

Thailand

Listen, listen to the people

by David Drucker

"I say to them, open your ears — listen to the people, but they have no time — they have to listen to the budget line and planning deadlines." Speaking is Khun Chira Sakornpan, one of the authors of a landmark study on the Klong Toey squatters slum in Bangkok, produced back in 1971 by Thailand's Thammasat University, assisted by UNICEF.

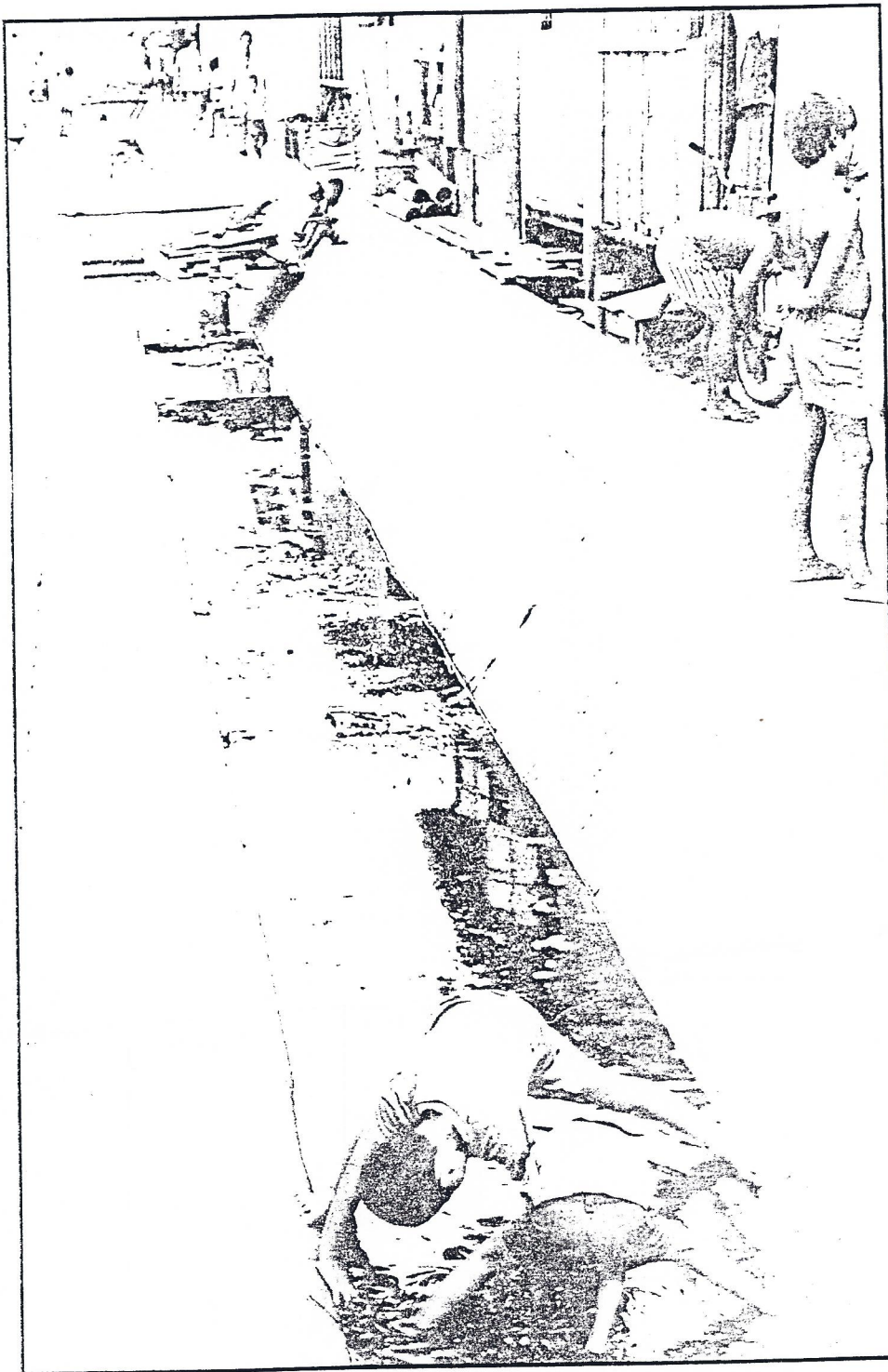
The report was commissioned because the Port Authority, as a major contribution to national economic development, was to make a large investment in expanding and modernizing the port of Bangkok.

