

Community-driven Disaster Reconstruction projects in Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai Province, Northern Thailand

These field notes were written by Thomas Kerr at the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) in Bangkok, during a trip with CODI to visit two disaster rehabilitation projects in remote districts of northern Thailand

March 16, 2008

1. **Mon Baw Haw** (Rural Baan Mankong Pilot Project), in which people affected by floods moved to new land and built a new village, using funds from CODI's "Rural Baan Mankong" pilot program.
2. **Pang Hin Fone** : (Disaster rehabilitation after landslides) - this ethnic Karen village moved to new land nearby and rebuilt their village using CODI's modest disaster rehabilitation housing subsidy.

Mae Chaem District (in Chiang Mai Province)

Mae Chaem District is a breathtakingly beautiful area of mountains, rivers and winding green valleys about 3 hours drive to the south-west from Chiang Mai city, in Chiang Mai Province, along the old southern road to Mae Hong Son. When you drive along these sharply winding mountain roads, which climb and dip and zig-zag very sharply, your ears pop with the altitude changes.

- *This area used to be densely forested just a few decades ago, but severe deforestation has changed the landscape and the climate a lot. Some of this is because of logging, and some from slash-and-burn agriculture, which has replaced formerly forested hillsides with farming. In recent years, there have been a lot of landslides and floods in the area after periods of unusually heavy rain, affecting many rural communities.*
- *These disasters are partly caused by the deforestation and partly by the changing climate. Many hill-tribe communities in this part of Chiang Mai Province. Our visit comes in the dry season, when things are more brownish in many parts of Mae Chaem. But then suddenly, there will be a stretch where everything is verdant green - different microclimates.*

1. **Chumchon Mon Baw Haw** (this is a Rural Baan Mankong Pilot Project) (March 16, 2008)

- **Mon Baw Haw** (this is the Karen name of the community)
- **Baan Yang Luang** (this is the Thai name of the community)

In this project, people living along the river down below, in Mae Chaem Town, who were badly affected by floods every year, and moved to new land nearby and built a new village. But during the past two years, the river winding through the town has flooded very badly, with the water levels rising very fast after days and days of rain, and coming crashing down, so many houses close to the river and several of the town's bridges were totally washed away.

- **211 households (195 families?) (Population is 682 people) in the new project.**
- **65 households in the first phase**, have moved to the new land and built their houses. The other families will come later in the next phase.
- **The new village's "Show off house"** - we have lunch and meet with the people under awnings put up around the village's most fancy and big wooden house, all done up in fake Lanna style, all built of teak wood, by one of the villagers with access to a lot of money!
- **Ethnic hill tribe people** : The community includes 3 ethnic hill tribe groups)
- **First choice of government's land: the spirits said "NO!"** : After the bad floods, the government proposed a relocation plan for this community and identified some vacant land. But the people weren't sure if this public land the government was offering them was suitable. So they asked their spirits (who protect them) and the spirits clearly said "*The land is not good!*" The land was too close to a cemetery and not suitable for a community. So they didn't accept the government's offer.
- **So the people found some land themselves, very close by (just 6 kms away), just up the hill from the town** : These families negotiated with a group of 14 hill-tribe families who had been staying on government land a little uphill from the town, who agreed to let these 65 families come stay there and readjust their land plots collectively to make room for the new families. When they

asked the spirits about this other land, which is at the foot of a hill but a little ways up from the bottom, which they chose themselves, the spirit said yes! So they want

