The urban community environmental activities project and its environment fund in Thailand

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1. The Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) was established in 1992 by the Thai government. It offers loans to community organizations in low-income urban settlements for income generation, housing and land, and small-scale community activities. See Boonyabancha, Somsook (1996), *The Urban Community Development Office, Thailand*, IIED Working Paper, London, 1996; available from IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H ODD, UK; e-mail: bookshop@iied.org

SUMMARY: *This paper describes the work of an environment fund set up to support community initiated and managed projects within low-income settlements in urban areas throughout Thailand. Drawing on a grant of US$ 1.3 million, over a two-year period, the fund has supported 196 projects benefiting 41,000 families. Although managed by a Thai government agency (the Urban Community Development Office) and with funds from the Danish government agency, DANCED, the fund has allowed low-income communities to develop their own projects and manage their implementation. It also encouraged inter-community exchanges and, more generally, a strengthening of the capacity of low-income communities to work together and negotiate and work with external agencies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THE URBAN COMMUNITY Development Activities (UCEA) project is a special project of the Thai government's Urban Community Development Office[1] and DANCED (Danish Cooperation for Environment and Development), which provided an initial grant of US$1.3 million. It takes the form of an urban community environment fund which supports community based organizations to initiate and implement community-level environment projects in urban low-income areas in all four regions of Thailand (Bangkok and vicinities, North, North-East and South). The project implementation period ran from January 1996 until December 1998, after which the process is expected to continue through existing organizations in Thailand.

UCEA provides grants for low-cost environmental improvement projects such as improved water supply, drainage, garbage management, tree-planting and landscape recovery, walkways, canal-cleaning and community centres in ways which enhance the self-help capacities of communities and which transform existing relationships between community organizations

and external agencies. All funds are channelled directly to the communities, with decisions about the distribution of funds made by city-based committees of interested stakeholders. Community representatives are in a majority on each project committee with the other members being drawn from the municipality, relevant government agencies, local NGOs, academics and other interested professionals. Through this process, communities plan and propose their own projects and learn how to negotiate, to compromise, to work with others, to build relationships and to be resourceful. As of December 1998, UCEA had supported a total of 196 projects, affecting 40,940 families, 220 communities, 27 community networks and with 32 local project committees having been set up. A further 14 community networks benefit from project support although there has been no implementation as yet.

   The main objective of UCEA is to improve the quality of life in low-income urban settlements in Thailand. But it is obviously unrealistic to think that US$ 1.3 million can make a significant improvement in the whole country - or that a grant of Baht 100,000 can transform a whole community. The UCEA funding is there to stimulate a process of change, to start a chain reaction of developments. These small grants support small, concrete improvements but they can show communities that change is possible, that they can manage projects and that they can change their relationships with each other and with the city. UCEA projects are the stimulus for this. The focus is on developing new participatory approaches to infrastructure and service improvements and supporting the development of transparent accountable relationships between local residents and community leaders, and between community leaders and the local authority. Project staff work towards these objectives by:

- providing grants to low-income urban communities which are actively involved in environmental improvements;
- creating self-managed development in the communities, meeting the inhabitants' multiple needs at low cost;
- developing a community-driven participatory process in urban development and environmental management;
- developing and supporting mechanisms for coordination and mutual decision-making between communities and local authorities, NGOs and other agencies, in order to mobilize all possible resources for community and environmental development; and
- developing and promoting coordination among communities to encourage greater cooperation within community networks.

II. WAYS OF WORKING

UCEA'S STRATEGY IS to decentralize responsibility for the management of project funds to the community and to networks of communities. By doing so, this makes the management of the funds a political process, linking the communities and the larger community network all the time. This ensures that the system

is transparent - the network and the communities look at the proposals together. The poor have long shown their ability to manage funds. More important than managing the funding is getting local groups to work together, to look at what is needed and then assess the proposals and set priorities together. This is never easy because of limited resources. When communities work together to make difficult decisions about the use of limited resources, they are learning about each other's communities and needs. This decision-making process at the network level is very important for learning. It is more common - and generally easier - for communities to compete with each other for resources. But here, they have to develop ways of working with each other.

