

# COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY DESIGN IN THAILAND

SADANU SUKKASAME

## Abstract

This paper focuses on a complex community design and community upgrading project in Thailand and reconsiders the role of the community architect as designer, coordinator, and planner to achieve people's participation in the community design. The Mettatham community occupied the land of a Thai temple many years ago. After a period of negotiation, an agreement was reached to rent and share the land between the community and other low income living nearby. Land sharing and settlement upgrading were employed to achieve a win-win compromise. The project was financed by the Baan Mankong Programme (BMP) under the Thai Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI). I was appointed to lead the project as a community architect. This paper examines how a participatory design approach can contribute to solving housing problems and promote sustainability for the future. A participatory design approach to build 56 housing units was undertaken through community design workshops and meetings. Working and interacting closely with people who experience poverty and have great ambition to improve their living conditions is the key to engaging with the poor. Employing simple tools and flexible budgets opened new methods and collaborations within the community and people became increasingly involved in the process to ensure their needs were met.

**Keywords:** Community architect, community participation, low-income community, sustainability

## **Introduction**

### **Land Problems and Opportunities**

Land is a crucial issue in urban poor housing. Without land, there can be no housing. Lacking strong power to negotiate with landowners particularly the state or religious institutions also becomes a fundamental problem for the poor. In turn, secure rights to land can encourage people to improve their land and dwellings.

In 2010, a survey in Koktoom and Nikom Sangton-eang districts, in the Lopburi province by the Koktoom urban poor network, found that around 42 per cent of land was private, 10 per cent was the Buddhist temple land and the rest of land was the state. Furthermore, around 1,500 households have occupied the state land and Buddhist temple without documentation. However, opportunities for the poor to settle on state lands are difficult and declining due to their lack of negotiating power. Many private landowners and state agencies evict poor people or let them lease individual plots for high rents or for commercial development.

The land held by Buddhist temple is much more than they need for occupying. Many households traditionally donate lands to temple when they die. These donations of land leading to temples become a land rich. The donated land has been employed for religious activities and social purpose within local community, and also allows people to occupy and rent for doing business. In Thailand, there are thousands of urban poor communities occupying land owned by Buddhist temples. This data represents an important resource and opportunity that urban poor are able to access possibly to create communities.

In 2010, a squatter community of 13 families was occupying 1.12 ha of land without any documentation which was owned by the Samakkeethammaram temple in Koktoom district. At the same time, many urban poor were seeking land to build secure dwellings and together they formed a new group with the squatters. They realized that secure tenure would be essential for future dwelling. Thus, after being registered as a cooperative, they started negotiating with the temple for a long-term lease. They planned to develop housing by sharing the land and upgrading the old houses for the original group through participatory process.

After negotiation, a land sharing and readjustment agreement was reached in which the temple agreed to share land. So, each household could gain a plot of land 30 square meters totally 1.12 ha for 56 units on a long term collective lease. In 2012, we began working with people to develop a new layout plan and housing design under the limited budget. Through the BMP, the community received a total subsidy of US\$ 222,000 for infrastructure and housing upgrading through a participatory process. Most people agreed with a detached twin house type to save cost of construction and they completed the construction in 2015. Therefore, this paper aims to present how a participatory design approach can contribute to solve housing problems and promote sustainability for the future.

## **1. Theoretical Contexts**

### **1.1. Participatory Design**

Participatory design is a process with many approaches and techniques. It is more than a design method that influence the housing, it is also a human dimension and social process which facilitated with exchange of information and enhanced the designers' understanding of the needs and expectation of the future building users (Luck, 2003). Sanoff (2007 p.213) mentions that participatory design is an attitude about a force for change in the creation and management for people. Design ideas therefore arise in collaboration with participants from diverse backgrounds. As such, it can be said that participatory design is not only for achieving specific purposes but it also engages people in meaningful and purposeful adaptation to their daily environment (Sanoff, 2000, 2007).

### **1.2. Community Participation**

A community is a group of people with face-to-face contact producing a sense of belonging, common interest and values together (Sheng, 1987 p.77–78). While participation reflects the ways in which individuals view their rights and responsibilities in society, all activities are intended to influence decision making and allocation of resources. Community participation is generally taken as the successful implementation of rehabilitation by involving people in the planning process by employing the slogan 'planning is for people' (Soen, 1981 p.105). Community participation is a prerequisite to community acceptance of public works projects and a framework for participation was structured as the concept of representative and participatory democracy (Amundsen: 1982). People will share the responsibilities, profits and risks of what they decide to do (Hamdi, 1991 p.75)

However, some studies argue that the community participation process, in some instances, is not a genuine attempt to empower communities to choose development options freely (Botes & Van Rensburg, 2000 p.43). In their study, community participation is used by governments as a means of legitimizing the political system

and as a form of social control, and assumes the notion of common purpose and good. Sheng (1987 p.78) also argues that community participation is often not successful as most government policies are not conducive to community participation. Community participation is often managed by a host of consulting agencies on behalf of pre-designed, party-directed planning programs and is quite clearly not fostered to empower local communities (Williams, 2006 p.198).

