Urban poor housing development on Bangkok's waterfront: securing tenure, supporting community processes

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ABSTRACT This paper describes a project to upgrade living conditions and provide secure tenure in nine "canal settlement" communities in Bangkok. It explains how this was planned and implemented, both on the ground and at the policy level, working with national institutions including the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) and the government body that owned the land. The different institutions involved are described, including the savings groups in each of the nine communities and the network of community organizations, which were particularly important for the realization of the project. The paper also discusses how upgrading plans were developed and how conflicts were addressed.

KEYWORDS community network / secure tenure / stakeholder participation / upgrading

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the best known and most visible kinds of poor illegal settlement in Bangkok are the canal waterfront settlements. Bangkok has more than 100 canals but most are no longer directly used for the routine transport of goods, as this has shifted to roads. This paper discusses the kind of upgrading that can be implemented in such settlements, drawing on a pilot project that is underway.

The project was initiated in a group of nine communities settled along Bangbua canal in north Bangkok. The communities are clustered along both sides of the canal and at one point, there was a risk of eviction as a result of a plan to build a four-lane highway along the banks. This plan, supported by a former governor of Bangkok, was cancelled, but it made the inhabitants of the canal waterfront settlements aware of their lack of secure tenure for housing and land. The authorities have two further grounds for relocating them: first, the fact that the communities occupy the site illegally; and second, that their settlements have extended out over the canal and impede water flow (Photo 1). Although there has been no major flood in the last 10 years, this remains an official concern. The authorities are also concerned about the communities' contribution to water pollution, garbage dumping and associated environmental problems.

In the past, it was common for these kinds of settlements to be cleared and for their inhabitants to be relocated. But the Thai

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PHOTO 1
An example of informal canal settlements

government's current urban poor housing policy suggests an alternative approach, namely upgrading through its Community Organization Development Institute (CODI). CODI has been successful in developing cooperation between illegal settlers and those government authorities whose land they have occupied, and for these nine canal settlements, an agreement to allow the upgrading was reached between CODI and the Treasury Department, which owns this land.

The nine Bangbua communities[1] extend along both sides of the canal for two kilometres. They have their own community network, although their settlements fall into three districts and so come under three different district authorities. The total population numbers 2,881 households, with the smallest community having around 100 households and the largest around 500 households.[2] Most of the adults work in the informal economy as hawkers, construction workers or taxi drivers, or have their own small businesses. The settlements have been there for more than 50 years, and some of the inhabitants have lived in the area since their grandparents moved there, before the Land Department of Thailand was founded.[3] Most buildings are one- or two-storey reinforced concrete structures built of wood and mortar, and located on either side of streets that are around two metres wide (Photo 2).

In terms of plans for the future, the first question that the inhabitants had to consider was whether they wanted to continue living there. The second was how, if they did want to stay, would it be possible and what kind of organization should be formed? There are various official government housing schemes that can support improved housing – and there are case studies of slum upgrading projects that have already been implemented.[4] There is also support available for relocating to a new

1. The nine communities are Chai-klong Bangbua, Bangbua Langkongkarnpap, Samakkee-ruamjai, Ruamjaipattana-North, Ruamjaipattana-South, Kaona, Ruammittra-raengsattha, Runmaipattana and Roykrong.

2. Data derived from a field survey with the community in April 2004.

3. Information obtained from interviews with a community member in March 2004.

4. For details of housing development schemes, see Yap, Kioe Sheng (1992), *Low-income Housing in Bangkok: A Review of some Housing Sub-markets*, Division of Human Settlements Development, Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok; also Yap, Kioe Sheng (1989), "Some low-income housing delivery sub-systems in Bangkok, Thailand", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 1, No 2, October, pages 27–37.