- **The new land is under the Agriculture Department. 69 Rai (11.04 hectares) of land total.**
- So they all readjusted the way they lived before, and developed a new community as a collective group.
- **Many activities together:** information gathering, saving, welfare, family information, income and debts information for each family, self-sufficiency agriculture promotion, protecting the community forest, system of local irrigation, community welfare to help each other.
- **Project Budget : 3.911 million Baht** (3.5 million Baht of this goes into the community's revolving loan fund for housing construction, and the rest is used for infrastructure). Each family can borrow up to a maximum of 25,000 Baht for their houses (very little money!).
- **This money comes from CODI's budget for the Rural Baan Mankong pilot projects, NOT** from the disaster relief funds.
- **Community decides no grants, only loans!** CODI gives this money as a grant to the community (from the Disaster Budget or the Rural Baan Mankong Budget?), but the community decided to use this money as a revolving loan fund, and give it to families as loan, not grant, so it can revolve in the future and support more of their improvements and community needs.
- Land is not totally free, but main budget is for house-building.
- They have their own gravity-flow water supply system.
- This project is under construction now and houses are 80% finished.
- Opening ceremony as the local community culture on 18 November 2007.
- **Big problem with these families is Debt from their farming :** All these people are small farmers, and they take loans from the government agriculture bank to buy seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and take loans against their next crops. They use mono-cropping techniques (especially garlic, red onions and shallots). But when the crop prices go up and down according to market whims, these farmers who invest in just one single crop are vulnerable to big financial crises. Plus, the mono-cropping technique ruins the soil, which gradually needs more and more fertilizer to produce good crops, year after year. Most of the farmers have debts of at least 100,000 Baht, many to the informal money lenders (who charge 5% interest per month!).
- **Also debts from new housing :** Also, many families have borrowed from informal money lenders to get more money for their new house building - some borrow up to 50,000 Baht extra, since the project budget of only 25,000 Baht loan per house isn't seen as being enough. A few families have built their houses within the small budget, and these families have mostly used the traditional "wattle and daub" hill-tribe technique, of mud-plastered walls over a structure of woven bamboo and strong timber framing. But most families want a more modern house of concrete blocks and asbestos siding, etc.
- **How the community savings group is trying to deal with the debt problems :** They divide into small groups for different income generation projects: one group gives loans to members to buy a baby calf, and sell the grown cow two years later for a profit. Another group gives weaving loans to set up looms and make traditional silk.
- **What the farmers grow here :** Garlic, red onions, shallots (most lucrative), also corn, lamyai. The farmers here sell their red onions for 8 Baht per kilo, but in Bangkok we buy them for 30 - 40 Baht per kilo! We pass many drying sheds in the villages, with open sides, where the red onions and shallots that have been bought by middle-men from the farmers are tied in bunches and hung from cross-poles to dry, before being trucked down to the cities.

Some background info on the Rural Baan Mankong Program :

Rural Baan Mankong Program : This is still in the pilot phase (in 200 sub-districts), and CODI has still very little money to expand the process to new sub-districts, but the process is being shared intensively in the provincial platforms of all 76 provinces, so the pilot projects are very well known. But these 200 pilot sub districts are very actively involved in surveying their landless poor families in the sub district and using 1:4,000 aerial photos to identify possible plots for housing and self-sufficiency plots within the sub district.

Who does this project target? The poor people in rural areas who have already registered, including the data of the poor from the Baan Mankong pilot sub-districts (tambon) of the people who have no land. 2 sources of data: the registration and the tambon survey (only in pilot subdistricts)

Process of the project :

1. Surveying how many poor people in the area have no land.
2. Then focus on each family all details
3. Build a team and have reps from the community, the network, the local authority as a management team.
4. Set up savings group.
5. Look for land. (if government land, have to check with gov. dept, if private land check with owner, check price etc.
6. Make plan to develop new land, including layout, infrastructure, and coordinate with other gov. depts. to send somebody to help them in welfare, income generation, house building, etc.

How the Baan Mankong Rural supports the project :

- In this Rural Baan Mankong project ("Baan Mankong Chunabot"), the community can use money flexibly, as necessary to each project,
- but they have a ceiling of the budget average of **61,000 Baht** per family.
- They will use 55,000 Baht per family for infrastructure and building house, income generation and welfare, and will spend 6,000 Baht per family for management.
- They have another development budget for the project that has more needs, but the budget is never more than 100,000 Baht per family.

Pang Hin Fone Community : (Disaster rehabilitation after landslide destroyed old village) (March 16, 2008)

This remote ethnic Karen village (which is about 3 hours drive from Chiang Mai, on the other side of the Ob Luang National Park) moved to new land nearby and rebuilt their village using CODI's modest disaster rehabilitation housing subsidy.

Bad landslides 2 years ago (2006). After several days of unusually heavy rain, a big section of the mountainside dislodged from the hill and slid down, destroying a lot of the villager's houses and farmland. That area where they were staying was then declared a danger zone by the District. Not safe to stay there. They had to ask the District Office for help. After the rains and landslide, the road was cut off and the people could not get out, had no phones. They needed food and water and rice for the villagers, who'd lost everything in the mudslide.

