

Community Networks and CODI

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CODI begins with the richness of urban and rural NETWORKS already in place

Community networks are growing by leaps and bounds - in number, size, and capacity. Their emergence as players in Thailand's development scene has been one of the most important developments of these past turbulent years. As a structure which allows individual poor communities to move from isolation and powerlessness into collective strength and which helps them to develop solutions to the problems they face, the community network has become an important development mechanism in the country - a mechanism which belongs entirely to people. Besides providing a means of idea-sharing, asset-pooling and mutual support, networks have opened channels for communities to talk to their local development agencies and to undertake collaborative development activities of many sorts.

The networks have also brought a completely new dimension and development vision to the way CODI operates. Supporting the formation and strengthening of myriad forms of community networks has become CODI's primary development strategy and most exciting project. In order to strengthen poor communities' managerial capacities, CODI began by assisting various forms of community savings and credit organizations to be set up, then tried to find a process whereby these activities could be multiplied by the organizations themselves. From working with scattered community groups, CODI gradually moved towards linking groups which already had some kind of organization to come together and form networks, to get involved in the various credit programs, to strengthen their managerial capacities, to find ways of multiplying their activities and to begin working in partnership with other organizations in the same city. The next step was to find ways by which these networks could learn from each other and multiply themselves.

The "s" in networks is an emphatic plural. This is not one federation or one network, but a vast and constantly expanding amalgam of groups, and groups-of-groups who find that there are clear benefits in being together. Experience in Thailand has shown that trying to link all these groups together under one national federation, has only created lots of problems, so the politics of coming together overwhelms the reasons for coming together. But networks in the same city or province or region are constantly finding ways to link together, to meet, to discuss, to compare notes, to assist each other, and to collaborate on various projects - without having to work under anyone else's system, or under any prescribed CODI system. This is important, because each network stands on its own feet, as an independent organization, free to develop its own working style, its own agenda, its own ways of working together. Each develops according to the interests and capabilities of the groups involved, and in response to the demands of its own context. The lack of sameness and absence of rules for membership are likewise emphatic. Networks have been organized in cities which link poor people and community groups around common development problems. There are rural networks, and networks which cross rural-urban lines. Networks have also been organized at national, regional, district and city levels, according to their constituencies. Each network conducts its own surveys, develops an understanding of its own area, its people, its housing conditions, its savings, its problems of housing, environment, basic services, welfare and employment.

Strength in numbers . . .

The way most development work goes, one group does one thing, another group does something else, and different communities have no links with each other, only with the NGO. When people are scattered like this, they have no voice, no strength. Nice little projects in nice little communities may bring improvements to those isolated places, but rarely transform the lives of the poor at any significant scale. It's a question of micro and macro scales: micro communities cannot demand alone for resources which are super-macro. Plus, cities have neither the tools nor the inclination to deal with disempowered groups, and civil society institutions are themselves too marginalized to bring about change on behalf of people.

Poor communities start doing things together because of need - because the problems they face cannot resolve themselves individually. A network can negotiate on behalf of a community for things which that community may be unable to get, because it's too small. This speeds up the change process. The collectivity of networks is perhaps the most powerful element to push the community process beyond the activities of microcredit and into the larger, structural issues which are the root causes of poverty. When poor communities link into networks, and when networks link together into movements at large scale, they

move naturally into questions of urban governance. And when those numbers are backed up with the finance and institutional support which CODI provides, they can begin negotiating with the stakeholders in the city and bring their development ideas to the bargaining table - whether it is to deal with cleaning a canal, or relocating a slum or solving the city's garbage problems.

In the network model, individual communities are the smallest structural unit and represent the most local constituency, but once they link together into networks at city, provincial, regional or national levels, they become a political force. Without these two elements - the smaller individual units on the ground and the larger collective unit with the force of numbers - you can't hope to make structural change at any significant scale. More than 150 community networks have been set up in Thailand, and as these have grown in size, strength and sophistication, they have become increasingly prominent players in their cities and provinces. There are plenty of old-style politicians who see in this growing strength a threat to those tired old systems of patronage, which have allowed them to control and exploit the poor for their own purposes. And inevitably, this has led to some tensions in certain cities.