PHOTO 2
Physical characteristics of Ruamjaipattana-South community

land plot with secure tenure and the possibility of either renting it or buying it through the community's housing savings group. If people wanted to stay in their current locations and upgrade or reconstruct their homes, they needed to negotiate for the right to do so and needed to reach agreement on the rental or purchase of land sites from the landowners. After several public hearings in open community panels, the Bangbua residents reached agreement that they would like to continue living in the area with a rearranging and upgrading of the housing and infrastructure.

Two organizations were available to provide support for this decision. The first was CODI, one of the leading Thai organizations supporting

community capacity building and providing loans for upgrading. The second was the group of local NGOs from the Chumthonthai Foundation, which plays a major role in supporting grassroots and community-based social and economic development initiatives to upgrade physical conditions. Both work under the national Baan Man Kong (secure tenure) housing programme, which supports community-driven housing solutions underpinned by the securing of legal tenure.(5) One of the key reasons for the poor physical conditions in urban poor settlements is insecure land tenure, which discourages inhabitants from improving their living conditions and official government bodies from providing infrastructure and services.

5. For more details of CODI's work, see Boonyabancha, Somsook (2005), "Baan Man Kong; going to scale with 'slum' and squatter upgrading in Thailand", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 17, No 1, April, pages 21–46; also see www.baanmankong.com.

II. FORMULATING A COMMUNITY NETWORK AND FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

As with other low-income housing upgrading projects, in the initial stages the inhabitants did not recognize the benefits of housing upgrading. However, knowing that they were not going to be evicted stimulated their interest, which was also stimulated by previous grassroots work in the community and by the Baan Man Kong programme. Little by little, the communities welcomed this coming challenge. One of the first tasks of upgrading was to develop a work plan, specifying each group's specific roles and activities (Table 1). At the policy and decision-making level, the main actors were the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI), the Treasury Department (the landowner), Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's district offices and the local university (Sripatum University).

At the operations level, the field working groups were the Bangbua community network committee, each community committee, each community's savings group for housing, and the Working Group for Housing Development in Bangbua Communities (WGHBC).

Figure 1 summarizes the overall strategy with both institutional and community-level mechanisms running simultaneously. At the institutional level, the task has been mainly to enhance cooperation with other institutions, especially the university (from which expert advice on various aspects is drawn). At the community level, the Working Group for Housing Development in Bangbua Community (WGHBC) was the main project coordinator linking the policy/decision-making level and operations. This was set up as the team in the field, with cooperation from three parties, namely CODI, community organizations and a local university.(6)

6. See *Thairath* (2003), "Encouraging universities and government authorities' cooperation in slum upgrading", 27 November (in Thai).

This working group also sought to liaise and work with the local district authorities (from whom building permission was required) and the Treasury Department (from whom land tenure was required). Regarding building permission, the working group informed local district offices of the difficulties that the project would face in reaching conventional housing standards. From the Treasury Department, it sought to negotiate long-term community land tenure (20–30 years) in order to guarantee legal settlements and encourage people to invest in improving their living conditions. Instead of having separate land tenure agreements for each community, another working group (the community network) was formed, with representation from all nine communities. This network

TABLE 1
Roles and activities of institutions and working groups in urban poor housing development

Policy and decision-making level	Roles	Activities
CODI	Provider of loans for urban poor housing	Establishing general agreement with other concerned institutions on urban poor development with regard to land, community capacity building, housing design and construction
Treasury Department	Landlord/landowner	–
Local district office	Responsible for initiatives in their jurisdiction and for building permission	Coordination between communities and higher government authorities
Local university	Supports technical staff and experts	Provides knowledge regarding social and physical improvement
Operating level	**Roles**	**Activities**
Bangbua communities network committee	Forms the link between Bangbua communities' committees and other community organizations	Encourages all communities to participate in the programme and keeps them informed
Community committee	Communicates with its own community members	Gathers the household/community information required for the initiative; strategic planning of different community working teams, i.e. community savings group for housing
Community savings group for housing	Mediator and manager of financial resources between CODI and community members for housing improvement loans	Gathers savings from community members with transparency and community self-auditing system
The Working Group for Housing Development in Bangbua Communities (WGHBC)	Main project coordinator	Workshop and action planning with each community; development of housing scheme and community masterplan with communities and other stakeholders, with attention to socioeconomic and political dimensions

sought to build an agreement for all nine communities – and to address the potential conflicts at an early stage. It also encouraged all communities to join the Baan Man Kong programme by providing information about it and inviting the inhabitants to public hearings. The working group also organized discussions about the programme with community leaders.

