

COMMUNITY PROJECTS AND DEMOCRATIC PLANNING IN THAILAND: LESSONS FOR GHANA

D.K.B. Inkoom

*Department of Planning, Faculty of Planning and Land Economy,
College of Architecture and Planning,
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology,
Kumasi*

ABSTRACT

The paper is based on field visits to community projects in Thailand as part of the learning processes of community initiatives and democratisation of planning practices at the community level. The principal objective of these studies is to analyse the mechanisms that communities use to initiate, implement, and manage community projects on a sustainable basis to benefit their lives. The focus of the paper is on Urban Community Environmental Activities (UCEA) projects in Thailand, examining the genesis of the programme, the processes involved and more importantly the structure of community participation in the implementation and management of the programmes. The role of central government in providing the legal, institutional and financial incentives to facilitate the process is also analysed. The factors that contributed to the relative success of these projects: an independent board to ensure flexibility, participation of the poor, and strong social and community networks are outlined. Furthermore, the paper draws lessons from the Thai experiences that are relevant for the development of urban communities in Ghana.

Keywords: *Community initiatives, project governance, decentralisation, Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

Comparing Ghana and Thailand is like finding a needle in a haystack, in the light of the vast historical, political, social-cultural, and economic differences. Despite these differences, there are, however some similarities—a near justification for comparing and drawing experiences on Thailand for Ghana. For example, both Ghana and Thailand are guilty of near-critical assaults on

their resource bases. Thailand has plundered its incomparable stands of teak just as Ghana has destroyed its rainforests. To quote the grave assessment of the Thai economists Pasuk and Baker (1996 p.210) in the best seller *Thailand's boom*:

“Over the past generation, Thailand’s environment has taken a beating. The forests have been chopped down. The city has be-

come jammed, ugly, polluted. Industrial wastes have poisoned the air; killed off the fish in rivers, made some villages scarcely habitable...this has not been the result of simple carelessness. Rather it has been a bye-product of the way that Thailand has chosen to develop."

To understand the issues to be discussed in this paper, brief profiles of each country is presented, after which the cases in Thailand for which experiences can be drawn for the improvement of the situation of the urban poor is discussed. The comparison is based on the understanding that positive elements of strategies and approaches for development that have worked in one context may not work in another unless the social-cultural, political, economic and spatial issues are considered. In other words, applications of approaches have to be context -and time specific in order to respond to the needs of the population.

Profile of Thailand

The Kingdom of Thailand (until the military coup in September 2006) was a constitutional monarchy with a Prime Minister and a King. The Kingdom has a land area of 513,115 sq km and an estimated population of 65,444,371 in 2005. The population growth rate is estimated at 0.87 per cent and the projected population for the year 2025 is 73, 260,176. The population density is 128 persons per sq km, with an urban population of 32 per cent against 68 per cent rural. In terms of population of the major settlements, Bangkok, the capital is the primate city with a population of 6,320,172 in 2000 with the rest of the cities well below the half a million mark. Life expectancy is 73.9 years for females and 69.4 years for males, with infant mortality at 21 per 1000 live births. The literacy rate is 96.4 per cent.

The GDP in 2003 was US\$ 143 billion, and a per capita GDP of US\$ 2, 310. The GDP by the various sectors of the economy are as follows: agriculture 9.8 per cent and employing 46 per

cent of the workforce, Industry 44 per cent and employing 21 per cent of the workforce, and the services sector contributing 46.3 per cent and employing 33 per cent of the workforce. In 2002, the unemployed were estimated 1.8 per cent of the workforce. (World Bank, 2003)

The country's major exports are garments, electronic goods (especially, semi-conductors) prawns, rice, rubber, precious gems, cassava, sugar, and cigarettes. The major imports are petroleum and petroleum products, machinery, chemicals, iron, and steel.

