

Thailand's Canal-side Settlements

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Thailand : Klong-side settlements : *Canal spoilers or canal keepers?*

Thailand is a very wet part of Asia, and many of its cities, built on low-lying swampland, are criss-crossed with *klongs* [canals], which not only help control all that water, but have traditionally provided vital conduits of commerce, transport and development. But since the automobile began replacing the "fish-tail" boat, roads and expressways have overlaid these older, wetter structures. The klongs, relegated to the status of open drains, have fallen into disrepair and are used for dumping sewage and solid waste, or concreted over to make way for buildings.

But as the cities keep growing, and the klongs keep deteriorating, worsening problems of flooding and pollution are putting municipal officials in the hot seat. Too often, the finger is pointed at the poor communities which line many of Thailand's klongs, to mask much deeper problems of urbanization and poor planning. The klong-side communities find themselves accused of spoiling the klongs and threatened with eviction.

In several Thai cities, beleaguered klong-side communities are using the problems they have in common to form networks, to work together to improve their klongs and their settlements and to consolidate their right to stay by demonstrating that *they are good keepers of these much-needed water management systems - Thailand's klongs.*

"Water-soluble" networking techniques :

The principle of coming together around a common problem or land ownership has become a tried-and-tested networking technique for poor communities all over Asia. The waste-pickers in Philip-pines, the pavement dwellers and railway slum-dwellers in India, and many others have found that becoming part of a larger whole means greater negotiating power and more options. Here the common problem is water, the common tenure situation is the klong-side settlements, but the local situations change . . .

One community's cleaning-up of Klong Samrong leads to redevelopment, network-building and securer tenure in Songkhla :

*In a flat-bottomed wooden boat, it takes about an hour to paddle along the briny four-kilometer length of Klong Samrong in Songkhla, from the inland sea on one side, to the South China Sea on the other. Besides houses, factories and tidal flats, you pass five poor settlements which have been home to fishermen, net-weavers, dockyard laborers and vendors for half a century. These settlements had long been accused of polluting the klong, and ten years ago, plans were announced to evict them. The people got together and with help from the **Southern Urban Poor Community Development Project** (NGO) formed a federation to negotiate alternatives. By demonstrating their commitment to keeping their klong clean and improving their settlements, all five communities were able to change their future, consolidate their right to stay, trigger other community developments and set a strong precedent for other klong-side communities all over Thailand. Here's what Songkhla's klong-keepers did :*

1991 - Research : First they asked *why is the klong dirty?* and found factory pollution and clandestine dumping of solid waste all along the klong. What could communities do to clean it up, and what would the city and other actors have to do?

1991 - First Klong cleaning : Anybody living on a klong knows that klong-cleaning is not a one-time proposition, but has to be done regularly. In Songkhla the communities get together once a year to remove garbage from Klong Samrong, clean the banks and pull out the plants which choke the water

flow. They make it into a big gala, with banners, a feast and press coverage. It's a good start, but the pollutants in the water and silt at the bottom requires help from the city.

1992 - 95 - Reblocking community layout : Earlier, houses built right over the water made it hard for the city's de-silting raft to dredge the klong regularly, so the communities moved their houses back, in order to maintain the required 8 meters minimum open distance across the klong. They also demolished toilets that drained directly into the klong and built new ones, with proper septic tanks, at least 3 meters inland.

1995 - Built wooden walkway : To improve access to their houses, the people in the Bor-wa community built wooden boardwalks along both sides of the klong. The walkway cost just 500,000 Baht, and was soon followed by a 2-story timber and bamboo community center, supported by the LIFE Program.

1997 - Community planning : Bor-wa was the first community to go a step further and prepare a full settlement redevelopment plan. During evening sessions in the new community center, with help from a young Bangkok architect, residents mapped out their houses and used colored tapes to plan pathways, fire access, drainage, water taps, electricity, garbage collection points, lamp posts and trees. The other settlements got wind of this and pretty soon, Bor-wa was helping the other Klong communities prepare similar redevelopment plans.

1997 - Community plans officialized : As evidence of the transformation in the klong communities' relationship with the city, these people-generated redevelopment plans were incorporated in the official municipal plan, and became the basis for subsequent NHA-built improvements to the Klong Samrong settlements in 1997.

Photo caption: *The city gets free help maintaining its waterways, and the communities get secure tenure and better living environments - everybody wins. In Songkhla, it was the first time the NHA built its standard concrete walkways according to plans which were worked out by the people.*

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Clean klonging in Chiang Mai : Some good reasons to travel 2,000 kilometers to see a few little canals . . .

Kong Koowai and Klong Mekhaa, which pass through Chiang Mai's Mengrai District, are lined with six informal settlements. The water in these klongs is already polluted when it reaches Chiang Mai, where markets, hospitals and industries dump in more junk. By the time it reaches the communities, the black, smelly water is barely able to sustain a few unhappy fish. Add to this the new systems of water gates by which city water politics can reduce Klong Koowai from a wide rushing canal into a stagnant trickle, with the turn of a cog.