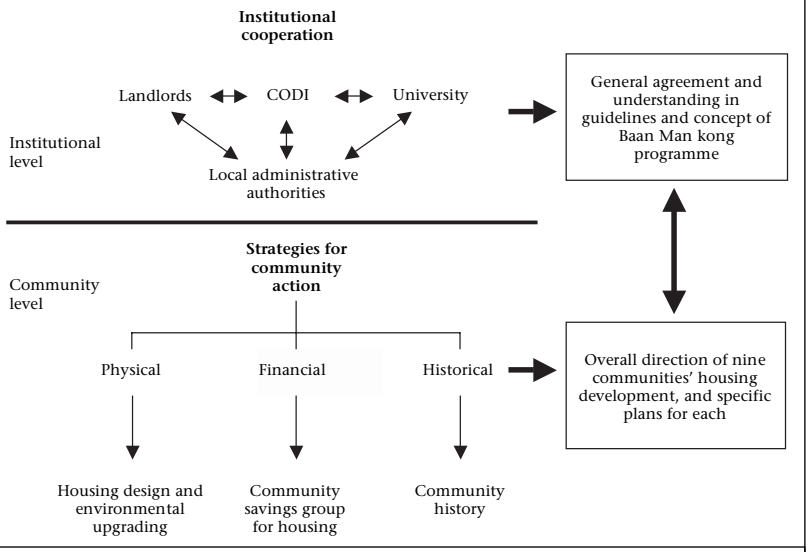

FIGURE 1
Strategy in Bangbua communities upgrading project

a. Bridging cooperation at the institutional level

At the policy and decision-making level, the project has had to deal with the complications of working with national development policy and national authorities. This has meant reaching general agreements with CODI as the programme's main support mechanism, the Treasury Department as the landowner, the district offices as the local administrative bodies and the local university as expertise provider. These bodies work together within the upper formal structure of policy and decision making, to avoid conflict and misunderstanding concerning the project at the beginning and to enhance channels for more support. After the cooperating partnership was formed, the plan was to mobilize nine communities to increase collaboration. The strategies have been:

- to coordinate with the Treasury Department for long-term land tenure;
- to agree on a Memorandum of Understanding for CODI, the university and the community network organization for financial resources and technical support; and
- to develop and adopt a broader strategy to cover other areas through the community network mechanism.

b. Managing strategy at community level

At the community level, the WGHBC has focused on three areas: improving physical conditions as the core objective; supporting the financial organizing group as the economic mechanism; and promoting historical representation of the community as part of community discourse and identity.

Physical environment. The core team brought together staff from CODI and the Chumchonthai Foundation and architects from the Faculty

of Architecture at Sripatum University to work with each community and gather information, analyze the situation, identify problems and limitations and set priorities. The basic data needed for the upgrading plan cover both physical conditions, such as housing patterns, characteristics and conditions, and socioeconomic conditions, such as number and size of households, economic activities in the residences and number of tenants. These were presented back to each community in summary form. The inhabitants of each community had a strong preference for continuing to live in these settlements, so the general solution was to relocate some buildings that had extended over the canal's surface water, and to share the remaining spaces with the other inhabitants. This obviously meant finding compromises acceptable to everyone.