Profile of Ghana

Ghana became independent of British rule in 1957. Ghana has a land area of 238,500 sq. km. The population, according to the latest population census (2000) was 18,912,079, with an estimated population (2005) of 21,029,853. With a population growth rate of 1.25 per cent, the figure is projected to reach 25 364 645 in 2025. Population density is estimated at 91 persons per sq. km (2005), with 46 per cent urban and 54 per cent rural. The major settlements are Accra, the capital, Kumasi, Tema, Takoradi, Tamale, and Cape Coast. Life expectancy is 56 years (2005), 57 for females and 55 for males. Infant mortality rate is 51 deaths per 1000 live births and the literacy rate is 76.9 per cent.

Gross Domestic Product in 2003 was US\$ 7.6 billion, with a per capita GDP at US\$ 370.

In terms of the contribution to GDP by the various sectors, the figures (2003) are as follows: agriculture, forestry and fisheries 35.8 per cent and employing 62 per cent of the workforce, Industry contributes 24.3 per cent and employs 10 per cent of the workforce, while services contribute 29.3 per cent and employs 2.8 per cent of the workforce.

The country's major exports include cocoa, gold, and timber, while the major imports include petroleum and petroleum products, and manufactured goods. (World Bank, 2003)

Ghana and Thailand - Any basis for comparison?

As shown by the profiles, the two countries vary extensively: historically, culturally, and socio-economically and the following statistics (Thompson and Thompson 2000) confirm these differences: Electricity production has increased by 58 per cent in Ghana since 1972 and by 1,148 per cent in Thailand. Inflation in Ghana since 1964 (the first year for which data are available) has multiplied 1,310 beyond Thailand's. One Cedi could buy then what 7,808 cedis can buy in 2005. Ghana's health expenditure per capita in 1995 was US\$4. Of Ghanaians over 15 years, 35.5 are illiterate, as against 6 per cent of Thais. Ghana's population is growing at such a rate as to double in 19 years, while schools are already being shut in Thailand thanks to the success of the population programmes. In Thailand, there were 103 telephone lines for 1,000 people; in Ghana 13 in 2003. (World Bank, 2003). The total of paved road as share of total roads in 2001 was 99 per cent in Thailand as compared to 18 per cent in Ghana. In terms of the internet, the number of internet host per 10,000 was 16 for Thailand, while it was 0.17 for Ghana. In terms of well-being, the average Ghanaian, in 1957, was richer than the average Thai. But in 1996, the average Ghanaian earned US\$420 per year, whereas the average Thai earned US\$1,855 (World Bank, 1999).

Despite the great differences in the statistics presented above, it is obvious that in several respects, Thailand has made more progress than Ghana in terms of socio-economic development, and there might be the possibilities of learning from their experience in urban community development for the benefit of urban development in Ghana.

Methods and sources of information

Data for this paper was collected during a two-week field trip to the Kingdom of Thailand in 2001. The purpose was to visit the Urban Communities Environmental Activities Project (UCEA) and to investigate the idea of a public

institution (UCDO/ECEA) initiating, joining, and facilitating a process that is genuinely owned and driven by communities themselves. It was also to get inspiration and knowledge useful to planning practice, teaching and research. This was within the context of the Enhancing Research Capacity (ENRECA) project jointly undertaken by the Department of Planning of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and the Department of Human Settlements of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The team works on a research in Ghana under the title "Community Initiatives and Democratization of Planning" This focus is the result of earlier research and general experience, which suggested that planners continue to operate without much sensitivity to local communities—neither when approached for assistance by communities nor when intervening in them.

The team went to Thailand with two key questions in mind:

- i) How do ordinary citizens, community committee members and community leaders experience UCEA?
- ii) How have communities responded to the implementation of the UCEA? And are they being strengthened in their capacity to organise themselves and deal with their problems?

In order to investigate the implementation of the UCEA, the team focused on visits to communities in three towns, namely Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai and carried out the following activities:

- Direct observation of environmental conditions
- Discussion with members of community network committees
- Discussion with community leaders
- Discussion with leaders of communities which have not implemented UCEA projects, some of which are adjacent to communities taking part in a network implementing UCEA.

