

The need for a new approach to sustainable cities: Making people the subject, not the object

An article by Somsook Boonyabancha, for then United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) "Our Planet" magazine, special issue on sustainable cities.
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Pa Chan is a leader at Klong Lamnoon, a small community of 49 households on the outskirts of Bangkok. On a recent visit, she and a big group of community members were busy dredging out silt, water hyacinth and garbage from the small drainage canal that runs alongside the settlement. Canal cleaning is a monthly ritual here, and everyone pitches in - children, grown-ups, teenagers, old folks. Since they began producing their own organic liquid compost ("E.M.") and pouring it into the canal, water that used to run black and foul-smelling has become green and full of catfish. The people in Klong Lumnoon used to be squatters here, but after a long and bitter eviction struggle, they negotiated successfully to buy a small portion of the land, where they have designed and constructed their own housing and infrastructure, as a collective project. Besides transforming themselves from embattled squatters to proud house-owners, these people have learned how working together makes possible many things they couldn't do individually. Here's a translation of Pa Chan's version of the story :

"When I first came to Bangkok as a young girl, 35 years ago, I stayed in several places and finally ended up here. We may have looked like a community of poor people living together, but back then we didn't know each other very well and kept to ourselves. There wasn't much trust, but there was stealing, jealousy, all kinds of problems. To the government and society outside, we were almost not human beings. All my life I've only wanted to have a secure house for my children.

"But then came the eviction struggle and Baan Mankong slum upgrading program, which set conditions that we had to talk to each other, save our money together and work together as a group. In the beginning, we didn't have much faith that a group of poor, uneducated people like us could take on such big task. Usually housing projects are developed by government agencies or people with technical knowledge. But we kept saving, kept coming together, kept talking and helping each other deal with problems that came up. Eventually, we were able to persuade the landlord to sell us a portion of land. We set up a cooperative so we could own land collectively, and then began the work of laying basic services and building new houses.

"At first, we thought we'd use the infrastructure subsidy to hire contractor, but after some calculations, we figured that we could save three or four hundred thousand baht (US\$ 7,000 - 10,000) if we did the work ourselves. So we divided ourselves into teams and set to work. Besides picking up a lot of construction skills along the way, we learned a lot about each other's lives and families in the two years it took to build our new community. The construction process also became our community building, our trust building. Nowadays, everybody knows everybody here, and we live like a big family. I can leave my children in the community when I go out and feel safe knowing they'll be looked after. When the building is finished, we have plans to plant trees and vegetables so our community will be green and clean."

This is just one very small example of what can happen when a development intervention emphasizes *people* as the key actor in making change - change which can transform both the physical conditions and the human qualities in a community, as well as its relationship with the larger city development process. People like Pa Chan and her neighbors in Klong Lumnoon have come a long way from their decades of isolation, illegality and powerlessness. With these new relationships and this new confidence, Klong Lumnoon has become a secure, healthy and vibrant place to live. Now its residents have the confidence to take full responsibility for managing any aspect of their community's development - physical or social. What's more, even a poor woman like Pa Chan has become a regular speaker and an important resource and adviser to many other communities and institutions, in Bangkok and other cities around Thailand.

Why can't we make a similar shift in how the larger city development process works? People are the real energy and spirit of any city. They are the creators, they provide the energy, the labor

and the life that make cities function. It is time to look at people as the focus of city development. It is time to find ways for people to get involved in our growing cities, so they feel a part of whatever has been (or is to be) developed in any constituency - their communities, their wards, their districts, along their canals or around their markets. How can people and communities play a part in the planning, the decision-making, the doing and the managing of the cities they are a part of? How can they also grow and be healthy as their cities grow? How can we begin a process where little by little, the city begins to belong to people - poor or not poor? This calls for a big leap - a change in the city development paradigm. How can the system make room for the force of people's creativity to spring up and flourish, to create this new urban development culture?

Opening up space for people to undertake projects in their localities. It is important to open larger space for people to come together and to take up various development activities in their neighborhoods and local areas - activities like house-building, community upgrading, canal-cleaning, recycling or revitalizing community markets. If, for example, a housing project is to be developed, people in that project should be able to determine how they want to live together, how the social system is to be developed, what form their new housing will take, what kind of management system will be part of the project. It shouldn't be only an architect or a planner or a developer who plans all this on paper for them. Or if some environmental feature of a city (like a canal, river, lake, mountain, historic site or shoreline) has become degraded, people who live within or around that feature can help develop it, and in the process can become the protectors and maintainers of that feature. This will give people a sense of sharing in the management of their own city and it will build relationships between individual in the city with improved city surroundings.

If we see people as the *subject* of development, we have to create space for people in these various constituencies to participate more actively and to have a stronger sense of ownership of what happens in those constituencies. Instead of the city being the vertical unit of control, these smaller constituencies - which are people-based and local - can be the system of self-control for a more creative, more meaningful development.

When local development initiatives come from communities, people become the doers, and feel the development of the larger environment is part of their communities, part of their lives, part of their achievement in helping manage. In many canal-side communities in Thailand, for instance, canal-cleaning activities have lead to many other activities, such as cultural events which celebrate the long history of living with Thailand's life-giving waterways. These activities are the urban people's way of respecting nature, since canals bring water, bring life, bring wealth. bring fish, bring transport channels, bring income-earning opportunities, bring a vivid reminder of our unignorable relationship with nature - in the center of the city.

Development interventions should try to create space for people to be the *doers*, for people to be able to lead the development process with confidence. We only need to understand the techniques to unlock this *people energy* and to channel it into a creative new force for city development. It is important to support development along this direction by adopting flexible financial management mechanisms as tools to allow people the freedom - as a group - to undertake development activities they initiate or need.

Creating more horizontal linkages and networks : Individual people in Asian cities today have a clear bilateral relationship with the state, but often have very few horizontal relationships among themselves. How can a single politician - or a set of politicians or government officials – possibly manage all the needs and aspirations of five or ten million human beings in a city, even if he's been given the power to do so? If we start building a lot of smaller constituencies within a city, where people in those various constituencies start relating to each other - and sharing between constituencies – then a lot of horizontal learning, linking, and creativity starts happening.

A city is not a homogeneous unit. Cities are getting very, very big - many in Asia are now number in the tens of millions. That's much too big to make sense of as a monolithic thing. When we look at cities that way, it's easy to fall into the trap of believing that only gigantic sized policy decisions and mega-projects can tame and streamline these teeming, out-of-control agglomerations of humanity. It is this kind of thinking leads to many of the unsustainable development attitudes we labor under today.

But it's possible to turn this around. If we look at cities instead as collections of many small, diverse and overlapping constituencies and allow people of each of those constituencies to take part in developing their lives, their areas and their ways of relating to each other, with proper coordination, then the human element and the human scale can reappear. And cities will actually begin to be manageable by their own citizens.

Asian cities are clearly bewildered by their recent explosion of growth, but they have a long and rich history to draw on of how to manage coexisting interests and diverse populations with diverse needs. If we open up space for this enormous people's energy and allow it to play a stronger part in the larger systems in our cities, we'll start seeing a lot of exciting new management systems emerging, and new directions in sustainable city development *by people*.