Klong Toey, which was scheduled for development, was the area behind the harbour, on the marshy swampland owned by the Port Authority; on it were 25,000 squatters. The public image of the squatter then was of an itinerant, unemployed delinquent, an altogether parasitic person. The shanties which had sprung up were not provided with the public services available in other parts of the city. Acknowledgement of the squatters' existence by any government department would be tantamount to recognition of their right to be on land owned by the Port Authority.

Resettlement

It is not uncommon in many parts of the world for squatters to be driven from their shanties by force and by the bulldozing of their homes. Usually the public cost of the social disruption which follows such a 'solution' does not fall on those ordering the bulldozing, not on those owning the land nor on development budgets, but on other departments and peoples, public and private. The 'evicting' authority has little stake in, or concern for, the 'underworld' individuals being deprived of their 'illegal' homes. There have been few examples anywhere of this kind of operation being undertaken with real dignity and compassion.

In Klong Toey, the young university students' study began to provide hard facts previously unknown about the squatters — their seamy image turned out to be a myth. What emerged instead was a remarkable picture. For example, 93 per cent of all



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household heads and 33 per cent of all persons, adults and children, were working at the time of the study.

Far from being itinerants, they were found to be a highly stable community with very little crime and few of the other vices which had been ascribed to them. They showed great industry and ingenuity in constructing 'homes' on marshland considered unsuitable for building or for any other purpose without considerable preparatory investment. A very large number actually worked for the Port Authority and within the port. Indeed, resettlement of the squatters elsewhere on the periphery of Bangkok would have had serious consequences for the labour force in the docks.

A strong case was then made for this different perspective: far from being a drain on the taxpayers, the squatters of Klong Toey actually *subsidized* the city. As they did not have to pay the high rents that speculative land purchase and building forced upon many residents of the city, the people of Klong Toey were able to survive on very low wages, impossibly low for those living elsewhere. Much of the city's manual and unskilled work was being financed by the low wages and the low-cost living of citizens like those in Klong Toey.

The squatters of Klong Toey had provided over 4,000 dwelling units at no cost to anyone but themselves and at an estimated one-tenth the cost of the lowest-cost government housing.

Identity achieved

In 1971 the links between the planning organization of the Thai government and the academic world were few. Most academic research never reached policymakers; that which did was rarely in usable form. It was quite new to bring outsiders into government committees at all. However, an illustrated brochure of the Klong Toey facts—a popular version of the study—was produced and distributed with UNICEF assistance, and drew considerable comment and publicity.

Suddenly, something unexpected had happened. In an unplanned way, the students' involvement in the study had 'rehabilitated' the squatters. From being non-persons, with very few rights, they had achieved the status of worthy citizens who, literally and symbolically, would no longer just be counted, but would themselves now count. Through the deep concern of the students, part of the social elite, the squatters gained identity as a community—henceforth

they would have to be reckoned with.

At the time, welfare programmes were mainly traditional charity and relief services, but there was a growing expectation that it would be possible to organize a community participation approach for Klong Toey. This would help improve living conditions for those who remained in the slums and bring about the orderly resettlement of families vacated for Port Authority development.

Now, some fifteen years later, the slum of Klong Toey still exists and has become famous in its own way. Articles appear regularly, films are produced and Klong Toey now even has a newsletter—the *Plank City News*. The children of Klong Toey to whom the original study was dedicated are now the parents of a new generation. Although slums in Bangkok encompass almost a million squatters, it is Klong Toey's 7,000 families who get much of the attention.

The Port Authority, nonetheless, still needs to expand and current plans for a new container wharf means people will have to move on, for the second or third time.