As well as managing the funds, local residents have to contribute at least 20 per cent of the costs through financial contributions or contributions in kind (labour, materials or equipment). The projects selected have to be a priority for local residents, and the community organization responsible for the project must have developed a strong local group capable of collecting and managing money. Allocation of funds is jointly undertaken through the local project committee with its representatives from the community, relevant government officials and local professionals, and is, therefore, transparent to all involved.

a. Community Committees

Community committees are established in all the participating settlements and these are directly responsible for proposing, implementing and managing the improvement activities. Community members participate fully in identifying environmental issues to be addressed, in formulating proposals and in making decisions with key external agencies. The scope of individual projects is small, with an average project cost of Baht 90,000 (US$ 2,250) and a project ceiling of Baht 100,000. The ceiling was set deliberately very low because the grants are seen as seed-money; enough to get something started and to set local processes in motion. Keeping grants small also draws out all the cost-saving innovation and creativity that is inherent in low-income communities - and the low ceiling also allows the programme to reach more communities, more networks and regions with seed-money.

Grants are provided directly to the community or networks and the local project committee has to be confident of a community's capacity to manage the funds and raise their share of the project budget.

Another component of the process is the development of human resources that contribute towards a participatory process for improved community environmental management. This involves awareness-building, training, opportunities for exchange of experience between different communities and partnerships with relevant local professional agencies. It helps to develop a geographically linked system of community organizations (community committees, provincial networks, regional federations). Community federations and networks help to decentralize power

and management authority for development to the communities. Such networks also mean that the lessons learnt from one community can be disseminated to a wider target group.

b. Local Project Committees

At the local level, communities in each city organize themselves into a network. Representatives of the network (all of them community leaders) form a local project committee together with concerned professionals. The professionals invited to join the committee are drawn from a range of agencies and involve both staff from government agencies and politicians who have responsibility for living conditions in low-income settlements, and staff from NGOs and academic institutions. The role of the professionals is to support the expenditure allocations through technical assistance and to help in linking the communities with the relevant state agencies. Local government staff and professionals have a chance to learn more about the priorities, skills and capacities of local residents and the community have a chance to learn from the knowledge and technical skills of the other committee members. All parties learn from each other through this process - about priorities, plans, expectations, attitudes and working styles.

The specific responsibilities of the local project committee are to:

- distribute information and organize workshops;
- establish project criteria in cooperation with members and consider the eligibility of proposed community projects;
- advise, facilitate and support communities in project implementation;
- oversee the administration, management and implementation of community projects;
- develop a community environmental improvement process together with communities and other organizations concerned;
- promote the integration of community development projects into a wider urban development process through partnership-building and joint decision-making; and
- propose guidelines and policy for future phases of community environmental development.

c. National and Regional Level Committees

The organizational structure operates at two main levels in addition to the local project committees, namely, the National Project Steering Committee and the Regional Environment Project Development Committee.

The 16 members of the National Project Steering Committee include representatives from the community, NGOs, the Municipal League of Thailand, central government, DANCED and the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO). Their responsibilities are to define the core administrative procedures and the project implementation process. They are also responsible for giving formal approval to the projects and budgets forwarded by the local project committees and for supporting and

coordinating the implementation of projects with other community development projects and actors. Finally, they monitor and evaluate implementation within UCEA's whole programme.

The regional level committee is a recent development and, at present, only one of the four regions, the North-East region, has set one up. It emerged from the provincial network of communities, which formed a regional federation and then established the committee, and is made up of representatives from communities, federations of NGOs, academics, the private sector and local government. Its main functions are to coordinate and support community development processes, linking them with other regional development activities; to consider the feasibility of projects recommended by local project committees, and to monitor and evaluate project implementation; to provide advice and training to community networks and organizations; and to advocate for policy change.

