A string of thoughts on pro-poor urban development in practice

By Cindy Huang / 18.12.2016

Over the past few months, I've spent hours trying to figure out how to explain the work I was doing in Thailand, what it has meant to me, and what it may mean for the future of urban development. I was working with architects, but we weren't designing buildings; we were designing social processes related to built projects – most of which didn't actually get built. I guess in simplest terms, I was researching *political processes*.

Urban development involves a few key things: a demand for new infrastructure, a place where it will be developed, those implementing it, and those providing the resources. Between the people, places, and resources, negotiations take place. These negotiations determine how everything plays out, and leave long-term imprints on the environment—social, ecological, or economic, etc. Negotiations, being innately malleable, also open opportunities for marginalised people to amplify their voices. They are therefore points in time where political change is possible.

Participatory processes in the context of urban development use the creation of, and the need for, infrastructure to create social and political impact.

Most people would agree that when participatory practices are injected into mainstream urban planning, design, and architecture, built environment projects (are intended to) increase in social value. But when the physical elements become secondary to the social practice, it tends to confuse people. Take for instance, *community architecture* that operates through participatory workshops; sometimes they lead to new housing or public spaces, other times they generate new ideas, skills, and spaces for negotiation – but no new houses, physical spaces, or anything built. "What's the point, exactly?" people would ask me, "What about the funding to build these projects? To, you know, make *real* impact?"

Building buildings will always hold an upper hand on building people because of its visibility and advantage in speed; nurturing people's abilities is less apparent and a longer-term endeavour, and its effects can take

months—*years* to surface. If humans weren't so forgetful maybe this would be a non-issue, but we just don't seem to have the patience or brain space sometimes.

I think in order to convince people the value of social capacity building and encourage investments in socially-driven projects, more needs to be done to show the impacts of these processes – to measure them, document them, and make them noticeable.

Working alongside members the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and Community Architects Network (CAN) has been incredibly humbling – to hear their stories, learn how they've strategically pushed for better living conditions in the slums of their countries—Thailand, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Cambodia, among others—and how they've been able to garner political influence through bottom-up activities. It baffles me that so much of it is not documented in detail and shared with the rest of the world. How are people to know?

Yet, what I gathered is that it can be hard to step back and evaluate the larger picture when you're working to calm a storm from within. People working in pro-poor urban development—on the ground, with time against them, and in areas of poor governance or conflict—often do not have the resources to analyse long-term impacts of their everyday work, contrary to large institutions with sizeable funding and staff to manage M&E programmes. These organisations are often led by poor citizens themselves – their personal struggles intertwined with their work, their spirits dampened by their own work's setbacks.

It appears, then, that partnerships between small grassroots groups (like ACHR members) and global research institutions (like The Bartlett DPU), where knowledge exchange can be mutually beneficial, provide valuable opportunities for outside perspectives, research, evaluation, and documentation on such fieldwork practices.

These partnerships can also serve as platforms on which small organisations can, for instance, apply for larger-scale funding and disseminate information on their work to a wider audience. And where appropriate, institutions can give guidance on business/NGO management skills and strategies – something that many grassroots groups seem to seek support on.

I think these types of partnerships have the potential to become robust foundations for NGO capacity building, and that any partnership can thrive as long as everyone recognises the mutual benefits and follows a plan with specific goals (e.g. 18-month research exchange that produces 2 visually compelling publications on local policy change proposals, with [at least] 6 case studies on informal settlement upgrading via fieldwork with community groups A, B, and C, plus a 3-step strategy for distributing them to relevant policymakers and local community networks within 2 months of publication—with detailed tasks/deadlines per goal). I've found that in a field so often veered by economic and political instability, while also crossing different cultural conducts, clear communication and defined aims, goals, and responsibilities are not just helpful but necessary.

But then there are other questions like: How do we measure social impact in a field still being defined? How do we better communicate—better *prove*—a project's social impact to influential institutions and the wider public? And when it comes to social capacity building, how do we measure things like self-confidence, a sense of ownership, drive, or happiness?

I do not have the answers to these, but they'll be worth thinking about.

- - -

The private sector

There is always, to some degree, a clash between pro-poor grassroots organisations and the private sector. In urban development, the private sector has done so much damage to local economies, heritage, community structures, and Earth's soils and rivers, that associating with them can seem counter-intuitive, or just plain taboo. But I think when any taboo becomes undisputed, opportunities can also be overlooked.

Acquiring financial sustainability is perhaps the most crucial part of operating a grassroots organisation. I learned from ACHR/CAN architects that many of them secure funds for pro-poor projects through grants, self-funding,

and income from extra private clientele work; all of these can require a substantial amount of time.

One way I can imagine sustainable financing for these organisations is through partnering with the private sector – specifically with medium- to large-sized companies or corporations. Most corporations these days have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes, not to mention many would jump on the opportunity for good PR.

I was surprised to find out that Redbull Thailand was the one to approach a small ACHR affiliate organisation with funds for them to carry out slum community projects. What was more surprising is that I couldn't find these projects on Redbull Thailand's website or social media pages, and the organisation was never asked to promote their brand in any way. It would be fair to assume, then, that Redbull Thailand wasn't necessarily after the PR and simply had an allocated budget for CSR initiatives.

It makes me wonder how many other companies are looking to spend CSR funds in similar ways. Is there an untapped pool of financial resources for community-led NGOs in the corporate world?