- Discussion with residents of communities which implement UCEA

In addition to focusing on field visits to the communities, the team had discussions with other relevant actors, namely:

- The National Housing Authority (NHA)- NHA is the main agency dealing with low-income housing in Thailand
- The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), which is the agency spearheading efforts to implement decentralisation and public participation in planning, as specified by the new Constitution of Thailand and the 7th Social and Economic Development Plan. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) - BMA is the only local government in Thailand with autonomy for planning and management of the urban areas.
- The Chiang Mai Provincial Government, Planning Department – The Chiang Mai Provincial Government operates under the Ministry of Interior. Its Planning Department focuses on land use and road network planning in Chiang Mai and neighbouring provinces.
- People's Organisation for Participation (POP) - POP is a non-governmental organisation which has been closely involved with the implementation UCEA in Chiang Mai.

The genesis of the UCEA programme

In the early 1990s, Thailand was reaping the benefits of ten years of economic boom, but somehow, the urban poor were continuing to miss out on the prosperity. The urban poor could not satisfy their basic needs, especially housing. To find out why, a study team was set up under the National Housing Authority bringing out community groups, activists, slum federations, civil society groups, entrepreneurs and key government people from all over Thailand to develop a new process to address poverty (UCDO, 2000).

The project idea was based on the following principles:

- To strengthen the capacity of individual urban poor communities in Thailand through participation in all stages from planning and implementation to monitoring of environmental development projects;
- To strengthen the networking and co-operation capacity of urban poor communities in Thailand through participation in all stages from planning and implementation to monitoring of environmental network development projects;
- To strengthen partnerships between urban communities and other local stakeholders, primarily through encouragement of local stakeholder co-operation and through the implementation of integrated partnership projects;
- To influence policy and regulation in the direction of decentralisation, environmental improvements, and active participation of urban poor through documentation of concrete implementation successes and networking; and
- To set the agenda for environmental innovations through implementation of high profiled environmental demonstration projects.

Based on the approach to bring development to the grassroots, the overall objective was to ensure decentralised community driven environmental management in urban low-income areas. The committee found out that poor community organisations in Thailand were doing a lot and had the potential to manage their own development. The missing elements were access to resources-particularly affordable credit and a support mechanism to help link the efforts of local communities and support a large-scale community-driven development movement. On the basis of the findings, the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) was established in 1992 with an initial grant of 1.25 billion Baht (US\$34 million), which was a special revolving fund to support urban community development activities

and to provide low interest loans to community organisations for emergencies, housing, and income generation. Though technically under the National Housing Authority umbrella, UCDO had its own development process and a separate board of directors to allow the fullest flexibility.

The Board has one-third of its members from the poor communities, one-third from government, and one-third from outside organisations. This new fund was to be accessible to all poor groups who organised themselves to apply for loans for their development projects. Over half of Thailand's 2000 urban poor communities in 50 provinces are now UCDO members linked together into 103 networks through a broad range of community development activities, including housing, income generation, environmental improvement, community enterprise and welfare. In October 2000, the UCDO was officially merged with the Rural Development Fund to become the Community Organisations Development Institute (CODI).

Underlying principles of the community development strategy

This section discusses the underlying principles of the community development strategy that was adopted and which enabled communities to improve their living conditions.

Joining forces with government to mainstream community-driven processes

The networks did their best to involve people of different organisations and different backgrounds in their activities. This was based on the belief that if one wants to make change and create and develop a common development path, which works for the poor, people and institutions at many levels need to be involved and need to have a shared vision of what is possible. This had several advantages as the networks were able to get the support of people in authority to respond to their needs, and thus they were able to initiate a debate of what could be done to solve their problems. Secondly, government

officials, by their interaction with the communities, broadened their perspectives on the problems of the poor, which enabled them to respond appropriately in the formulation and implementation of pro-poor policies.

Plugging government resources into the network process

The UCDO was able to link two government economic aid programmes with their urban poor target groups, through the community network process. Two outstanding examples have been the Miyazawa Fund of Japan and the Social Investment Fund programmes. The programmes provided the networks an opportunity to demonstrate to government an alternative system for channelling resources and ensuring that resources reach the intended beneficiaries and they in turn use the resources for the purposes for which they were provided. With the access to larger resources, the communities and networks had the opportunity and tools to strengthen their capacity to manage much larger development resources and widen their potential to attract other financial resources.

