at the institutional level, networking can be an initial assurance for other related institutions about new paradigm of urban poor waterfront housing development It can bring mutual understanding among institutions, as well as generates new ideas and alternatives. On the other hand, at neighborhood level, networking can be a crucial encouragement and provide confidence to community about the program. Furthermore, it is also a social learning process. This progress becomes an initial step for communities to represent their readiness and earnest in this project, which aims to imply the concerned authorities especially landlords for their capability in efficiently managing community without environmental degradation and, later, securing tenure. It will make the concerned authorities to more accept, understand, and be confident about their self-sustained development and bring all into open-ended illegal settlement's solution as well as waterfront condition betterment.

However, working with community is still limited, some constraints and shortcomings have appeared during practice. They are;

❑ WGHBC cannot explore deep enough through community power structure's detail addressing in few communities because one group can dominate the rest. This becomes difficulties of working process and consumes longer duration than expected.

❑ Some rules and regulations which was set up by the neighborhoods, to participate in community saving group for housing in some neighborhoods are too rigid and injustice, which was not initially defined who are called community dwellers.

❑ Community's approach orients too much on financial resource and pays less attention on community building, which is CODI's core concept of sustainable urban poor development.

There are several differences in geographical and social conditions of urban poor waterfront community that one model cannot be universally and effectively adopted. Now at least the core of urban poor housing development in this case should orient on network-based approach in which community has previously been existed and being high potential to be a lesson for others to become aware of improving of their housing development in the same token. In this regard, working on urban poor community must mainly focus on both upper level and lower level. By upper level, it means to enhance cooperation with other institutes, one of important strategies to formulate their discourse of power and human rights. What to be done for strengthening power is to enhance institutional alliances, to extend community network to other canal communities, and to stretch the problems into public domain. Meanwhile, by

lower level, planners require effective coordination, communication and compromise among community dwellers and inevitably could not play outsider role, but a part of community.

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