



Baan Mankong participatory slum upgrading in Bangkok, Thailand: Community perceptions of outcomes and security of tenure

Diane Archer*

Department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge, 19 Silver Street, Cambridge CB3 9ET, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

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A key problem facing slum dwellers is tenure insecurity – as well as the threat of eviction, residents are excluded from many services extended to legal residents, from water connections to public schooling. Thailand's Baan Mankong slum upgrading program adopts a people-driven approach to resolving problems of insecure housing and poor living conditions, putting slum residents at the core of the process. This paper explores, through interviews, how residents in four Bangkok communities perceive the outcomes of upgrading, particularly their new homes and tenure situation. Participant satisfaction is key to ensuring successful scaling up of Baan Mankong, as this is done through community-driven exchange and learning-by-doing. The results show that while the respondents appreciate their new houses and improved living environment, they are wary of the resulting debt burden. While tenure is regarded as secure in the short term, the long-term situation is not so clear. Homes cannot be sold on outside the community, and therefore Baan Mankong is valued more for improving shelter and strengthening community cohesiveness, rather than as a profit-driven financial investment.

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Introduction

In 2003, 10 pilot participatory slum upgrading projects were approved in Thailand under the title of Baan Mankong ("secure housing"), and the project was scaled up, with a target of upgrading the housing and living environment of 300,000 households in 2000 poor communities across the country. So far, projects are underway or complete in 1546 communities, benefitting over 90,000 households (CODI website, 2011a). The Baan Mankong approach has spawned similar movements across Asian cities, encouraging city-wide movements of housing by the people, working in partnership with other actors. UN HABITAT has praised the Thai model, saying the government's "long-term support for low-cost shelter and slum upgrading has undoubtedly contributed to Thailand's extraordinary success in improving living conditions in slums" (2006, p. 161). Thailand has a unique para-statal organisation, the Community Organisations Development Institute (CODI), which works closely in communities to build up the strength of community groups such as saving groups, and promote collective action

through community improvement projects, also channelling funds to these communities.

This paper draws on research which examined the outcomes of Baan Mankong from the perspective of the community residents involved, in particular the impact of participation on social relations. In this article, the focus is on how residents of newly-upgraded communities perceive their new homes, with regard to their sense of tenure security, and how much they are willing to invest in their housing. While this paper makes no claims at generalising – only four communities were surveyed in depth, and each community has different circumstances – the experiences of these communities can offer valuable lessons. The comments of the community residents offer insight into what matters for them in the upgrading process and its outcomes.

Background

This paper focuses on Bangkok, which, as Thailand's primate city, has experienced considerable population growth in the last few decades. Many of the migrants to the city, unable to afford to buy or rent formal housing, squat on privately or government-owned land in slum communities. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) defines a slum settlement as an overcrowded, dilapidated and densely-built community, with a minimum of 15 housing units per 1600 m² (Pornchockchai, 2003, p. 13). Estimates of Thailand's

Abbreviations: BMA, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration; CPB, Crown Property Bureau; CODI, Community Organisations Development Institute.

* Present address: GPO Box 2006, Bangkok 10500, Thailand. Tel.: +66 02 2860385; fax: +66 026794263.

E-mail address: dianearcher84@gmail.com.

urban slum population vary, from 2,061,000 persons, consisting of 26% of the country's urban population (UN HABITAT, 2008, p. 248), to 5.13 million people (CODI, 2004). As well as insanitary living conditions, residents of squatter communities face the threat of eviction that is associated with tenure insecurity.

Giles (2003) and Yap and De Wandeler (2010) provide comprehensive histories of the Thai government's past responses to urban housing problems, tracing the government's reluctance to use self-help methods. Giles concludes that the Thai government "consistently failed to act in ways that were cost effective, instead preferring approaches that offered political visibility" (2003, p. 228). Between the 1950s and 1970s, the National Housing Agency's main focus was on public housing and slum clearance. Apartment buildings were built for those displaced by urban renewal, with much media attention, but the public housing was unpopular with its inhabitants. In the 1980s, there was a move towards a market-oriented strategy.