"It wasn't always like that" says Pi Panngam, a leader from Ha Tanwaa community on Klong Koowai. "People's lives were tied to the water, which they used for washing and cultivating. Now it's so dirty, the klongs are more a hazard than an asset." What to do? "Politicians do things in Chiang Mai and people wait," she says, "But Meng Rai district is a little better - we can solve the klong problem ourselves." So the members of Mengrai District's klong-side communities decided to use a grant from the *Urban Community Environmental Activities (UCEA)* Program to initiate their own klong-improvement process in three phases :

Phase One: Klong study tour : A group from Chiang Mai's klong-side communities got on the train and traveled to Bangkok and Songkhla, where they visited other klong-side communities to gather ideas about how to redevelop their klongs and boost their confidence that people *can* do it. It worked. Pi Panngam : "People saw and said '*We can do it better!*' " In Bangkok, after a whirlwind boat tour along the Klong San Saeb, and lunch hosted by the Minburi City Hall, the group visited the Gamaloon Islam community, where one of Thailand's most high-profile community-led klong clean-ups was organized several years back. Khun Veenai, member of parliament from Gamaloon and veteran

klong-cleaner, offered this advice: “Don’t expect cooperation from government at first. Start by doing things yourself, and government support will follow.”

Phase Two: Klong clean-up : The first big clean-up on Klong Koowai was strategically scheduled on the Queen’s birthday, on August 9, 1998, with T-shirts, a logo, a feast, press coverage. Besides hundreds of klong residents, community groups from all over Thailand came up to help clear out garbage and cut back plants along the banks. Pi Leng, Bor-wa community’s leader from Songkhla was there : “We wanted to make sure they do it properly.” Big noisy public events like this are a way of *democratizing possibilities*. They can disseminate issues because larger numbers of people get a peep into the process - community folks, outsiders, officials, NGOs. That way, the klong clean-up process belongs to *the whole city*, not only to those few communities.

Phase Three: Community and klong improvements : Now, district meetings are held every month which include communities, city officials, community network, and NGOS. Mengrai District is filled with plans :

- widen Klong Koowai, construct “hard edges” to make way for municipal de-silting
- move houses back a little to redevelop the klong margins as green playgrounds
- use the silt from dredging as land-fill for a day-care center
- reduce upstream pollution via negotiations with city and private sector polluters
- explore community-based “green” filtering systems to help clean the klong water

Photo caption: “See how clean the streets are, but look at the klong, a floating garbage dump. Consolidating ownership by cleaning up the place. Pi Panngam in Klong Koowai talks about organizing people, slowly, gradually. “Start something real like the clean-up and people will come in later.”

New Bangkok Klong Community Network :

Yearly flooding in Bangkok is natural, but a big political headache for the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, in charge of controlling it. When the BMA sub-contracted some NGOs and housing professionals to survey informal settlements a-long the city’s klongs, it had plans to upgrade the city’s drainage by concreting klong walls, and adding water gates and pumping stations.

The surveyors, though, saw the survey as a chance to extend the same federating principles which have brought together communities on State Railway land, under bridges, and along klongs in other cities and have led to breakthroughs in land and housing rights.

Bangkok’s Klongs : The common picture

- Number of Klongs : **107**
- Number of settlements : **125**
- Number of families : **about 10,000**

So last year, when the city announced plans to evict half these communities, Bangkok’s new klong federation was at the BMA Governor’s door, in force, ready to negotiate. An agreement was reached in which committees of klong residents, NGOs and city officials would be set up in each district, to work with klong residents to find mutually agreeable solutions which allowed the city to carry out its drainage improvements and allowed the communities to stay right where they are.

In most cases, people agreed to shift their houses a little away from the klong edge, in others they re-blocked, or squeezed into smaller areas. All but six cases were resolved within this district-level process, and those six came back to the city, where the BMA ruled in favor of the communities. *Nobody was evicted, nobody had to relocate.* The BMA also agreed to grant “community status” and to support infrastructure and environmental improvements in the klong-side communities.

No community alone could have negotiated this solution with the city, only together, in organizations with the kind of big numbers and “critical mass,” which is the power of a federation.

Thailand : Land-sharing at Rom Klao :

In 1994, a devastating fire leveled the community at Rom Klao, part of the sprawling Klong Toey settlement, on Port Authority land. Thai law stipulates that land leases cease to be valid after a fire, so it's no surprise that arson is often used to remove unwanted tenants. But after decades of eviction and arson, Klong Toey residents have found ways around this rule: build a new house, *FAST*, right over the ashes of your old house, so the next morning, when the authorities show up, you can say "What fire?"

Rom Klao residents used the crisis as an opportunity to negotiate a more secure future for their community. In the subsequent months, the community worked with the *Human Development Center (HDC)* and National Housing Authority to negotiate a land-sharing agreement with the Port. In exchange for giving back some of the land to the port, the community got a long-term land-lease (without payment) to redevelop their community. After long negotiations with HDC, NHA and the Port, they came up with a "re-blocking" plan, with equal plot sizes a neat grid of lanes, a community center and pre-school. NHA used its 17,000 Baht-per-family subsidy to build raised concrete walkways and drains and bring in electricity and water supply, according to the community's layout plan (but using NHA's contractors).

