

Klong Toey ~~THAILAND~~LISTEN LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE.

"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". It is Khun Chira Sakornpan speaking, one of the authors of a landmark study on the Klong Toey squatters slum in Bangkok produced back in 1971 by Thammasat University, Thailand, and assisted by UNICEF.

The situation leading to the commissioning of the report arose from the fact that the Port Authority, as a major contribution to national economic development, was to make a large investment in expanding and modernising the port of Bangkok.

Settled on Klong Toey behind the harbour, on the marshy swampland owned by the Port Authority, were 25,000 squatters and it was this area which was then scheduled for development. The public image of a squatter was one of an itinerant, unemployed, delinquent, altogether parasitic person. The shanties which had sprung up were not provided with the public services which are available to other parts of the city, if for no other reason than that the acknowledgement of the existence of the squatters by any government department would be

tantamount to recognition of their right to be on land owned by the Port Authority.

Throughout the world it is not uncommon for squatters to be driven from their shanties by force and their homes bulldozed. It usually happens that the public cost of the social disruption which follows such a "solution" does not fall on those ordering the bulldozing, on those owning the land or on development budgets, but on other departments and persons, public and private. The "evicting" authority has little stake in, or concern for, the somewhat "underworld" persons who are deprived of their "illegal homes". There have been few examples anywhere in the world where this kind of operation has been undertaken with real dignity and compassion.

The Klong Toey study began to provide hard facts about the squatters which until then had not been known or available to anyone. The seamy image of the squatters turned out to be a myth. Instead, a remarkable picture emerged. For example, 93 per cent of all 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 or 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. A resettlement of the squatters elsewhere on the periphery of Bangkok therefore would have serious consequences for maintaining the labour force in the docks.

A strong case was then made for showing that far from being a drain on the taxpayers, the squatters of Klong Toey actually subsidized the city. They did not have to pay the high rents that speculative land purchase and building forced upon many residents of the city; so the people of Klong Toey were able to survive on very low wages offered for their labour, which was impossible for those living elsewhere. In this sense much of the manual and unskilled work of the city was financed by the low wages and the lowcost living of the 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 low-cost government housing.

In 1971 there were few links between the planning organization of the Thai government and the academic world. Most of the research from academia never reached policymakers; that which did was rarely in a useable form. It was quite new to bring outsiders in to government committees at all. However,

a brochure of the Klong Toey facts with pictures - a popular version of the study - was produced and distributed with UNICEF assistance, and drew much interesting comment and publicity.

Something dramatic took place. In a quite unplanned way, the students' involvement in the study had "rehabilitated" the squatters from the status of non-persons, with very few rights, to worthy citizens who literally and symbolically were not just to be counted but would now count. The students found themselves concerned and identified with the problems of the squatters, and this in turn made the squatters a potential social and political force (in the most positive sense).

With support from an educated upper class group (the students and the University), henceforth they would have to be reckoned with. Although at the time welfare programmes were mainly traditional charity and relief services, 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 in 1985, fifteen years later, the slum of Klong Toey still exists and has become famous in its own way. Articles are published regularly, films are produced and Klong Toey now

even sports its own 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 abound in Bangkok encompassing almost a million squatters, it is Klong Toey with its 7,000 families that gets 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 they come. A generation of street-wise children alienated from rural roots have become today's slum dwellers and 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".

Emerging from the slum where she was born and grew up, and still lives, is Prateep Unsongthan. She is unusual for she is an insider, seeking to aid her people from within. She explains that she began with no saintly ambition; she needed work and money. Knowing that all you have to do is put up a notice announcing "school", and that 150 children will turn up,

she began to teach in a shanty building. To her surprise, her fame spread.