- **80 households affected**
- **They set up a village communal kitchen** which cooked for everyone every day.
- The District and the sub-district offices, as well as various other government organizations tried to help the people, but nobody knew how to solve the problems of land and housing. So the district helped them to contact CODI.
- District Chief speaks : After the disaster, we didn't know what to do! We had no experience with this kind of disaster. But little by little, we have solved the problems with the people. Only with help from the CODI subsidy, which helped to make something concrete.
- **CODI budget : 80 houses x 18,000 Baht = 1.2 million Baht (12 million Baht?)**
- **Started with a survey** : How much money they would need to build simple new houses? About 20,000 - 30,000 Baht.
- CODI's disaster relief housing support was only for 18,000 Baht per house, though, which had to be managed collectively.
- Resettlement process and planning : One guy says, "*A lot of meetings! No time to work!*"
- **Housing loans, not grants, with flexible repayment system tied to farming cycle** : This community also decided not to use the CODI subsidy as a grant, but as a loan, which each family will repay into the community revolving loan fund, so that the money can revolve and help solve other problems of debt and income generation later. They really wanted to keep that revolving fund. They decided that the housing loan repayments will be made yearly or half-yearly, when they sell their crops to the market, and will repay 3,000 Baht each time, flexible, according to how much they made selling their crops.
- **CODI loan to clear informal debts (??) : The community also took a 5 million Baht loan from CODI to clear their informal loans, and afterwards did a community plan to link income and farming with the repayment (???)**

"In the old settlement, we lived more individually, each family taking care of themselves. But when we all had this big problem together and had to move to the new place, we got a new system of mutual help. We built all the houses together - one house took five days to build, one after another, all working together until all the houses were finished. We also have our savings group and village revolving loan fund."

Also big problems of farmer debt here : Just like the Mon Baw Haw community: they used to have a sufficiency system where they farmed just what they needed to survive and sold the little extra in the market, without ever buying any chemicals or having to borrow any money. Now with the mono-culture market farming, most families have lots of problems and debts of 100,000 - 200,000 Baht.

- *We spend money daily, but we only get our money from selling the crops every 6 months - the profit from one crop might be just 20,000 Baht.*

Land trade : The villagers found their own land for resettlement, and they didn't have to pay a penny for it, because they arranged to "trade" this land for their old land. The new land (which is higher land) had been occupied by another group of hill-tribe farmers (just 3 families), who had been using it for their farming. The people managed to come to an agreement where they gave these 5 farmers their old "risky" low-land land (which is fine for farming, but dangerous for housing), and in exchange got this safer high-land for their new village. This kind of land exchange is something in the Karen culture.

This is all technically public land, under the Forestry Department, and these people are forest dwellers.

Solar cells : Each house has a solar cell to fuel a bit of light and radio in the new houses, supplied by EGAT (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand).

How Karens occupy these hill areas : There are two different tribes in this village: Karen and Hmong, but the majority are Karen. Nad says that Karens are known for their particular way of managing the forest and farm land, in which they maintain three distinctions in the land:

- forests that they preserve and don't use or touch,
- forests that they use as community forests to find dry wood and herbs, etc. And
- fields that they use for growing their vegetables.

Nad says that when a child is born, they bury its umbilical chord under a young tree, and that child has to protect that tree. When a Karen person dies, they bring the body back into the forest.

Karens : Stay together in compact villages but farm their small land holdings outside : These villagers are farmers, raising red onions, which they sell to middlemen in Mae Chaem for 8 or 9 Baht per Kilo. The middle man sells them on and eventually they go for 30 - 40 Baht per kilo in the markets in Bangkok. That's capitalism! They also have a community forest that they all use nearby and manage carefully.

Beautiful woven tunics : All the men and women wear colorful cotton tunics, which they weave and stitch themselves. 40 or 50 years ago, they used to raise their own cotton also, but now they buy the plain cotton in the market, and dye and weave the cloth.

Blessing the new village with a sacrifice : A man with a gentle, weathered face and a broken arm bound up in a home-made sling brings down two tiny black chickens (one hen and one rooster) bound up in straw so they can't get away. These two birds are hung up during our lunch, and used later in a ritual to bless the new community, below the largest, oldest tree behind the church. I think the whole village came down for this - women with babies tied around on their hips, kids, men, old folks. These two poor birds got their throats pushed against the blade of an axe, so their blood could mingle and bring fertility to the tree and to the village. While we city folks held our breaths or looked away during this bloody rite, the two men doing it were as cool and nonchalant as anything! This is the difference, I suppose, between buying your chicken wrapped in plastic at the Foodland, and raising your own chickens and butchering them yourselves when it's time to eat!