NETWORKS:

As a platform for dealing with any issue . . .

The network system is an ideal platform for dealing with any development issue, because it draws together people and groups around any issue of importance to them. And when these networks connect with CODI's various credit and development grant funds, it gives a big boost to their capacity to tackle these issues, on their own terms, and gives them a bargaining when they go to negotiate with other actors and draw them into the process. And, because the people's groups are the ones driving this process, CODI's role becomes very clearly to support these network activities with different kinds of funds.

Networks can be powerful mechanism for dealing with housing issues, for example. Behind the huge problems of eviction and insecure tenure in Thai cities lie deep, structural problems of land distribution and income disparities, which in turn come out of deeper macro economic realities in the country and region. These structural problems are too big, and too difficult for any single poor community to resolve alone. But when communities with specific kinds of housing and tenure problems link together across the city, or even across the country, they start examining the common conditions which create those problems, systematize them and start working on resolving them as a group. Hundreds of communities on State Railway land, for example, have formed a national network which has successfully negotiated alternatives to eviction, secured long-term leases for many railway settlements and developed a productive working relationship with the Railway authorities. None of this would have been possible if they were a few scattered communities.

But there are innumerable issues being dealt with very effectively through the network process. Community networks are dealing in many different ways with problems of environment and basic services, with eviction, with housing cooperative mechanisms, with savings and credit development, with community enterprise, with municipal labor subcontracts and with community welfare. And the list is just beginning.

Why community networks?

As a platform for large scale development which involves a synergy of learning, experience-sharing, morale-boosting and mutual inspiration, community networks have given Thailand's poor enormous confidence and created a development mechanism which belongs entirely to them. Community networks have emerged at many levels and in many forms and have become the main community-driven development mechanism of CODI, in its work to develop a national-scale development process.

1. Networks as building collective capacities at scale

The sharing and learning which is at the core of the networks process creates a new culture of togetherness. And a very large version of togetherness is vital, because unless large numbers of people believe in the same thing and work together to achieve it, they can get no resources. Change can be a very slow processes - you need a lot of people looking for solutions, making a lot of experiments in different contexts to build scale - scale of options, scale of involvement, scale of confidence. The stronger status of networks makes it possible for the poor to deal with larger, structural issues related to their problems - issues that are beyond the capacity of isolated community organizations. When large numbers of people are linked

together, that critical mass breaks down the resistance to change, dissolves the barriers between poor people and resources.

2. Networks as learning platforms

As an information channel, networks allow people to learn from each other and to transform the experiences of a few into the learning of hundreds. Whenever one community has developed some alternative which works, all the others in the network - and in other linked networks - will learn about it as a matter of course. No need for a community worker or NGO to be sole agency to spread the news or tell people what they should do. Here, people have the freedom to learn as they want to learn, explore alternatives and make choices in ways that make sense to them.

3. Networks as openers-up of community processes

As the networks have grown, they've increasingly taken over management of their own movement, and all the planning and linking that that involves. Networks are now the chief promoters of new savings groups and administer their own funds which pay for many of their own network activities. When a network links several communities, or several small networks together, it creates a process with a life of its own, in which lots of people are involved, meeting all the time, undertaking a lot of different activities. More activities means more space for more people to get involved: somebody may be good with accounts, somebody else is interested in construction or management. Someone is interested in children and another is gung-ho on elderly welfare. Everybody has a potential to be a leader, and the network process is all about creating space for different people to get involved.

4. Networks as internal support systems for peoples' processes

Earlier, the primary links were between scattered community groups and CODI. When problems came up, it was up to each group to work it out themselves, or for the institution to intervene. The lack of horizontal linkages or mechanisms for communities to help each other left people dependent on the institution for help. When the huge loan repayment crisis hit, everyone could see this fragile system wasn't up to the task. Through all the meetings, workshops and exchanges that were organized to deal with the crisis, the networks emerged as a deep source of problem solving ideas and horizontal support. The networks have given Thailand's poor groups confidence, negotiating power, information, and many more tools to deal with pressing problems around them.