Financial organizing group. Not all communities were ready to develop their own savings group for housing because this relies on trust among the community members. Savings groups cannot be imposed from the outside. After explaining to each community how savings groups can work, these generally develop, supported by CODI (which helps develop saving management systems) and by the community housing development savings group as the operating unit. The Bangbua upgrading needed external funding, but this only became available when communities had developed a formal savings group with regular savings from all members, and had a committee elected by community members. External financial support is not based on the amount saved but it does depend on the regularity of savings and the transparency of the committee team. The purpose of the housing development savings groups is not only to collect savings from community members as housing funds for the future but also to develop know-how and to support learning among community networks for financial management.

Historical representation. Each low-income community has its own long history and traditions, especially those connected with water and the canal. This community identity was important in negotiations with the landlord – also for strengthening the community's own identity and self-esteem, for instance through collective memory, community water traditions and songs and lifestyle.

This three-pronged approach became a good learning process for both implementers and the communities. What has been learnt from the working process and the interchanges between communities needs to inform the upper structure in order to achieve the best practice in sustainable housing development.

III. MOVING FORWARD: REPORT FROM THE FIELD

After developing the strategies and plans, the WGHBC then adopted these in practice, which meant a two-level process.

a. Community network level:[7] the nine communities committee

The aim of the community framework was to have all nine communities represented as one community unit and to mobilize all the communities in the same direction. Each community had its own degree of acceptance and readiness to join the Baan Man Kong programme, so the process had

7. For details about the meaning of a community network as a joint development mechanism, see Boonyabancha, S (1999), "Citizen's network to address urban poverty in Thailand", Manila Social Forum: The New Social Agenda for East and Southeast Asia, Manila, 8–12 November 1999; also see reference 5.

to ensure that all communities had a good understanding of the programme and had the chance to discuss it and to learn from each other through the community learning interchange. This was implemented through the community network committee and the WGHBC.

- **Information about the project.** The first step was to provide information about the project to the communities and to support discussions about it. CODI has a long experience in supporting this, both working with community leaders and being available for discussions with all the inhabitants. All nine communities were also part of a network panel that exchanged learning and reported to each other on progress.
- **Encouraging communities to formulate savings groups.** The next crucial step, once a community had agreed to join the programme, was to establish a savings group for housing development. The main mechanism was through support from the community network, especially to each community leader or activist. Public hearings were held in each of the nine communities and, after three months of promoting community savings groups for housing development, five communities had established savings groups and were saving regularly. Each community had to have precisely defined regulations for screening those who sought to participate in the programme, as the opportunities provided by the Baan Man Kong programme encouraged many people to try and be included even if they did not live there – for instance, some of the inhabitants' relatives. Therefore, the setting regulation was for screening those who were genuine inhabitants and those who were not.

Support from CODI depends both on well-managed savings groups and on the inhabitants of each community reaching agreement among themselves on the re-blocking and distribution of plots. CODI does not provide loans to individual households but to the whole community, through the formal, legally established community organization. It is this organization that provides households with loans and supervises their use.

b. Individual community level: community committees and working teams

Each community had to undertake certain tasks. Not all have proceeded at the same pace, as achieving these tasks depends on the degree of community collaboration and the competence of community leaders. Some communities face conflict among their members, and this has to be solved step by step. The tasks that each community has undertaken, or will undertake, are:

- **Community survey.** This produces the information needed for housing development; it also encourages the inhabitants to take part and contribute. The community committee asks each household for basic information. The physical surveys are done, usually by small working groups of inhabitants working with university architecture students. In the case of this project, cooperation between community people and a sub-working group of the WGHBC proved effective.
- **Developing consensus.** After a few rounds of open discussions

(Photo 3), agreement is reached regarding the housing scheme. This includes a decision on which model of redevelopment will be implemented: reconstruction, with all existing buildings to be demolished and newly constructed buildings arranged within a redistributed land plot system, with no buildings extending over the canal; or partial reconstruction and re-blocking to allow accommodation of those whose buildings extend over the canal and have to be demolished. All community people want low-rise housing (two storeys) with their own land, and do not want high-rise housing or apartment blocks because this does not allow for their home-based economic activities. But the planners and other professionals working as part of this process need to bear in mind that this consensus can change. There are often local conflicts, which are not made public nor presented at this stage, which later need to be reconciled by working in smaller groups.