Of course, ethical questions are bound to arise. What if a corporation wants to fund a project in Thailand's slums, but has a history of contributing to the destruction of slums? Would it be naïve to partner with them and give them the PR they may be seeking? Or, would it be an opportunity to educate them and work to shift their outlook and company strategy? Exploring such cases could be interesting.

During this year's CAN Regional Workshop, Somsook Boonyabancha spoke about the importance of working with the private sector, not against it, and taking advantage of the political spaces for negotiation that it can open. Urban development is, after all, largely funded and controlled by the private sector. And in many global south countries, governments need money as much as the next person—that of which the private sector can provide. What the government *does* control are the policies. And policies are often shifted around to make room for developers' demands. Working with developers like Somsook suggests may appear taboo to some, but is in fact tactful and sometimes an effective way for civil groups to leverage political power.

I think a major strength of ACHR is their ability to align with a range of sectors and actors, including big players in the government and land developers. I admire how Somsook has been able to garner a diverse network, manoeuvre within the system – changing it from within, while remaining steadfastly committed to the citizens – especially the poor. I'm curious to see how her strategic propensity will be passed onto the new generation of ACHR leaders.

I guess in any case, the more allies the better.

- - -

Thailand's urbanisation

To say that Bangkok has undergone a lot of urban development in the past decade would be an understatement. I barely recognise the city from my last visit. Rows of hi-tech skyscrapers next to rusty DIY street stalls are simply a depiction of Thailand's rush to become "more developed." But trying to race to the top of a mountain without basic training will ultimately lead to an injury.

There's no question that Bangkok needs to learn how to better build urban resilience. The inequity of where the money is going is stark; outskirts of Bangkok face far heavier flooding than the city centre, and the closer to the city the more billboards for new extravagant condominiums line the streets – "This could be yours!" they scream. Meanwhile, pockets of deteriorating slums lie between these condos, counting the days 'til they're forced out.

And when a massive flood comes, sure – a population of people are safe, which is better than none, but the whole society still suffers.

Throwing money towards safeguarding tiny areas as opposed to distributing it across a larger region has been proven ineffective – never mind unjust – but the reality is these decisions are still being made by the Thai government. What's worse is that large-scale infrastructure seems to be the go-to solution to combat climate change impacts; people have no choice but to watch their local history, ecosystems, and community

structures be destructed – the very things that would have helped strengthen the area's long-term resilience. What has taken so much time to nurture is destroyed so quickly. It makes you wonder, how can trust be built again?

But I also don't think this means hope should be lost. As global trends in urban planning and development promote the integration of social practices and condemn the lack thereof, there seems to be a *verrry* gradual emergence of community consultation activities for government-built projects in Thailand. The sincerity behind these activities can of course be questioned, but the fact that the government feels the need to exhibit them is perhaps a small step forward.

It proves that external pressures can help – that global institutions, think tanks, and political movements of any size can all play a part in encouraging governments to be democratic in their urban development – rewarding them for putting people first. And internally, citizens can do the same.

Twenty years ago, a community architecture studio that centred its work on slums would have been a radical idea for a sustainable business. Today, multiple ACHR affiliates have portfolios of slum community engagement work behind them in partnership with the government, research institutions, and the private sector – capturing the societal shift in Thailand's attitude towards urban development.

Multiply what this a few dozen times and you have the achievements of the ACHR/CAN network across Asia. Being a part of the CAN Regional Workshop in Chum Saeng was by far the best part of my six months in Thailand. Seeing the comradery of architects from so many different countries, working to change how places are remade and how people can be empowered, gave me new hope. After returning to London I've heard stories from CAN architects about workshops that took place in Nepal and Myanmar since, and it has made me realise the impact of CAN and ACHR activities; every little step they make sparks new hope in new places. ACHR and CAN are not just networks, they make up a socio-political movement.

I wonder if any government has recognised the extent to which ACHR and CAN are helping to build urban resilience in their countries, preparing societies across Asia for

future climate change impacts and economic fluxes. Do they realise the resource they have at hand?

I think this is why I find the hiddenness of grassroots movements both beautiful and frustrating.

- - -

This field

In my experience researching community-driven, pro-poor urban development and working with members of ACHR/CAN, there's one thing I find clear. To me there's a psychology to this field – a need for people to be particularly empathetic and able to connect with others, a need to make it more about behaviourism than the built environment. At the end of the day, it is about making people believe in something—whether it is an autonomy to make change, an ability to innovate, or simply a sense of citizenship. In this field, built environment projects provide the frameworks and tools that enable these processes of empowerment.

I think the key to bringing participatory practices to the forefront of architecture and planning is to document their impacts through telling people's stories – how they've related to their environments, how they've participated in shaping it, and how it has changed them. I think it is to show proof that self-belief is the root of self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency the cultivation of something more: savings groups that fund community-led housing upgrades, civic groups that maintain local heritage sites, regional networks of architects that mobilise and train communities.

If there's anything that I took from my six months in Thailand, it's that ACHR/CAN practitioners are not just architects of built projects, they are architects of spaces for political negotiation. And their clients are the slum communities of the global south. What this means for the future of urban planning and global development, I don't know. But I think in this case, the uncertainty is a good thing; it means the conditions are malleable, which means there's an opportunity for political change.