Originally, many of the squatters were energetic agricultural workers from the northeast. The government, at great cost, has attempted to send some home, but still

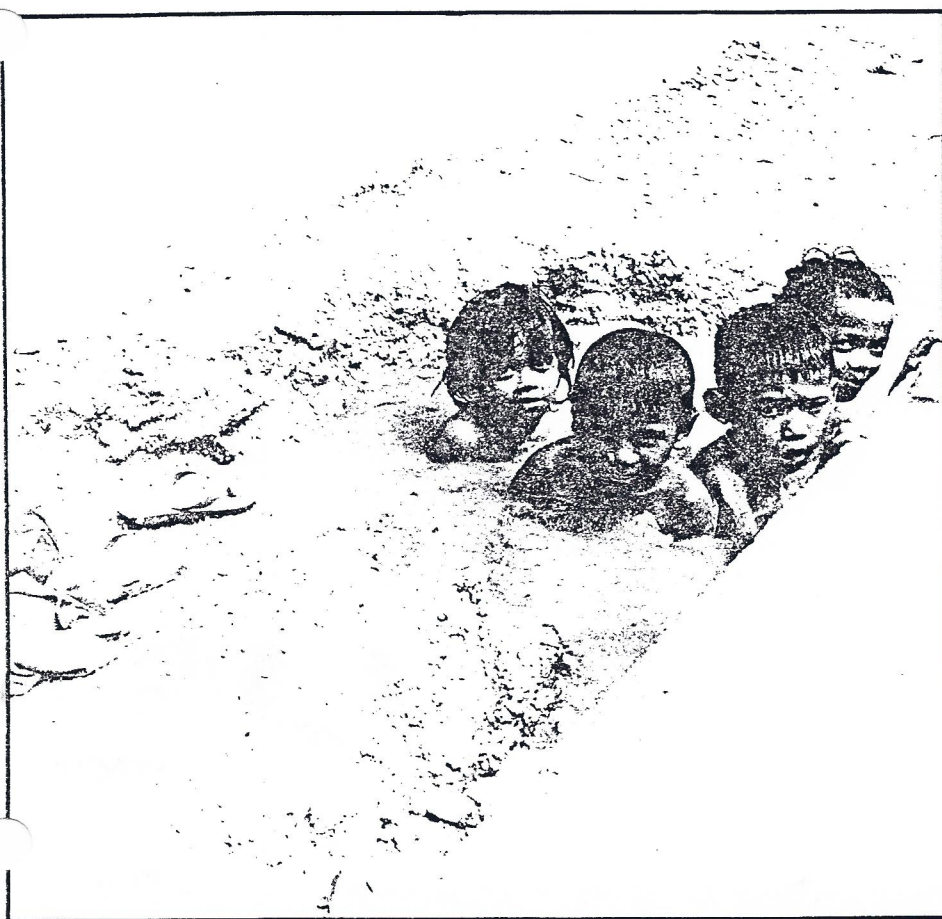
Street children are more susceptible to infectious diseases if they suffer from malnutrition, anaemia and neglect.

A big hand for flexibility

In 1974 after independence from a hundred years of Portuguese colonial rule, the new government of Guinea-Bissau started several rural water supply projects with foreign assistance. The Buba-Tombali wells project, supported by the Netherlands, is one of these.

One of the project's most significant aspects is the flexibility of its objectives, which have been modified in accordance with the people's wishes.

For instance the foot-operated 'kangaroo' pump imported from the Netherlands was given up because the people preferred handpumps. The project staff then developed such a pump locally. It was called the Buba pump, and the people liked it. ■



UNICEF 1738/86/Halevi



they come. A new generation of street-wise children, alienated from rural roots, has become today's slum dwellers and has learned urban ways of survival. More than one in five young men are now unemployed. Government and voluntary agencies, politicians, and the people themselves have become increasingly sophisticated in the tactics of 'the eviction war'.

One who emerged from the slum where she was born, grew up, and still lives, is Prateep Unsongthan. She is unusual for she is an insider, seeking to aid her people from within the community. She began with no saintly ambition; she needed work and money. Knowing that simply putting up a notice announcing 'school' would result in 150 children turning up for classes, she began to teach in a shanty building. To her surprise, she became famous.

The battle for certification of the school and registration of children without legal addresses or birth certificates continues. Prateep believes that if one cares for the children of the slums, one must inevitably be concerned with all that touches their lives. Full of energy, warmth and good humour, she seems unspoiled by the national and international recognition her work has attracted.

With the proceeds of her Magasaysay Award, she has established the Prateep Foundation for the people of Klong Toey. She shrugs off the 'Angel of the Slums' label bestowed upon her by the popular press — she prefers the nickname 'devil', earned for her nuisance value to the authorities. She laughs as she speaks of how her own mother thinks she is 'out of control' when she stands on a platform addressing the crowd through loudspeakers. She insists that while the authorities try to do their best, 'they just don't understand the people'. Like Khun Chira, she feels they have no time to listen.