After a general consensus has been reached with regard to redevelopment, the WGHBC then works with smaller groups. It thus began with

PHOTO 3
Open panels and public hearings in communities with related stakeholders

the community that was ready to start, that had sufficient savings and that had reached agreement on redevelopment directions, that is, the community that had the least internal conflicts, while continuing to encourage other communities to develop these bases for starting action.

The main activities at this stage are as follows:

- Small groups in "cells" of 15–30 people are formed, based on friendship and kinship ties, to work on housing design issues. Communities formulate these groups themselves (Photo 4). If the reconstruction model has been chosen, the group also works out how to re-cluster households and economic activities. A masterplan is developed in which all households are accommodated and community requirements addressed. The work of each of these cells is also integrated into an overall housing development scheme (Figure 2).
- The WGHBC, supported by university staff, works with these groups and helps with details of the community masterplan, and building and housing design and character within available budgets and other limitations. Architects do not have a major role in this design process but are facilitators and technical advisors. Several rounds of discussions are usually needed before a detailed plan can be drawn

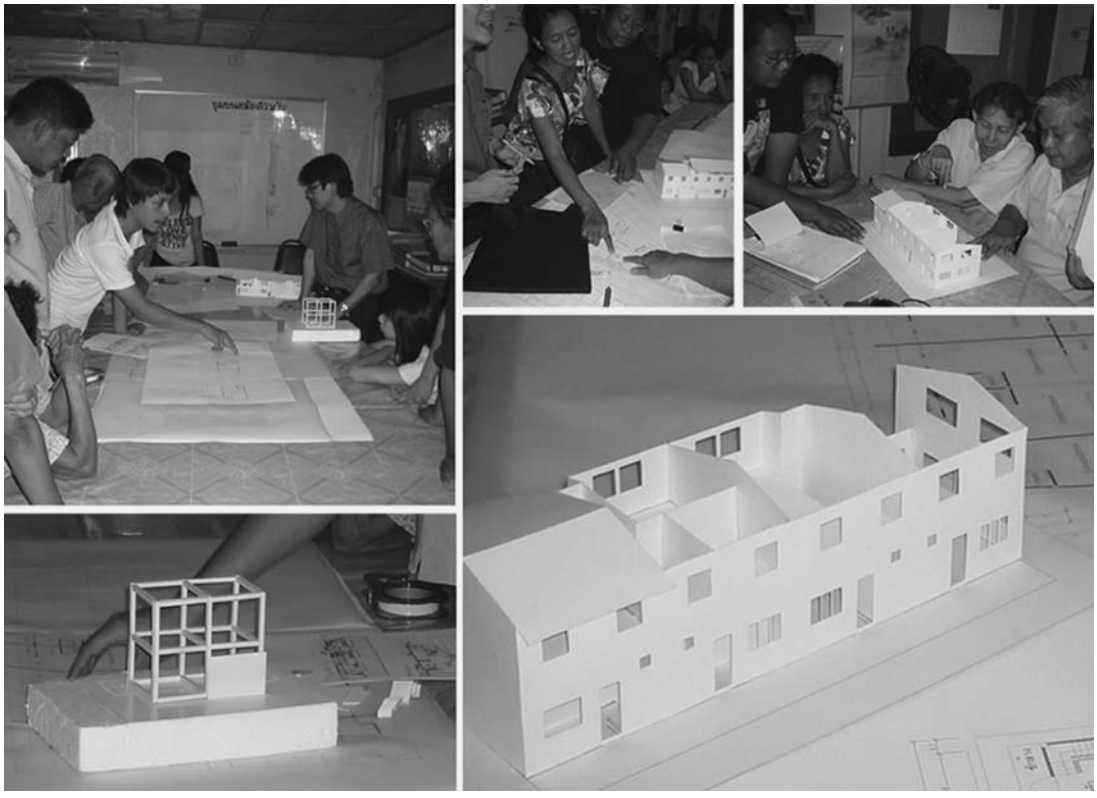

PHOTO 4
Design process with community participation; small groups working

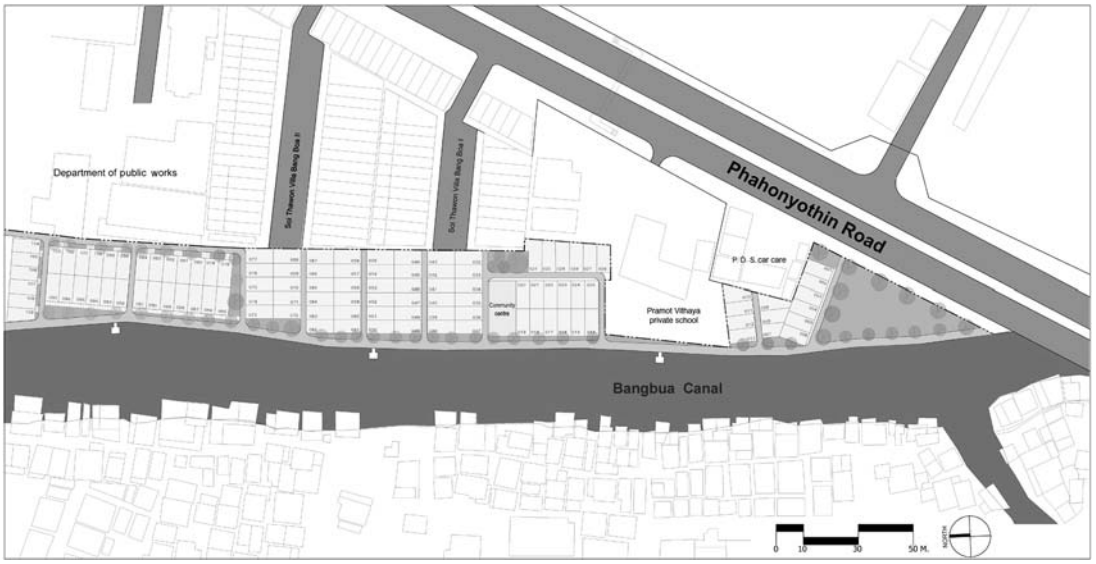

FIGURE 2
Samakkee-ruamjai community masterplan: initial housing development scheme after working with the community

up of housing design, infrastructure planning, area requirements, materials, space and open space arrangements, landscape design, architectural characteristics and common facilities.

Table 2 summarizes the functions of each working level. These levels do not work as separate units, but within the larger network.

Implementation is underway. Samakkee-ruamjai was selected as the pilot community and 20 out of the 112 planned housing units have been built by the community's own construction team (Photo 5). Although this might appear slow compared to conventional housing projects, it can also be seen as a major success given all the physical and technical constraints the community has had to face, such as difficult access and transport of

TABLE 2
Functions at each level of community working group

Network community team	Single community team
Informs all community organizations about the state of the project	Formulates savings groups and working team
Collaborates for land tenure	Community survey
Works through the network committee on the three-pronged strategies	Develops housing scheme

PHOTO 5
Housing design in Samakkee-ruamjai community

materials through narrow streets, as well as a limited area for construction and the need for temporary housing during construction.

This pilot construction in Samakkee-ruamjai has also had a positive impact on other communities in the network. Opposition to the project has decreased substantially. Three communities (Chai-klong Bangbua, Bangbua Langkongkarnpap and Kaona) started construction in January 2006. The implementation of the project has also considerably strengthened the community organization, not only locally but also at city level. Bangbua network has been involved in CODI's nationwide development activities and a network leader has been appointed a member of Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's urban poor development committee.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

What has been learned from practice regarding the significance of community networks and participation?