Following the 1997 economic crisis, Thailand saw a shift towards policies promoting self-sufficiency and decentralisation. The Community Organisations Development Institute (CODI) was formed in 2000 as an amalgamation of the Urban Community Development Office (established 1992) and a rural fund. While a public agency under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, CODI's approach is closer to that of an NGO, bridging the gap between the state and poor communities, and CODI's board includes community representatives (Boonyabancha, 2003). Baan Mankong, implemented by CODI, is part of the central government's commitment to decentralising the process of housing provision, taking a demand-side approach. Baan Mankong was introduced in conjunction with a public housing project called Baan Ua-Arthorn ("we care housing"), which follows the traditional supply-side government housing model, but faced criticism for low-quality and badly-located projects. Baan Mankong meanwhile draws on CODI's decade-long process of encouraging community-based activities such as savings groups, using community strength to design and implement housing projects, creating a sense of ownership in projects, as well as civic engagement. The problem of insecure tenure is resolved by communities negotiating long-term leases or buying land collectively, as well as improving infrastructure and upgrading or rebuilding houses. Funds from community savings groups are supplemented with 15-year government loans, and communities are encouraged to form networks with other communities, to share experiences and resources. Community members are at the core of the house design and construction process, and are responsible for managing community funds and loans through a cooperative. Collective action, not only within the communities, but also with outside stakeholders, is therefore an important factor in success of the upgrading. Baan Mankong aids the integration of slum dwellers into society at large by giving them decision power through "horizontal power delivery", creating horizontal linkages between peer groups in the city and allowing the urban poor to form one big community (Boonyabancha, 2005). It goes beyond housing to address issues such as social welfare and community insurance.

There are 12 stated goals of the Baan Mankong program (CODI website, 2011b), including securing tenure, empowering poor communities, creating a participatory development process and making laws compatible with the development of communities. This paper will focus on the first two goals, and whether residents feel these have been achieved, in the context of an improved living environment:

1. To improve living conditions or develop new housing for squatter settlements;
2. To create a sense of land/housing tenure security.

While Baan Mankong is leading to a wider process of social change in Thailand, whereby the urban poor are becoming key actors in social and human development, the primary motive of community members to take part is for the tangible outcomes of improved housing and tenure security. While a participatory process should not be assessed solely in terms of physical outputs, these remain an important measure of success. Furthermore, due to the community-led approach to scaling up upgrading to new communities, those facilitating upgrading in other communities need to have been satisfied with the outcomes in their own communities in order to successfully assist others in the process. All too often, the views of the beneficiaries of housing projects are neglected in favour of more easily measurable statistical data regarding physical output and finances. However, the participatory nature of Baan Mankong, not only at the community level but also at the city-wide level, signals a shift towards increased citizen participation in urban governance, and therefore the voices of the participants need to be heard, and lessons learnt from their experiences, with regard to whether their needs have been met.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative research carried out in Bangkok over 8 months of fieldwork in 2008 and 2009. After an initial pilot survey, four Bangkok communities which had recently completed the upgrading process were selected for in-depth study. This involved in-depth face-to-face interviews with the community leaders, and briefer semi-structured interviews with community residents, who were also given some ranking questions. In each community, a target response rate of 20% of households was set. In total, 85 community residents were interviewed from the four communities, of which 52 were female, in addition to members of community committees. Follow-up focus group discussions were held in the communities. In addition, interviews were carried out with other stakeholders for triangulation purposes: landowners, district officials, CODI officials and academics involved in the upgrading process. Participant observation of meetings and training sessions of slum networks was carried out.

The material that was collected was analysed qualitatively, through the coding of interview transcripts to identify common themes. Whilst every effort was made to reduce the possibility of bias, such as through leading questions, the author is aware that respondents might have felt that certain answers were the "right" ones, or that they might have suffered from "survey fatigue", due to the popularity of Baan Mankong as a research topic. However, the author's ability to speak Thai allowed a closer engagement with respondents.

The four case study communities were chosen as they represented different types of upgrading, as outlined below. The communities were all formerly squatters on state land who negotiated a collective lease from the state, and are representative of the majority of Baan Mankong projects: as of January 2011, 41.6% of upgrading projects were begun to ensure on-site tenure security, while 43.6% led to long-term lease, as opposed to other forms of tenure (CODI website, 2011a). Table 1 summarises information pertaining to the sampled households.

- Bang Bua (BB) community has 229 households, and is on land belonging to the Treasury Department. The community runs alongside a canal, and savings group activities started in 2004 when plans were announced to build a road along the canal. The community opted to demolish all homes and rebuild row houses. Other communities along the canal are following suit.
- Pattana Bonkai (B) community forms part of a larger low-income community, of which approximately 200 households

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