The Port continues to try to clear Klong Toey of its settlers. Ask people who live there what is the length of their lease and they smile and say, "As long as we are strong!"

Theme and Variations :

Rom Klao's Core House package is fast, simple, cheap and very Thai . . .

After the fire, the negotiations, the planning and the land-sharing agreement, there was a need for some serious, fast house-rebuilding at Rom Klao - but the people had lost everything in the fire. To give stressed-out families a head start, the ***Human Development Center*** helped develop a standard wooden core house which could be built fast, and people could finish later.

Structure only : The 2-story "core house" was designed to almost fill the little plots, with 24 square meters per floor, and provided only a strong timber structure. The idea was that families could add their own walls, windows, doors and roof, as and when they were able, and even those with very little money could tack up plastic sheets and have a shelter.

Loans given in materials : Instead of borrowing cash, each family "borrowed" a big pile of timber - exactly enough columns, beams and rafters to build the core house - as a materials loan from HDC, to be paid back in cash installments. They got the wood on bulk discounts and as donations, so the core house's cost was kept to a modest 25,000 Baht. HDC provided the concrete footings as a subsidy and coordinated the distribution process. The houses were built in groups, with everybody helping each other.

Biscuit tin footings : Everybody in the swampy Klong Toey settlement knows that wooden houses built over water are prone to rot, as damp climbs up into the structure. Replacing rotten supporting columns can be difficult and costly. To overcome this problem, the folks at Rom Klao came up with a cheap and whimsical solution : a 5-Baht recycled biscuit tin, filled with concrete, that acts as a moisture barrier, and prevents damp from transferring from the concrete footings down below into the wood structure above. 70% of Rom Klao's houses used this detail, and to date, they're all dry as bone.

Photo caption : *"Floating" Settlement : Rom Klao, like most of Klong Toey, is built on marshy wetland along the river. When the "70 Rai" area on the other side of Klong Toey was redeveloped, the land was filled in at great expense and laid with sewers and drains. To make the most of NHA's scant on-site redevelopment subsidy, Rom Klao opted to rebuild its community - houses, walkways, and open spaces - on piles, a meter above the swamp, and leave the water underneath alone. This kind of "floating" settlement is a tradition that goes way back in Thailand.*

CONTACT : Human Development Center (Khun Rattana, Khun Choy)
3757/15 Sukhumvit Road, Soi 40, Phra Kanong,
Bangkok 10110, Thailand
Tel (662) 392-7981 / 381-1821
Fax (662) 391-4968

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Raft House Dwellers along the Nan River in Pitsanulok “move up” to dry land . . .

Life on the river goes way back in Thailand, and in Pitsanulok, there are still raft houses (*ruean phrae* in Thai) floating on the River Nan. Although these houses are a symbol of the province, it's getting harder and harder to live that way. The giant bamboos which compose the rafts underneath rot after a couple of years and have to be replaced. A single length of bamboo which once cost 3 Baht now goes for at least 45 Baht, pushing the cost of keeping these houses afloat beyond the means of most raft-house dwellers, many of whom are low-income earning families.

Nowadays, much of Pitsanulok's sewage and industrial waste gets dumped into the river, making the once clean water smelly and black with pollutants. One woman told some visitors from Bangkok that just five years ago, with only a few swirls of the alum crystal to settle the natural sediments, they could drink the river water. Newly-built dams upstream cause water levels to rise and fall dramatically and irregularly, according to turns of a cog instead of natural seasons, and this also makes trouble for the raft-houses' moorings.

It's also getting crowded. Where there used to be just a few raft houses scattered here and there, now there are 240 of them, clustered several houses deep along the river banks. With all those people come increasing sanitation problems. The municipality has tried offering self-contained “floating privies” but because these rocked so much, they were unpopular with the raft-house dwellers, who preferred their traditional toilets inside the houses, which go - *plop!* - straight into the river.

People in the city are sad to see any of these houses go, but changing times are making many raft-house dwellers consider “moving up” onto land. About 80 families are taking advantage of a new resettlement scheme in which the city provides free land in town (not too far from the river), the NHA develops the infrastructure and the UCDO gives housing loans.

The first batch of 50 households have already moved from their raft-houses into new contractor-built houses which were designed by the NHA, without much community participation. UCDO entered the process late, but has since reached a compromise plan which allows more of a people's process to guide the rest of the resettlement process. A team of young architects from UCDO will conduct design workshops with the second batch of raft-house dwellers, and they will design and build their own houses, and take part in planning the layout and basic services and common amenities like community centers and open space.

CONTACT : Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI)
2044/ 28-33 New Phetburi Road, Khet Huai Khwang,
Bangkok 10320, THAILAND
Tel (66-2) 716-6000
Fax (66-2) 716-6001
e-mail: codi@codi.or.th