Table 1: Community Projects in all Thailand, January 1996 to December 1998*

Region	Number of families	Number of communities	Number of projects	Budget from UCEA (million Baht)	Total budget (million Baht)
Bangkok	10,337	52	60	5.5	8.6
Bangkok vicinities	7,874	18	18	0.8	1.1
South	8,149	29	31	3.0	3.9
North	5,242	70	44	3.7	4.8
North-East	8,986	51	43	4.6	7.3
TOTAL	40,588	220	196	17.67	25.76
Average budget/project				Baht 90,134	Baht 131,451

* These projects included: improvements to physical environment such as community walkways, bridges, drainage and canals (76); water supply (25); garbage disposal and collection, and recycling activities (21); area improvements, cleaning polluted pools, a health garden and planting trees (15); construction or improvement of community areas, child and community centres, and children's playgrounds (40); community electricity (5); community information and radio (5); water treatment (3); community fire extinguishing system (3); other (5).

SOURCE: UCEA Project Completion Report (1996-1998).

III. ACTIVITIES

THE KEY ACTIVITIES of UCEA centre on strengthening community processes, the linkages between communities, and the political and negotiating capacities of communities.

a. Community Improvements

The grants are mainly given for improvements within communities; Table 1 gives information about their location and nature. Among the projects that have been supported are:

- improvements to, or construction of, community infrastructure such as water supply, electricity supply, bridges, drainage system and walkways;

- construction of public facilities such as public toilets, kiosks and public announcement boards;
- improved garbage collection and disposal, for example, through the establishment of a recycling centre or common refuse collection area;
- waste water treatment including sewage treatment;
- upgrading of community surroundings such as canal-cleaning, painting, community-greening and creating community recreational spaces or playgrounds; and
- capacity and awareness-building in support of UCEA and the community environmental improvement process through campaigns and public relations, training, study tours, information exchanges, seminars and workshops.

Boxes 1 and 2 give examples of projects that have received support. Box 1 describes three projects undertaken in Chiang Mai which received support in the early stages of the UCEA project, with a focus on individual community projects. Box 2 describes other Chiang Mai projects which developed later, when the network began to find ways of using the UCEA funding to support larger, joint projects involving several communities with common problems, and got them working together.

Box 1: Chiang Mai Community Network Projects

Different community networks around Thailand use their UCEA grants in different ways. The Chiang Mai Community Network requires that projects cost less than Baht 200,000 (US$ 5,000), be built entirely with contributed labour and benefit everyone in the community. Some of the projects recently undertaken include the following:

Sala at Ton Kaam: The old Ton Kaam community in the centre of Chiang Mai had no temple or meeting hall. With a Baht 190,000 (US$ 4,750) grant and for a total cost of Baht 250,000 (US$ 6,250), the community planned and built a two-storey community centre. The people contributed cash and unskilled labour and the project took about three months to complete.

Boardwalk at Tung Pattana: Tung Pattana is a small squatter settlement of 30 houses built on stilts, on public land alongside a drainage canal. During the rains, flood waters fill the canal and houses can only be reached by wading through the water or hopping along bamboo poles strung between houses. Despite the fear of eviction, the community asked for Baht 100,000 (US$ 2,500) to build a boardwalk. Using their own labour and ingenuity, they built a concrete and wood structure which can be taken apart and rebolted at a higher level during flooding or removed to a new place in case of eviction.

Deep well at Central: Poor hill tribe families settled on this land, owned by Central Department Store, where there was no water supply, toilets, electricity or drainage. With a small grant, the people built a seven-metre deep well and water-filtering system.

SOURCE: *Newsletter of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights*, No.11, April 1998.

Box 2: The Canal Clean-up Project with the Chiang Mai Network

Klong Koowai and *klong* Mekhaa (*klong* means canal in Thai), which pass through Chiang Mai's Mengrai district, are flanked by six informal settlements. The water in these *klongs* is already polluted when it reaches Chiang Mai, a city well-known for its solid waste problems, where markets, hospitals and industries dump more wastes into the canals. By the time the water reaches the communities, it is black, smelly and barely able to sustain fish. The new system of water gates can also rapidly transform *klong* Koowai from a wide, rapidly flowing canal into a stagnant trickle.

"It wasn't always like that" says Pi Panyaam, a leader from Ha Tanwaa community on *klong* Koowai. "People's lives were tied to the water, which they used for washing and cultivating. Now it's so dirty, the *klongs* are more of a hazard than an asset." What can be done? "Politicians do things in Chiang Mai and people wait," she says, "but Meng Rai district is a little better - we can solve the *klong* problem ourselves." So, when members of Mengrai district's *klong*-side communities decided to initiate their own *klong* improvement process, they put a proposal to UCEA to support their three-phase plan.