The battle for certification of the school and registration of children without legal addresses, and birth certificates has begun. Prateep believes that if one cares for the children of the slums, inevitably one must be concerned with all that touches their lives. Full of energy, warmth and good humour, she has been 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 her popular label of "the Angel of the Slums"; she is more at home with the title of "devil", earned because of 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 upon a platform addressing the crowd through loudspeakers. She insists that the authorities try to do their best, "but they just don't understand the people". Like Khun Chira, she feels they have no time to listen.

Time has brought change. It would no longer be possible to attempt to solve problems with bulldozers and by 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 to be given favors, Klong Toey denizens lose their flimsy squatters' rights if their actual dwellings no longer exist because of destruction by fire. The squatters respond in an organized manner by frantically securing lumber, mosquito nets and rice bowls. They place them phoenix-like upon the ashes to show evidence of residence before the law appears and can legally evict them.

Although activists have to be more cautious than in the past, some have shown themselves ready to stand by the slumdweller, accompany them to police stations, put up bail, and ensure swift legal representation. T-shirts proclaim "Housing is more than houses".

Leadership from the community shows some strength when there is an external threat. But it is a matter of sorrow to those who look for positive participation by the community that leadership and energy dissipate once a crisis has passed. "We are too busy trying to earn a living," some will explain.

As it has been shown elsewhere, for those hitherto excluded from society, 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 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". The rickety walk-ways, the flooding (which Klong Toey shares with all Bangkokians) and particularly the stagnant water and the extraordinary proliferation of non-degradable garbage still look much the same as ever.

Even so, over the years electricity and water have become available in Klong Toey. If the squatters can pay, ways have been found to provide these. Education and health facilities have also been offered despite the requirement of registering an official address. The health authorities have been moved to action particularly because Klong Toey had become the focal point for the spread of cholera. Gradually registration has been achieved, the numbering of houses has been instituted; ID cards have become available. When that happens, it was pointed out, "the slum dwellers are able to vote - and that leads to more trouble".

Members of parliament now each have a say in the disbursement of 2.5 million baht (\$100,000) in their constituencies. Some use this as an opportunity to involve

communities in setting priorities and planning. But, as one MP says, "We cannot help those who disregard the law for we are the lawmakers". It has become policy that the people be consulted; but in practice, some district officers are said to appoint community representatives themselves. ↩

↩ The leaders, too, often perform in authoritarian ways and do not earn or retain the respect of the community. ↩ The National Housing Authority spent 267 million baht in five years on slum improvement and has sought approximately the same amount for upgrading Klong Toey alone. With the present intention to move the occupants from the planned container wharf area, they have struggled to negotiate the legal lease of alternate Port Authority land at a nominal cost. A large sum has been spent for roads and drainage, but the people are refusing to accept a rental of 180 baht (\$7) a month over 20 years. They also argue that the cost of transferring their shelters is prohibitive. A benefactor has been found to meet some of these costs and, in addition, General Artit a very prominent military figure in Thai politics, has provided army labour to construct 142 cement breeze block dwellings with concrete paths and simple sanitation. The army, eager to hold the hearts and minds of the people, sees areas of poverty in strategic areas like Thailand's docks as a possible breeding ground for infiltration by the urban guerrillas which plague other countries.

Discouragingly, for all its good intentions, the National Housing Authority is considered by many just another landlord to struggle with; all the arrangements, it is said, are made without involving those who are considered to be beneficiaries. Although the poor will take what is offered, they do not easily forgive charity - it is not just money that is wanted, it is honour.

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

So the Klong Toey story and of places like it continues. The expectation of a true meeting of the planners and the planned-for in a partnership to tackle fundamental problems has not been achieved. The development of the rural areas, the plans for a new port and the energising of the Eastern Sea Board are painfully slow in getting under way. Agricultural prices continue to fall. Rural incomes don't keep pace with inflation and the opportunity to work remains 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 in order to keep clear the drainage and

to deal with the increasing problem of flooding.

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

It needs, she says, "for us to really listen", and 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 talents to endure, and those who command resources and still hold to the twin objectives of improving the living conditions of the poorest, and enhancing national development.