At the institutional level:

- the community network is important for ensuring that all other concerned institutions work in the same direction concerning urban poor housing strategies;
- cooperation brings a broader perspective on how to address problems and assign roles and tasks that previously had been ambiguous or neglected, and this also generates new ideas and models for urban poor housing development; and
- other alternatives have been derived from partnerships.

At the community level:

- the network has shown how it can successfully encourage communities to engage in housing development;

- the network assures other stakeholders concerning each community's commitment to developing their housing, and this helps ensure progress in obtaining secure land tenure;
- the network is also the core of social learning and interaction among members, which increases their capacity and potential;
- consideration needs to be given to the community power structure to ensure participation; and
- a key issue with regard to working with different groups of low-income individuals or households is conflict management, whereby each person or group may not gain the best housing option but everyone gains and solutions are sought that provide the least adverse effects.

This process has to overcome the landowner's doubts about the community's capacity to implement housing development and address the environmental problems. The process described above is the initial step for communities, allowing them to show their readiness and capacity. This helps ensure that the authorities will accept the plan and have confidence that their self-sustained development will work.

Managing diversity and conflict. This process also has to resolve conflicts. Not all conflicts are apparent in the early stages, as many people do not want to make these evident nor do they want to raise them in the public panels. Initially, the main conflict concerns who can or cannot take part in the programme. For instance, the understanding of who are "community dwellers" usually has to be redefined to include tenants – and the plan needs to accommodate not only those who first occupied the land but also those who have lived there over time, but without their own houses. This issue has been taken into account in some communities. There are also conflicts regarding reaching agreement on design and on land allocation among households. This is often a problem for communities that apply for the partial reconstruction model because accommodation has to be made available for those whose current homes extend over the water. There are also obvious resource and design limitations that have to be respected.

Reaching agreement is sometimes hindered by a community's power structure, whereby one group dominates others. This complicates the working process and often, more time is required for agreements to be brokered. Some rules and regulations with regard to the inhabitants' participation in community savings groups for housing prove too rigid or unfair to some groups. As noted above, one difficulty concerned the rights to housing of community members who had been renting. In some communities, the approach focused too much on financial resources and paid less attention to community building, which is at the core of CODI's concept of sustainable urban poor development.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides an example of urban poor housing development based on community organizations and their networks and supported by external groups. It emphasizes the key role of a knowledge-based social network and of certain key tools and applications to support it that also allow for differences from place to place. It highlights the fact that no

single model can be universally applied. This community network approach has underpinned urban poor housing developments in this waterfront corridor and it should also provide lessons for other places. One important focus is to ensure that secure tenure and an improved housing environment provide the basis for the settlement not returning to being a slum. In this regard, working with urban poor communities has to focus on both upper and lower structures. Working with upper structures means enhancing cooperation with non-local institutions and between community organizations. This is an important strategy if urban poor communities are to take a discourse of power and human rights into a practical realm. This can be achieved by:

- enhancing institutional alliances;
- extending community networks to other canal communities that face similar problems; and
- extending awareness of community problems into the larger public domain.

At the same time, at the lower level, planners need to work closely with the inhabitants and their own organizations – helping with coordination, information sharing and, where needed, developing agreements or compromises among community dwellers. This should include informal discussions, and even gossip, as mechanisms to cross-check the validity of the solutions proposed, as well as the more formal discussion and communication channels such as community meetings. This is important in ensuring that all groups can participate in the process without being dominated or excluded by others. An in-depth understanding of the sociological and social backgrounds of each community (race, norm, family and socioeconomic conditions) has to be taken into account in planning and in the application of collective sets of strategies and tools. The strategies and tools should be used and adjusted within each community and when transferred for use in other communities. These should be understood as supporting dynamic processes to achieve both quantitative outcomes (number of inhabitants participating and number of improved shelters) and qualitative outcomes (including neighbourliness and aesthetic considerations).

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