Phase One: Study Tour
A group of people from Chiang Mai's *klong*-side communities travelled by train to Bangkok and Songkhla, where they visited other networks of *klong*-side communities to gather ideas about how to redevelop their *klongs* and to boost their confidence in people's ability to do it. As Pi Panyaam says, "The people saw and said 'We can do it better!'"

In Bangkok, after a boat tour along the *klong* San Saeb, and lunch hosted by the Minburi City Hall, the group visited the Gamaloon Islam community, where one of Thailand's most high-profile community-led *klong* clean-ups was organized several years ago. Khun Veenai, a member of parliament from Gamaloon, offered this advice: "Don't expect cooperation from government at first. Start by doing things yourself, and government support will follow."

They then travelled south to visit *klong* Samrong in Songkhla, where ten years of canal-cleaning and settlement improvement by five energetic *klong*-side communities convinced the city that they are the *klong*'s best protectors and consolidated their right to stay.

Phase Two: *Klong* Clean-up
The first big clean-up on *klong* Koowai was strategically scheduled to coincide with the Queen's birthday, on August 9, 1998, with T-shirts, a logo, a feast and press coverage. As well as hundreds of *klong* residents, community groups from Bangkok, Songkhla, Chiang Rai and Khon Kaen came to help clear out garbage and cut back plants along the canal banks. Pi Leng, Bor-wa community's leader from Songkhla came and said, "We wanted to make sure they do it properly." Large, noisy public events such as this are a way of democratizing possibilities. They can disseminate issues because larger numbers of people get to see the process - community members, outsiders, government officials, NGOs. That way, the *klong* clean-up process belongs to the whole city, not only to those few communities.

Phase Three: Improvements
Now, district meetings are held each month with communities, city officials,

community network, and NGOS. The Ha Tanwaa community has put forward many ideas :

- **widen *klong* Koowai and construct "hard edges" to make way for municipal de-silting;**
- **move houses back a little to redevelop the *klong* margins as green playgrounds;**
- **use the silt from dredging as land-fill for a day-care centre;**
- **reduce upstream pollution through negotiations with city and private sector pol-luters;**
- **explore community based "green" filtering systems to help clean the *klong* wa-ter.**

SOURCE: *Housing by People in Asia*, Issue 12 of the newsletter of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, April 1999.

b. Project Activities

The main activities include the following:

- development of the process by which funding is provided, including implementation criteria and routines, in conjunction with various partners;
- preparation and implementation of public campaigns on environmental issues;
- organization of community networks as a mechanism to facilitate the development process;
- study tours, training and workshops for participating community networks and organizations, and local agencies;
- public relations and documentation activities to disseminate project information to new communities and concerned agencies to encourage them to adopt similar policies and processes;
- coordination and network-building with government agencies and the private sector to secure financial support for project activities;
- assisting local project committees with the provision of grants for implementing activities;
- monitoring and evaluation of approved projects.

IV. PROJECT PROGRESS AND EVALUATION

AT THE END of 1997, UCEA arranged for an evaluation of its performance, with reports for Bangkok (Bangkok and vicinities region), Chiang Mai (North region), Khon Kaen (North-East region) and Songkhla (South region). The objectives of this evaluation were to consider the suitability of UCEA's implementation process and to assess its impact. In addition, evaluation members were asked to examine conditions and trends in the social and economic context as they might affect project achievements and look at the effectiveness of its implementation. The main conclusions of the evaluation are summarized below.

a. Implementation at the Community Level

In terms of satisfaction, UCEA funded projects seem to have achieved greatest success at community level. Residents have found the improvements to be useful and to respond to their needs. They also feel that the projects are their own and that costs are low in comparison to similar projects run by local agencies.

