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AIDS, Drugs, and Slums

Ta Taco & Kom Klao Settlements, Korat



6:30 pm

Vipa is a 19-year-old girl who works with a local Youth League. She is the leader of the group of teenagers that organize around community service activities, sports, and group study.

The Youth League operates like an endangered species in an area where poverty, AIDS and drugs run rampant. The Korat plateau is home to the most

infamous commune called *Juan-Bireley*; it is where the teenage gangs roam freely; selling drugs and sex in dark alleys.

The sound of a single cylinder motorcycle buzzed over a large open community pavilion under a dim neon light. Vipa walks over to greet the man. He is currently a member of co-op committee here at Ta Taco commune. He greets us cordially and promptly enters his brand new house. We can see his young baby running around in the living room as her grandma plays hide and seek with her.



Vipa says that this land has just been purchased a few years ago. "There are actually 2 communities here," says Vipa. "Some of our folks used to live around the infamous *Juan-Bireley* area too."

"So both communities purchase the land together?" I ask.

"Yes, one (the Kom Klao cooperative) has already finished with their houses, and the new one (Ta Taco cooperative) is still working on their houses. Kom Klao has 47 houses

while Ta Taco has 50 houses. The land here is 2 Km from their old settlement," says Vipa.

"Who is the landowner of their old settlements?"

"The State Railway Authority"

"Including the infamous *Juan-Bireley* commune?"

"Yes, they live on both sides of the railroad tracks; I think there're about 70 households there."



Vipa tells me that in the city of Korat, there're 21 squatters communities already under CODI's collective housing program; most of them had settled on the land belonging to the State Railway Authority. Out of these, 16 communities have now formed a saving group and are eligible for the infrastructure subsidy grant - 25,000 baht per household.

"You know, the officers from the State Railway are extremely cordial when

they meet with us, but afterwards nothing gets done," observes Vipa. "There are still a lot of land conflicts in Korat."

"How much was the land cost?" I ask.

"The land cost 60,000 baht per plot - quite expensive. Each plot is 72 square meters in area. The total area of the land is 9,600 square meter," says Vipa

"About the size of the World Cup soccer field then," I laugh.

"I don't watch soccer, sorry," says Vipa with a grin.

Vipa walks me over to one of the newly finished houses. An old grandma emerges from the shadow to greet us. Her teeth are black; soaked in betel-nut juice. She points to the perimeter of the houses and says that they are 5-1/2 x 7-1/2 m in dimensions.

There're also smaller houses with 40 square meter spaces available, but it's not too popular. People here are used to larger spaces says the grandma. She says that the co-op has also taken out a 4 million baht housing loan from CODI - with 2% interest rate.

"It was necessary," she says.



"With this kind of financial commitment, is it better to go and rent an apartment outside the community?" I ask.

"No, it's actually cheaper to pay the monthly fee here than to go out and rent an apartment; the market rate rent which now stands at 1,800 baht per month and you will never get to own it," says the grandma.

"Right now they're paying back 1500 baht per month (for 60 square meter plot)," she continues, "and 1900 baht per month (for 72 square meter plot) per household."

"You pay it to the co-op?" I ask
"Yes, to the co-op," says the grandma as she nods her head in quick succession.

"In the future, even if we have no jobs; it would be alright because we already have our own roof and land to live on," says the grandma. "We have to think about future generation," she whispers.



"Many people here also feel proud to own their own houses," interjects Vipa. "They feel proud to take part in building their own houses."

"There must be a lot of headache dealing with all these people in a collective housing co-op," I observe.

"If there's no problem, there'd be no development; the more problems and challenges more development," says Vipa didactically; her face lights up under the glow of a dim neon light.

"You should add more lights here," I observe. "It's too dark," I say
"You have no sense of romance!" scolds Vipa.



"Look at that young man over there, he's studying with just one neon lamp," I say.

"You're look at a top student there. Last year, he finished 3rd in his class; and the year before that, he finished first," says Vipa.

"It's amazing what a single neon light could do," I observe.

"How much are you guys paying for your electricity?" I ask.

Vipa gives a short sigh.

"In Ta Taco, we're using one meter per community right now," says Vipa, "since there're no separate meters yet, our electrical bills actually cost more per unit when compared to regular houses."

"That's very strange," I say.



"Because the utility sees us as one single big user, they charge us more per unit," says Vipa. "At Kom Klao there're already separate meters because the project is done and every house has a legal address which makes it eligible for a meter. So their electrical cost is substantially lower."

We thank the grandma and exit the house. In the shadows are some duplex houses. Vipa says that they have 7 people living together in one duplex. The duplexes are connected to one another with through doors so

there're about 2-3 families in each duplex.

"The good thing about collective housing is that there is a lot of social support; the kids can play with one another, old people can gossip, and the young can sing Karaoke together. It's good for you psychologically - and physically too," says Vipa. "In the past few years, only the grandma got sick; and that only happened once. She had eaten too much seafood and suffered from severe food poisoning."