Time has brought change. It is no longer possible to attempt to solve problems with bulldozers and breaking heads. There is no inclination, nor could authorities face the public outcry. On private land, however, there is much suspicion that 'accidental fires' are not accidental. Where access is difficult and fire brigades expect favours for doing their job, Klong Toey denizens can lose their flimsy squatters' rights once their actual dwellings are destroyed by fire. The squatters have learned to respond by frantically securing lumber, mosquito nets and rice bowls which they place phoenix-like upon the ashes to restore evidence of residence before the law can appear and legally evict them.

Although activists must be more cautious

than in the past, some have shown themselves ready to stand by the slum dwellers, accompany them to police stations, put up bail, and ensure swift legal representation. 'Housing is more than houses', proclaim the T-shirts.

Leadership from the community shows strength when there is an external threat. But those who look for sustained community participation regret that leadership and energy dissipate once a crisis has passed. People are 'too busy trying to earn a living'.

For those hitherto excluded from society, as elsewhere, participation for self-defence *against* 'development' sometimes comes to seem more relevant than participation *in* 'development'.

The authorities see things differently. They insist there are some who seek advantage for themselves in the name of 'social justice' and who are more interested in what they can get than in any long-term planning. As one official says: "We must abide by the rules. The people disagree — not in meeting rooms but in the media".

Today in Klong Toey, the rickety walkways, the flooding (which it shares with the rest of Bangkok) and particularly the stagnant water and the extraordinary proliferation of non-degradable garbage still make the area look much the same as ever.

Nevertheless, over the years electricity and water have become available in Klong Toey. Ways have been found, if the squatter can pay, to provide these services. Despite the requirement to register an official address, schools and health centres were offered — the health authorities moved to action by the threat of spreading cholera. Gradually registration has been achieved, houses are being numbered, and ID cards made available. Becoming part of the system entitles the slum dwellers to vote, to be taken in some measure into account. Help has also come from the army through provisions of army labour to construct 142 cement breeze-block dwellings with concrete paths and simple sanitation.

Community involvement

In Thailand, each member of parliament now has a say in the disbursement of 2.5 million baht (some \$100,000) in their constituencies. Some use this as an opportunity to involve communities in setting priorities and planning. The policy is that the people be consulted. But another view holds that 'we the lawmakers cannot help those who disregard the law', and it is said that in practice some district officers appoint community representatives themselves.

The National Housing Authority, which has spent millions on slum improvement and seeks millions more for upgrading Klong Toey, has struggled to negotiate leasing of alternative Port Authority land at nominal cost. Squatters would have to relocate and pay a monthly rent. For all its good intentions, many consider the housing authority just another landlord to struggle with; all the arrangements, it is said, are made without involving the 'beneficiaries'. The poor will take what is offered, but they do not easily forgive charity — money is important, but so is honour.

"Development is not something that can be given or imposed from outside. It must come from inside", explains Prateep. "It is for the people to decide what their future will be."

So the story of Klong Toey is a continuing one. The expectation of a true meeting of the planners and the planned-for in a working partnership has not been achieved. The development of the rural areas, the plans for a new port and the energizing of the Eastern Seaboard are painfully slow in getting under way. Agricultural prices continue to fall. Rural incomes don't keep pace with inflation and means of employment remain highly concentrated in the capital of the country.

Bangkok burgeons its concrete wider and higher, throwing more slums into shadow and requiring more evictions from the remaining canal banks to keep drainage clear and to deal with the increasing problem of flooding.

Chira Sakornpan, with whom this account started, has spent her working life trying to make others understand. She has been on numerous committees and shared their confusions. She and her colleagues have been called upon to study proposals and feasibility of plans. Targets are set, programmes devised to make sure that money will be forthcoming, or to ensure good evaluation. She herself is often considered troublesome, too argumentative, for although she knows the potential value of studies, she and her kind are not called upon to put programmes into operation or to closely follow what happens to the people.

What is needed, she says, is "for us to really listen", to tackle the different dimensions of people time and organizational time. The gap still awaits effective methods of participation between the people of Klong Toey, with their enormous talent for endurance, and those who command resources and still hold to the twin objectives of improving the living conditions of the poorest, and enhancing national development. □