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Uncle Chakra, the Forever Renter



"As the chairman of the community credit union, my words carry little weight," says a middle-age man with a square wrinkled face. He's sitting in a tiny community clinic next to an examination bed. The examination bed is well-kept; it has been cleaned regularly; in the middle of the bed is an infant weighting scale. There's a medicine cabinet nearby which houses various anti-septic and anti-biotic; they're legally available in Thailand even without a doctor's prescription.

"If only the Treasury Department would come and tell them what I'm saying now, their words will have great impact," uncle Chakra hammers his fist down on the doctor's table. It disturbs the dust on an old bulletin board which shows the operational schedule of community clinic. The schedule reads:

OPEN MON-FRI: 7:30-11:30 AM, 12:30-16:30 PM

MONDAY: Dental/ Tuberculosis

TUESDAY: Diabetes/High blood Pressure

WEDNESDAY: Dental/ Postpartum Internal check up

THURSDAY: Old aged diseases

The FRIDAY schedule is blocked by a gold-framed portrait of lord Buddha which seems to have been hastily positioned there just minutes before we arrived, judging from its lack of dust particles.

Uncle Chakra founded the community credit union 4 years ago. There are more than 500 households in this squatter settlement - a huge amount considering that the land area is only 20 Rai (3.2 Hectare).



"We use to have 22 Rai but the Treasury Department leased 2 Rai to the private sector. Some parts of the settlement also belong to the Railway Authority," says uncle Chakra. He tells me that there are some problems with drugs; and people who are associated with drug tend to resist change. The drug dealers evade the police by hiding between two squatter settlements that are separated by a roadway. "Doing drug is an introvert activity; and when we asked them to join our collective Housing program, they tend to resist."

Aside from the drug problems, the organizers here face the problem of absentee slumlords who owns many rental units in the settlement. They would stand to lose if the community is transformed into a formal legal entity. Uncle Chakra himself is still renting out a room in this squatter settlement.

"I live here for over 20 years now," says Uncle Chakra. "And I'm still renting out a room!" He stands up and grabs a plan from the top of a medicine cabinet. He gradually rolls it out on the examination bed. "Here, this is where I live," he points to a blob on the plan.



CODI and the Treasury Department usually give housing titles to those who are physically staying in the settlement rather than those who rented out their units to others; but it also depends on the types leadership within the community. Some community did just the opposite; they reserved the land right to the oldest settlers - who usually have higher income and could afford to rent out units to newcomers. Since they got here first, they have managed to save up some money. The newcomers, however, face a bit of a challenge; they must pay rent to the original squatters and in the end they have little prospect of saving money for future growth.

In Bangkok, there is a squatter settlement underneath the highway where people have been renting out units for over 20 years (Penang Market Co-op). Today under the community cooperative, they still continue to rent out rooms. The co-op built a separate apartment for them so that they could continue to live there. There are 7 families that were unable to join the saving group due to financial hardship. They were unable to save up money because of the rent. Some slumlords actually became the founding members of the saving group.



"The problem we have here is centered around people who have large houses," says uncle Chakra. "And they're the same people who rented out units to the newcomers."

He says that if the co-op starts to propose new change to the site layout, these absentee slumlords would sure to protest. They stand to lose income from their investment in rental units. The new layout would involve new paved pathways, drainage lines, and power line. These new infrastructure would take up space from the existing houses; everyone must make some sacrifices. But for most people, they have so little to lose and much to gain by joining the Collective Housing program.

"We need to have the Treasury Department come and say: WE WILL EVICT YOU NEXT MONTH," laughs uncle Chakra. "Only then would people become united! They would stop their bickering and focus on their future."

I suggested to him that he should start in an area where people are most united. If there are 500 households, perhaps start with 200 houses first so that the other 300 would see the progress and results of your work.



"Some people ask if they could use the old woods and material for the new design," says Chakra. I told him that it's wise to reuse the existing materials - especially the finishing materials and windows and doors. He tells me that he plans to use an abandoned Esso oil office - a 4-story concrete building - as a temporary shelter to house families during the reconstruction. "But it might be too late now; they're demolishing the building; all the glazing is gone," says uncle Chakra.

"I have seen the improvement at Suen Plu, and the 7-12 Commune I like the large outdoor space at Suen Phlu," says uncle Chakra. "We should wait after the election to start the community meeting" It is a common practice among the slum dwellers to hold meetings after the election for fear that outsiders might think that they're accepting cash-for-votes.