Letting practice set systems instead of systems setting practice

Communities are allowed windows to try things and to make mistakes, but encouraged to learn from the mistakes. The philosophy was that a lot of good ideas get destroyed in the consideration phase, before they ever get the chance to be tried, so in order to learn, there was the need to accommodate mistakes. This rarely happens in a government-supported programme. The notion behind this approach was to emphasize implementation, learn from what works and what does not, and using that as a basis for designing the next line of actions. With these experiences, rules for future operations were then established from practice. This way of working has its risks, but these were seen as necessary ingredients if communities would grow and manage their own development processes and activities.

The use of Networks

The word Network was chosen as the best English equivalent of the Thai *krua kai*, (which conjures up images of fishing nets...) and was deemed loose enough to be flexible, without actually implying that it has to be loose. This soft-focus leaves the door open for fresh interpretations and new models of what a network might be, or how it might operate, and allows many quite dramatically different processes to run at the same time, all of them still being networks. Networks developed according to the interests and capabilities of the groups involved and according to their own changing circumstances.

Networks come in all shapes and sizes. Some, like the networks of under-bridge communities in Bangkok, communities on Crown property, along railway tracks, and beside *Klongs* (canals), have common tenure or landlord problems and come together to find joint solutions and negotiate for land rights and entitlements as a block. Occupational networks like the taxi and *Tuk-tuk* (water taxi) co-operatives and the different community enterprise networks use group-system clout to deal with sharks in finance and private sector institutions and to lobby for large-scale municipal contracts.

Turning difficulties into opportunity

The problems that the economic collapse in 1997 brought with it meant that the urban poor were affected in several ways. Before 1997, nearly a million people were pulled out of poverty each year. With a population of 61 million, the country saw the number of the poor increase from 6.8 million in 1996 to 9.8 million in 1998. The Northeast, the poorest region of the country, experienced a drop in income twice the national average. The problems that the economic collapse brought with it meant that the urban poor were also affected in several ways. The UCDO was established with the help of the Thai Government to tackle problems of urban poverty in 1992. After the country's economic

crisis in 1997, which saw increased balance of payment deficits, and fewer resources from government to undertake development projects, much more impetus was given the poor to improve their lot through collective effort and empowerment. The poor used this as an opportunity to launch out in order to overcome these problems.

The process of "unlearning" for professionals

In order to work with the poor, many of the professionals of the Non-Governmental Organisations had to adopt different approaches in order to gain acceptance in the communities and trust among the people. In several instances, the kind of training provided by training institutions does not respond to local needs, making professionals ineffective in their local environments. In terms of community development, this is particularly critical as professionals intervene with their biases and prejudices stemming up from, among others, their education and orientation. The UCDO staff had to undergo training that would bring them close to understanding the issues in the communities there were working. The training programme for the staff of the NGO was structured in such a way as to allow them to live in the communities for a period of six months as part of their orientation and integration into the programme.

Integrated Credit System Response to the needs of the poor

Communities have diverse needs, including better incomes, better housing, access to credit, access to secure land, better prices for their produce, agricultural and from industry, and many others. The integrated credit system responded to these needs as it allowed community member to have access to credit to respond to the myriad of needs. Nine separate loans were developed, each with its conditions for access. These included Housing development loans, house improvement loans, income generation loans, revolving fund loans, revolving network loans, community enterprise loans, bank guarantee

loans, revival loans, and Miyazawa revival loans which were operated with funds available from the Japanese government's economic aid package to Thailand.