People's participation in terms of attending meetings to identify issues and plan work is variable. For example, the Chiang Mai report states that in small communities (50 households or fewer), between 60 and 100 per cent of household heads attend meetings; in large communities (150 households or more) less than 50 per cent attend. The Songkhla report states that issues are still proposed and decided upon by community leaders. This is partly because community members expect their leaders to be aware of the problems and know what to do, and partly because the leaders have not yet found a way to organize meetings in such a way that most community members can actively participate. The problem is greater in larger communities.

However, community members participate actively in project work, particularly construction work such as drainage, sewers, walkways and roads. In public utility projects, for example, to improve the water supply, almost every household participates in one way or another, be it through providing physical labour, cash or food and drink, and residents feel that the project is theirs and they are proud of it. Because of this, it is felt that the community will ensure that the investments will be maintained and thus the project's sustainability will be secured.

Another objective is a sustained participatory process in community development and environmental management. Experience shows that such activities require continuing strong leadership. Generally, when projects succeed in obtaining a grant, the position of community leaders is strengthened and they receive more community support. This, in turn, builds confidence, leading to greater commitment by leaders to work and advocate for their communities. For leaders experienced in managing community affairs and solving conflicts, the project, with its organized network of communities for consultation and mutual assistance, helps build their confidence and their ability to ask for assistance. For communities with no experience of development activities, working with UCEA has helped the emergence of new leaders, accepted by their communities for their ability to identify needs and carry out the work.

In some communities, the projects that UCEA has supported have given rise to some conflict. However, in general, implementation of UCEA projects has not caused any serious conflicts, unless these already existed within the community.

The main problem that has been identified so far in the project implementation is how best to manage the process of identifying issues and formulating project proposals, particularly in large communities. In the opinion of the evaluation team, one way to overcome this is to encourage leaders to institute regular community-wide discussions on environmental problems which af-

fect them and try and find various solutions. The evaluation team also hopes that these regular discussions will create greater interest among community members in managing the various aspects of the projects, rather than leaving it to a few leaders.

b. Implementation at the Network of Communities and Local Project Committee Level

As described above, two specific approaches are embedded within UCEA: that as much of the problem identification and project formulation as possible should be undertaken by the communities and that the criteria for project consideration and selection be known and accepted by all the community; and that local project committees be set up to establish the project criteria and consider proposed community projects. It is also the role of the local project committee to promote the integration of community development projects into a wider urban development process through partnership-building and joint decision-making among relevant groups within the city.

In order to fulfill UCEA's objectives, networks of communities have to be established at local level in order to set up the local project committees. In some instances, UCEA has used existing networks whose experience and history have helped to shape the way the local project committees work and how they interact with various other local agencies. For example, there are four networks of communities in the Greater Bangkok area. One arose from cooperation between a UCEA project coordinator and the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO), after UCDO went into the communities in 1996, seeking to set up savings groups. Another network was established in a similar way but these communities (of squatters) needed to understand more about the UCEA before they could successfully produce and implement projects. Communities in the third network had organized to find new land for their settlements. They had set themselves up as a housing cooperative in order to buy land and divide it into plots, and had largely used credits from UCDO. These communities have been through a long experience of organizing to resist evictions and it was thought that they would be able to manage their UCEA projects easily. But there have been some difficulties in some communities, with a lack of involvement by community members in projects and most of the work being done by the leaders. It appears that once community leaders become involved with outside agencies and activities, there is a danger that they may lose contact with members of their own communities, a problem which the UCEA must address and aim to solve.

In the most successful Bangkok network of communities, Samut Prakan, the leaders devote themselves to their work and receive cooperation from the municipal authority and other government institutions as well as NGOs. However, this may be due partly to the fact that the serious environmental problems faced by these communities are well-known and solutions have been sought by many at all levels.

The evaluators concluded that there are many factors pro-

Box 3: Saleng Centre at Khonkaen

In Khonkaen, as elsewhere in Thailand, much of the city's waste is collected by informal waste material collectors who move around the city on three-wheeled cycles. A community network in Khonkaen, Saha Chumchon ("Communities Together"), decided to develop a project for a garbage collection and recycling centre. With money raised by the community network, and with some funds provided by UCEA, the centre was opened in February 1998 and is now serving 40 to 50 traders every day who bring paper, bottles, plastic and old bags.