In view of all that has been mentioned, it seems that participation allows people to gain access to ritual information with regard to the method used to compile it. It stands out as interrelated key factors that promote community development to actively solve problems and promote social empowerment (Talo et al, 2014 p.2). Community participation is therefore concerned with community member engagement and active involvement in issues affecting people’s lives and communities.

**3. Methodological approach**

The methodological approach of the study follows fundamental steps of action research: observing, reflecting, planning and implementation stages. The beginning of the development process is identifying stakeholders and forming groups of formal and informal leaders. Initial trust was created through meetings and design stages in the early sessions, stakeholders were brought to know each other and encouraged to develop collective decision-making.

At the same time, we established a community committee which divided into management, craftsmen, social and data teams in order to bring people to work together and produce new relationship of cooperation. Furthermore, community collective saving also encouraged collective management skills by integrating these processes into community development to provide secure tenure.

The design stage is a part of the empowering process providing an opportunity for learning and designing their community under the limited loans and funding. This is a kind of bottom-up and self-organization approach. Also, it encourages actively involvement in the design process to ensure that the results meet the needs of the community.

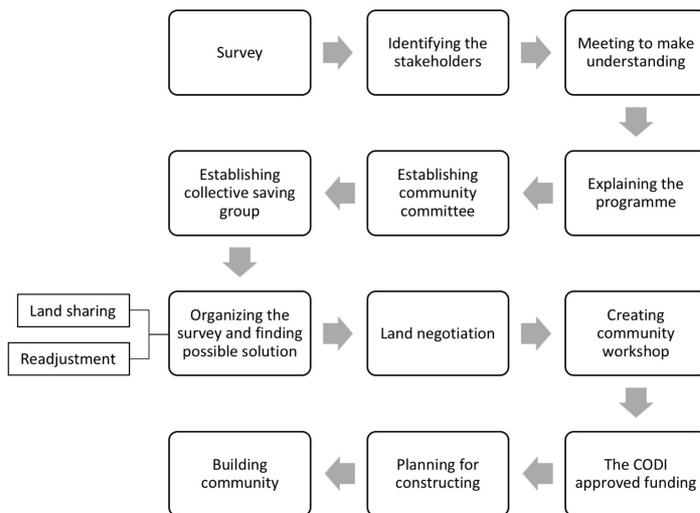


Figure 1. The process of community participation of the Mettatham Community. Land sharing and readjustment are an option that people agreed to improve the community.



Figure 2. Left: people participate in the meeting and workshop to design the housing layout concentrating on sharing equal plot of lands and readjustment. Right: people draw lines to reveal plot of lands and maximum possible house size. The agreement is to build 17 twin houses and 9 detached houses for new occupants, and to upgrade 13 houses for the original dwellers.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. Land Sharing and Readjustment Processes

Achieving a long-term leasing contract is an ambition of the urban poor. The original occupants as a squatter group, were 13 households living in scattered positions on the temple land. Meanwhile, 43 households are new occupants coming to share the land under the collective lease. As a result, the original occupants received occupancy rights from the temple. Importantly this reduces the threat of eviction and ensures they can continue to live on the land.

A 30-year collective lease is an effective way to ensure that they remain, and offers many advantages particularly to secure and keep land for their descendants. Land readjustment is a step that connects several household lands to create a new boundary and allows people to express ideas to develop a form of secure dwelling on the same piece of land (UN-HABITAT, 2008a p.29). Consensus is required through meetings and workshops to make proposals to the land owner.

Both new and old residents selected land sharing and readjustment to create a brand-new community with more efficient layout of plots. The negotiation between them took time, as some original households complained that their plots are smaller than they had initially. However, the participatory planning and design processes were stages of negotiation to achieve consensus to provide similar plot sizes of around 30 square metres with secure tenure.



Figure 3. The change of a house of a squatter who joined the project in 2010. In 2012, he demolished the old house (left) built from bricks and galvanized iron sheets, and he built a new twin house (right) for himself and his daughter.

#### **4.2. Informal to Formal Land: An Opportunity**

The United Nation declares that adequate housing and secure tenure are a rights under international human rights law (UN-HABITAT, 2004). Informal residents are more or less free to build creativity, according to their needs and constraints of space and budget (UN-HABITAT, 2008b p.6). The improvement of informal to formal land can provide them opportunities, for instance, secure tenure, necessary utilities, basic services and infrastructure.