Empowering communities

The concept of empowerment is not new for Thai society. Empowering the community in Thailand means building social capital and promoting self-reliance. It means crafting a development paradigm that is balanced and brings harmony back in the society (as posited by the ninth Development Plan) and moving away from the "excesses" of the high-growth era which led to commensurate high social costs (World Bank, 2001). Efforts aimed at strengthening the Thai society have been embodied in different ways: starting with the lessons of His Majesty the King calling for Thai people to be more self-reliant; to legal reforms mandated by the new Constitution; to the development agenda advanced by the 8th and 9th National Development Plans; and finally to the growing grassroots movements among the people themselves seeking a larger role in policy formulation and implementation.

Lessons from the Thailand Experience

The following lessons could be relevant for the development of urban communities in Ghana.

The leading role of government in development

The key role that governments have to play in the development of people cannot be overemphasised. Governments have the responsibility to provide the broad policy framework for other development partners to operate. There is always the need for government to provide the enabling environment for people to participate, in addition to providing the initial resources needed to trigger development. In this case the Thai government provided the required wherewithal for the programme to take off. By providing the necessary funds for the UCDO to initiate the project and to support the communities and the networks, the government of Thailand demonstrated practical commitment to the elimination

of urban poverty. One common problem associated with Ghana's decentralisation is inadequate funds for decentralised institutions to implement the functions assigned to them. The District Assemblies' Common Fund (DACF), which is expected to provide resources to the district to support development, is almost always in arrears, causing Assemblies to fail to meet their financial obligations to contractors, communities, and also in the running and implementation of the Assemblies' own programmes. Many assembly members contend that the only regular feature of the DACF is the delay in disbursement, and this does not auger well for the decentralisation process. Government has to ensure resources are available for initiatives, especially those that are locally based and started by local people.

Linking development to the ideology and cultural beliefs of the people

In the Thai Language, the word for housing, *tiyuasai*, carries the sense of a place where you abide, not a thing that you actually own. The belief that "we are all ultimately borrowers, that we can only use the things that we need during the course of our lives and then turn them over to others when we die", is a Buddhist way of believing. Another Thai saying, *mai biedban* extends this ethic, cautioning against taking or using things we need in ways which cause disturbance to other people, or to the environment.

In this sense, savings and loan activities are something deeply important. The cycle of borrowing what one needs to improve oneself, and then returning it, so that others can benefit, matches the sustainability and communality of this ethic. When people put their hard-earned savings together, lending to and borrowing from their neighbours, that money ceases to be a thing that is "owned" by a particular person, and becomes a common good, an open resource that is there to help whoever may need it. And after people have used the money to improve their lives in small (or not-so-small) ways, they return it. The resource is thus replenished for others to

use. This is an example of a national identity and belief that is used as an asset for social mobilisation and development. The case of massive default in Ghana's poverty alleviation fund is a case in point where this ethic of making sure that a resource in your care should be so carefully handled in order that others, including generations yet to be born, also benefit.

In Ghana, the belief that land for example belongs to the present generation, the past and those yet to be born could serve as a strong factor for environmental protection. This could be the platform for environmental protection, good farming practices, community action in neighbourhoods, and urban development.

Networking among communities

Networking with other communities and external agencies could provide real opportunities for people to learn lessons in order to take their own initiatives, implement projects and to ensure that actions taken are in the best interest of all community members. Experiences from the field visits in Thailand indicated that this was a common occurrence among the community networks. This allowed the sharing of first-hand experiences among communities. Communities were encouraged by such visits to undertake projects they previously thought they could never implement; others were able to establish important links which proved advantageous in the implementation of their own programmes. Networks could be community networks, area-based networks, and issue-based networks, among others. This way of learning is yet to take roots in Ghana, even though the benefits are substantial. In the case of external agents, such networks could provide opportunities for training, skills development, access to credit, better marketing opportunities for products, and funds for the implementation of specific initiatives. The development of these networks depends on strong local institutions which will serve as a basis for strong networks with external agents for sustainable development.

Use of opportunities to improve the circumstances of the poor

In Thailand, the economic collapse caused the poor to come together to find solutions to the crisis. This resulted in the creation of various networks which afforded people the opportunity to overcome poverty. In Ghana, the economic collapse in the late 1970s up to 1983 when the Economic Recovery Programme was launched did not yield any such result. If anything at all, it further worsened the situation of the poor and necessitated another set of programmes of action to mitigate the social costs of adjustment.