All those using the centre are invited to become members. In the first three months of operation, 49 collectors became members and in any one day about 60 per cent of the users are members. Membership is free and enables the collector to have access to welfare services and to have a share in the profits (although it is too early to say how much profit might be made).

The network's main objective in developing the centre is to provide social benefits to the waste collectors. Centre staff provide training to help the collectors distinguish between toxic and non-toxic waste. They are not concerned with high profits but with the participation of their members. A further benefit that they offer is that they do not try to cheat the collectors through using faulty scales or through rounding down the weight of material that is collected. Such dubious practices are used by the commercial agencies who purchase the waste. The collectors using the centre generally earn about Baht 100-200 each day, more or less the average for the informal sector in Khonkaen.

The municipality has been trying to help through advertising the centre, encouraging people to sort their garbage prior to collection and proposing that the collectors bring their waste to the centre. Municipal staff are currently seeing if there are ways in which they might be able to offer further help. Whilst they cannot offer land because the centre is a commercial operation (and they cannot be seen to favour one commercial operation over another), they have been trying to help in the search for a site to enable the area for waste collection to be extended, and they may invest money in the centre.

In a recent development, the municipality has provided 30 communities with a grant of Baht 10,000 each to manage community garbage recycling activities and to sort garbage to link them with network collecting activities.

moting or obstructing cooperation between different agencies and people, local politics being one of the most important but, in order for these agencies and organizations to cooperate, there must be mutual objectives and targets. The potential for these networks to support more ambitious initiatives with a city-wide development potential can be illustrated through the example given in Box 3, which describes the development of garbage recycling activities in Khonkaen. Here, the network of community organizations decided that it should help one of the lowest-income livelihood groups in the city, the waste recyclers.

The projects supported by UCEA also have important qualitative aspects which are not easily measured. These include the following:

• Low-income communities gain considerable confidence and

pride through being the owners of the development and through managing the process themselves.

- The projects help build community mechanisms for on-going management and maintenance.
- Projects are cost-effective, usually costing between one-third and one-tenth that of most comparable conventional government projects.
- Community environment activities build active community participation, as community members work together in addressing their problems. They also promote new leadership in low-income communities.
- Projects draw on the creativity and diversity inherent in low-income communities and are not blocked by professionals. In several communities the UCEA projects were the first examples of locally initiated projects.
- Successful community initiatives encourage community members to work together in other areas, to develop linkages with other communities and to develop the means of addressing broader issues.
- The projects strengthen the capacity of community networks to manage projects together and to negotiate with other development actors.
- Projects provide communities with concrete experiences and the confidence to negotiate for sustainable related local resources and policy change.

c. Recommendations of the Evaluation Team

At the community level :

- Communities should be encouraged to continually find new projects and with more active participation. More importance should be given to community analysis and appraisal including the relationships between various groups in the communities. More attention should be given to issues identified by community members for project formulation, and projects should be devised in such a way as to promote participation and closer cooperation between community leaders and community members.
- The principles of transparency and accountability in management should be emphasized although methods may differ, as they respond to regional variations and different situations.
- There should be more opportunities for communities to exchange their experiences, in order to learn about the processes of project formulation and the concepts and practices of participation, transparent and accountable management, project success and the sense of community ownership of projects.

At the network of communities level:

- The development of community organizations and networks of communities is important. UCEA should promote stronger

cooperation between community members, organizations and networks by devising conditions and situations where they have to work together.
• UCEA should promote more inter-community (or inter-network) activities to allow shared environmental development issues and problems to surface. This would create an awareness of shared problems in the development process of low-income communities in general.

Cooperation at the local level:

• UCEA should pay attention to public environmental issues which concern large sections of the population. This can generate participation by various agencies, both governmental and NGOs, as well as businesses, who would join together to solve common problems.
• Working methods for coordination and participation by various local agencies and individuals involved in environmental development can be improved, with more joint activities other than simply screening project proposals for eligibility. Examples of this would include meetings to consider rules and regulations which obstruct the development of low-income communities, or fora for exchanges of experiences in community development, organization development and environmental management, or of environmental issues at provincial, regional and national level.