Secure land tenure is essential in allowing them to improve the community and to create opportunities for other urban poor communities to ensure that they can develop by themselves. Becoming formal through upgrading activities produces improvement of their livelihoods and also the finances which enable the community to create and develop welfare activities to look after each other (UN-HABITAT, 2009). In terms of repayment, they have to repay their land and housing loans approximately of US\$ 20-37 per month for 15 years. In the long term, everyone has to manage their finance responsibilities as a group. This helps to generate social cohesion to manage the finances and to assist members in case somebody cannot pay (UN-HABITAT, 2009).

Although many people in the community work in low-paid jobs, some people have been able to get higher-paid skilled jobs through the transformation of informal to formal community. For example, they generate new careers as craftsmen, from the building and managing of community skills. In the same vein, collective development keeps people together to find ways to generate collective income, for example, they created a community shop for selling community products and storing handmade crafts to sell in the city centre. This is because having a legal address gives them the confidence to build shops or get better-paying jobs in the formal sector. This demonstrates the close relationship between housing and work which enables housing improvement through providing opportunities for income generation (Gough & Kellett, 2001)

Eventually, people have the confidence and improved management skills when they are the key development actors providing the space to manage their own settlement. The advantage of development programmes is that they can continue to live in the same area that means they also keep their jobs or income-earning opportunities.

#### **4.3. Collective Development Towards Sustainable Community**

The community achieved a favourable deal with the landowner. They succeeded in negotiations with the Buddhist temple to get a 30-year land lease agreement with the rental cost of only US\$ 3 per a year per household. The land lease is based on a collective lease provided to housing cooperatives that have full rights to the development of land.

Additionally, the collective development programme supports the dynamics of human relationships, which relies essentially on the people who participate in the participation process through a democratic system. This can be a key instrument of social inclusion reflecting the strategies of grassroots and social movements (UN-HABITAT, 2005). Improvement of existing housing is also a strategy for people to achieve collective community management, which keeps people together in the same place. Collective development stimulates people to improve their housing and living environments by leasing long-term land rights to occupy, and reorganizing plots and making space for infrastructure and public spaces to achieve sustainable dwelling.

#### **4.4. Roles of the Community Architect**

The Community Architect plays an essential role in changing an old paradigm by synthesizing the knowledge learned from working and engaging with the people in the community. Low-income communities need a new vision to create sustainable dwellings by employing the power of imagination of people. This serves as a tool to empower people to move from their existing knowledge and experience to a new idea of the world.

Importantly we need to learn how to encourage and convince people of the need to get involved. In fact, forming a sustainable group is probably more important than designing houses. At this point, the role of the Community Architect becomes a tool to link social, design, and building processes, focusing more on the process than the product. Also, there is no "best formula" in terms of process because communities will need different processes depending on the current situations or particular circumstances.

Low-income people desire to create social change by looking for a possible way to improve their circumstances, whilst the community architect's vision is seeing the aspect of a place to understand how people may live or communities evolve and to understand the dynamic background of the community. Although low-income people can build houses without architects, however, architects can produce more graphic and visual design techniques that can help people effectively follow their imagination. Also, people get enormous satisfaction

and fun in participating more in designing their own community. Therefore, I would like to present three roles of the community architect in community design.

Firstly, a designer should not only work with stakeholders in terms of the physical appearance of the built environment, but also encourage and enable them to work through and begin to solve their own dwellings problems. They must consider the existing non-physical aspects such as budget, regulations, culture and a belief, and a confidence in the design process. Creating flexible processes in terms of building is also essential, hence, the designer should be careful and consistently listening to the voice and knowledge of the community. Secondly, a coordinator's role is to create and encourage community networks, both inside and outside communities, for instance, creating networks between urban poor networks and academic institutions or enabling urban community networks to share knowledge and experiences with each other. A community architect is therefore a middleman to connect people, organizations and government agencies to journey together. Lastly, a planner role is helping people to develop and plan housing their project to complete on time and to engage with strategy and action planning.

These roles have enabled me to realize that there is no best formula for planning, it depends entirely on the circumstances. We should create spaces for participation that enable communities to act and implement effectively, and to create relationships with their own working environments.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has examined how a participatory design approach can contribute to solve housing problems and promote sustainability for the future in Thailand. The challenges faced in the diverse knowledge system of productive collaboration, is an important learning opportunity. This study has found that a community participation process as a mechanism to enhance people, can change and improve a social situation and dwelling by focusing on "people processes". For example, a collective saving group and participatory budget have changed the dynamics of relationships and built constructive engagement. An essential role of the community architect is connecting social and design processes together through participatory processes. Although this study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings propose a variety of areas that might provide knowledge that will benefit through future study. For instance, comparing the results of this project with the success of other urban poor communities in the province of Koktoom, in both suburban and city centre areas. Further study is badly needed to account for the variability in terms of cultural origins, contributions, and cultural change within diverse environmental conditions in the city.

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