5. Networks as internal checks and balance systems

The network system gives communities many tools to resolve internal problems and provides the checks and balances vital to sustaining a balanced, equitable community-driven development process. There is always the danger of community leaders taking advantage, monopolizing power and channeling benefits in corrupt and excluding ways. It's no different than in the larger political arena, where new dictators emerge all the time and have to be continually reined-in through a process of political balancing. In the past, if a community had a problem with a dictatorial leader, it tended to get stuck at that level. But the way networks operate now, people link together in so many ways, and these issues generally come out on a larger platform. When groups get to know each other and see each other all the time, there's naturally a lot of talk, and it's hard to hide things. That community and those leaders will ultimately face the heat of outside scrutiny. Opening up this way becomes a vital control mechanism in the network process, a way of balancing things, diffusing tensions and un-sticking problem situations. And people living in poor communities know how to approach these issues in very delicate, face-saving ways.

6. Networks as bridges with the formal system

Community networks have strengthened the negotiating status of poor communities in the city, and initiated all kinds of innovative collaborations with other urban actors in city, province and country-wide development projects which affect the poor. Networks have also joined forces with other civil groups to influence the broader directions of city development. In these ways, networks are demonstrating ways of bridging the gap of understanding which exists between the urban poor and the formal system, and to help balance this crucial political relationship.

Sweet, salty, sour and hot:

Community networks in their rich variety . . .

In many cultures, it is considered impolite to season dishes which have been prepared to taste correct. In Thailand, though, there are four condiments which are always served with every Thai dish, which enable you to adjust the taste to be saltier (fish sauce), sweeter (sugar), hotter (ground chilis) or more sour (vinegar), according to your own taste. Nobody will be put off if you add these things in any combination. This good-natured culinary pluralism, which accepts that different people have different tastes and should not be hindered from satisfying those tastes, finds a social equivalent in the way community networks operate in Thailand, and the way they are all free to either work together or work separately, and how they come together, etc.. There are now over 150 community networks. What they all have in common is that their large numbers make them a political and development force. It's different in each city and each province, but usually it takes a common problem or need to ignite a network, or some kind of crisis to rally around.

Good news for networks:

New fund is set up to strengthen networks, community organizations and regional processes

During the past few years, CODI has emphasized the formation, strengthening and linking of community networks in order to create a stronger platform for these community organizations to share ideas, to work together and to have a say. This 500 million Baht fund is another tool in these efforts. It channels government resources to community networks in 4 ways to create space for people to come together, plan and implement their own development projects, from the bottom up. It's not government or CODI setting up the policy or planning the projects or activities. Using government funds through a combination of grants and loans as tools to broaden the community network process and help networks link together and set up their own development projects.

The consideration process : Networks in urban and rural areas invite provincial-level mixed committees to see their proposed ideas, Then it goes to the regional committee, then to the center, which links the 5 regions. In this way, the the project consideration process itself becomes another tool to get people from different networks to work together. The 500 million Baht is now in people's hands in 30,000 rural and urban communities, in 74 provinces. Here is a brief rundown on the kinds of support the 500 million Baht fund extends to networks and community organizations and provincial linkages:

- 1. Grants for network-based projects:** (150 million Baht) Offers small grants (up to 200,000 Baht) to urban and rural networks to fund network-wide projects : welfare, community planning, agriculture, community improvements. Offers small grants (up to 200,000 Baht) to urban and rural networks to fund network-wide projects : welfare, community planning, agriculture, community improvements.
- 2. Loans to networks:** (250 million Baht) Loans up to 5 million Baht per network, at 1%, repayable in 5 years, for setting up saw mills, rice banks, paying off informal debts - anything! Only for networks with some experience managing funds. Loans up to 5 million Baht per network, at 1%, repayable in 5 years, for setting up saw mills, rice banks, paying off informal debts - anything!
- 3. Partnership grants:** (70 million Baht) Used to support joint projects by communities, civic groups and NGOs: recycling, community infrastructure, welfare systems, livable cities project, young architects. No ceiling on grants.
- 4. Provincial linking grants:** (60 million Baht) 800,000 Baht to each province (76 total) to make its own plan to link all the existing groups in the province together (rural and urban) through exchanges, seminars, meetings and committees.