V. LESSONS LEARNED

1. DECENTRALIZATION OF THE development process to community and local partnerships is possible and much more effective than centralized development, if organized properly.
2. The number of community development projects achieved at the end of UCEA is nearly twice the original target - 196 projects rather than the 100 originally envisaged. This is largely due to the correct process of decentralization, with the communities as main development actors. Communities are able to manage and implement projects efficiently without those restrictive formal procedures which tend to lower rather than enhance community capacity. **The experience with UCEA shows that if the community process is organized properly, cost-effective projects will be developed efficiently and quickly, and they will provide a tremendous boost to community organization.**
3. Projects can be used as an instrument to strengthen institutional rearrangement and gradual structural change if the process of decision-making and management is organized properly. However, objectives have to be clear and the conditions under which support is provided worked out properly.
4. Community networks become a very important mechanism, particularly in facilitating learning and supporting community development processes. At the same time, they provide political roles for communities who can work together as a group to ne-

gotiate for structural issues and broader policy change. UCEA has been important in helping to facilitate the growth and strength of community networks, as well as in the concrete actions it supported.

5. Community exchanges are a powerful community self-learning and training process.

6. It is important to facilitate the development of local partnerships. The experience with UCEA shows that if relationships between local partners are well-established, there is more progress in several development aspects.

7. There are still distances and differences among various development actors, especially between government officers and people. To work together as partners and for government officers to work as facilitators rather than decision makers are still very new concepts in Thailand, and need more time to develop.

8. The environment fund provided by UCEA proved to be a very flexible way of supporting the community development process in initiating development activities that matched the particular conditions in each community. It was also well-suited to helping groups at various levels find ways of making decisions together and working together.

9. With regard to community-level environment and development, although some development projects supported by UCEA may not be directly environmental activities, they do induce other community environment development activities to be developed later. It is important to learn that there are different ways of achieving the target as long as the mechanism to support community action has been built up and other more serious community concerns have not been ignored.

10. For Thai communities, environmental issues are part of a holistic community development process. Environmental issues are not sectoral issues singled out from other community development aspects. An integrated and holistic approach allows environmental solutions to develop more effectively and to be more sustainable.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

THE UCEA EXPERIMENT has illustrated one possible way of changing development mechanisms to bring the urban poor into the process of urban development and make the relationship between the poor and the state more equitable. Now this lesson has to move to a larger scale and this is the UCEA's challenge, given the rigid development system currently prevailing in Thailand. UCEA is active in supporting the core development principles of the Thai Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan and the new Constitution of 1998. Both of these documents express the government's widely supported wish to create capable and self-reliant citizens. At the core of UCEA are principles of decentralization, a civic society, transparency, accountability, participation and human development, and the aim of decentralizing environmental development to the grassroots level.

There are many obstacles to achieving these aims. Thai society remains rigidly hierarchical and centralized, and the move towards decentralization will face resistance. Furthermore, Thai people are individualistic and competitive. To generate cooperation among equals, be they government or other agencies, NGOs or communities, will be difficult. However, change is taking place: change towards a more democratic system and a more just society and the innovative approach of UCEA is both important and necessary if such a move is to be achieved.

Despite the successes to date, much remains to be done and it is essential that UCEA continues. UCEA's experimentation with new forms of organization and financing for local environmental improvements is needed to encourage and facilitate the decentralization of urban development and the placing of decision-making into the hands of community members until this becomes normal practice, accepted and demanded by all. Furthermore, the experiences with UCEA have been important in strengthening the community networks that have participated in the process. Their experiences within UCEA have enabled them to better understand technical and financial aspects of community upgrading and have given them a new example of cooperation between professional agencies and the urban poor.

The UCEA project represents an important step forward for professional agencies that have been involved in this process. For the government, it has shown how officials and politicians can work more equitably with local communities, learning from their insights into how to use funds effectively, and understanding more about the priorities of local residents. For NGOs, academic and professional associations, the project has shown them how to contribute to community processes, responding to (rather than dominating) the perspectives and views of the urban poor. For DANCED, the experience has shown that large international agencies can effectively support a process of grassroots development, helping to improve the living conditions of the urban poor and transforming relationships between the state and civil society.