Even though the introduction of the policy of decentralisation in 1988 seeks to empower local people to take decisions concerning their welfare, the implementation so far indicates that this notion is yet to be debunked in many rural communities in Ghana. Even communities where careful community awareness programmes have been implemented continue to ask, "when will the government or Non-Governmental Organisation bring the next project" and this does not provide a sound basis for sustained development. One other notion that continues to gain roots in various communities is the need for Members of Parliament (MPs) to use their share of the "Common Fund" to develop their constituencies. This is in spite of the fact that MPs are principally legislators and not grassroots development agents. Increasingly, it appears that sustainable community development, especially for the urban poor; depends largely on the extent to which individuals and communities themselves would mobilize their endogenous resources as a trigger for partnership with external agents.

Broadening the range of credit available to the needy

The credit system that was developed to assist the communities had a broad range of operation; from credit to buy new work implements to credit to finance the building of a new home, and was operated at the individual, community, and

network levels. It is interesting to note that the credit allowed recipients to engage in a variety of activities which they deemed crucial to their economic survival. It is important to learn from this experience as formal credit focus has been to engage in a business venture, and not complementary activities like a good housing environment which will ensure a healthy life to support the economic activities of the individuals concerned. By allowing this flexibility, recipients were able to overcome the difficulties in several spheres of their life. In the Thailand case, there were at least nine different forms of loans, namely: housing development loans, house improvement loans, income generation loans, revolving fund loans, revolving network loans, community enterprise loans, bank guarantee loans, revival loans, and Miyazawa (Japanese Development Aid) loans.

The role of partnerships with government institutions and NGOs

According to Hordijk (2001), a partnership involves two or more actors in an enduring relationship expressed in concrete activities, with the partners sharing responsibilities for the outcomes of the activities. Such partnerships are meant to serve the public interest.

This idea of formation of partnerships is one of the main tenets of the on-going decentralisation process whose implementation unfortunately is facing a lot of difficulties. There is the need to emphasise this since it is impossible for government to provide all the felt needs of people. The vast resources available to other partners in development can only be mobilised if a way is found to let them be part of the process of development. The large number of Ghanaians living abroad could assist in so many ways in developments at home if opportunities are opened for them. These opportunities may include providing a forum for sharing intellectual knowledge and experience in diverse fields, ensuring that the processes involved in doing business in Ghana is reduced to the barest minimum and

creating investments climates that are attractive enough to compel Ghanaians abroad to invest in the country.

The critical role of empowerment

Finally, communities have to be systematically taught by civil society organisations and the District Assemblies to empower themselves and be in charge of their own development. Many rural communities still see themselves as deprived, helpless, and in need of assistance from outside. This, experience has shown, produces communities who are overly dependent on outside help, in the absence of which nothing seems to go on well. Experiences in the water sector in Ghana, for example demonstrates that communities that do not participate actively in the provision of water facilities are often not able to maintain the water systems that are built for them (Akangbang, unpublished). The outcome of such a situation is that communities are not able to initiate their own development, and sustain development in their local areas. Programmes that are initiated from outside therefore tend to suffer in the long term. Empowerment can take several forms; it could include non-formal education, training, awareness and confidence building.

CONCLUSION

Communities that are able to take control of their circumstances stand a good chance of improving their livelihood situations. In view of the scarcity of resources needed to facilitate the process of development, there is the need to ensure that communities take advantage of all opportunities available. Urban communities in Thailand and their networks have taken steps to do this and appear to be on the way to ensuring development that is sustainable. The long-term effects of such actions are yet to be seen, but the successes achieved so far indicate there are elements in their approaches which may be useful for other countries, Ghana included. Within the context of Ghana's decentralisation process, there are legislative and institutional provisions (Constitution of 1992 and the Local Government

Act 1993 (Act 462) that have the potential to transform communities into sustainable entities, as has been the case in Thailand.

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