Urban development discourses, environmental management and public participation: the case of the Mae Kha canal in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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SUMMARY: *This paper discusses issues of political influence and power struggles in connection with environmental projects, in the context of a low-income settlement in the city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. This low-income settlement has been included in the interventions of four different projects/programmes in the last five years: a community-driven initiative implemented with the support of a public organization and an NGO; the Chiang Mai 30-year master plan designed by architectural consultants to Chiang Mai municipality; a project undertaken by the Department of Town Planning within Chiang Mai provincial government, following an initiative by the prime minister, Mr Taksin Shinawatra; and an historic preservation project being implemented by the National Department of Fine Arts.*

I. INTRODUCTION

PROJECTS THAT TARGET problems of environmental degradation can be seen as platforms for interaction between different social groups and stakeholders. Furthermore, such projects may function as fora for social change through the promotion of dialogue, cooperation and partnerships between low-income groups and those with power and influence – typically local authorities and land developers. From that perspective, environmental development projects could be seen to bring into focus environmental issues that, to different extents, are relevant to the inhabitants of a locality or region. However, environmental development projects, despite their potential for creating spaces for cooperation, do not in practice carve out a neutral space free of political interests, and they risk therefore becoming the stage for power struggles and social conflict. In view of this, we ask here what role does the concept of *environment* play in the actions and discourses of different stakeholders in *environment-targeted* projects? The terms and formulation of a project as an environmental project carry in themselves a definition of the problem, which will guide the forms and scope of environmental management.

This paper discusses issues of political influence and power struggles in connection with environmental projects in the context of a low-income settlement in the city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The study of this particular settlement, Kampaeng Ngam (located by the Mae Kha canal), touches upon a number of issues which, we believe, have broader regional relevance, especially to other urban areas in Thailand (Photo 1). Notably

Photo 1: Constructions reach the Mae Kha canal embankments (photograph taken in November 2000)

important in this connection is the type of urban development that has taken place around canals (*khlongs*), where environmental deterioration has come to the foreground as an issue, and where low-income communities have squatted on land owned by the government. This type of development on urban land alongside canals can be found in a number of cities throughout Thailand, and has become, in many instances, the ground for social conflict between low-income communities fighting for the right to stay on squatted land and government authorities who attempt to evict them. At the same time, low-income settlements, and the canals along which they are situated, have been the targets of environmental projects supported by international donors, public organizations and NGOs.

In this paper, we look at the involvement of different actors (central and local authorities, public organizations and NGOs as well as local communities) who have had a stake in the Mae Kha canal in Chiang Mai and the areas alongside it. We look at how the issue of environmental deterioration has been dealt with in the projects and programmes supported or implemented by these actors, and at the political agendas behind their environmental discourses.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE of the Mae Kha canal goes back to the foundation of Chiang Mai, as one of seven elements that determined the choice of location of the Old City. Chiang Mai was originally laid out at the end of the thirteenth century as an almost perfect square fortress, with an additional, outer, earthen and brick wall. Kampaeng Din, as the outer wall is called, follows a semi-circular layout stretching north–south along the Mae Kha canal.[1]

Prior to 1962, development in the city of Chiang Mai consisted of settle-

1. The Mae Kha canal has its source in the Mae Ta Chang and Mae Hyuak rivers, which both flow from the Suthep-Pui mountain range. It is about 11,370 metres long, between one and ten metres wide and approximately 2.5 metres deep. See Tantayanusorn, N (1997), "Management of Mae Kha canal in Chiang Mai municipality boundary", unpublished MSc dissertation, Chiang Mai University, pages 1–16.

2. Yoddumnern-Attig, Bencha and G Attig (1993), cited in Yoddumnern-Attig, Bencha et al., *Population Dynamics and Community Forestry in Thailand: Understanding and Incorporating Population Issues into Forestry Development Plans and Programmes,* Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand, pages 5–12.

3. Chiang Mai Province Statistical Office.

4. Ribeiro, G and C Heitmann (2002), "Chiang Mai transit", *Arkitekten* No 26, October, pages 30–33.

5. Tourism Authority of Thailand.

6. Nelson, M H (2001), "Thailand: problems with decentralization?", Paper presented at the conference on Public Sector Challenges and Government Reforms in Southeast Asia, 12 March 2001, Jakarta, can be accessed at http://www.riap.usyd.edu.au/research/publications/documents/ConferenceProceedings-Jakarta_000.pdf (accessed 3 January 2005).

7. Since 1992, Chiang Mai residents have been able to elect a municipal council, which would then elect a mayor.

8. LePoer, B L (editor) (1987), *Thailand: A Country Study*, US Library of Congress, can be accessed at http://countrystudies.us/thailand/78.htm (accessed 3 January 2005).

9. Section 284 of the Constitution of Thailand reads as follows: "*All local government organizations shall enjoy autonomy in laying down policies for their governance, administration, personnel administration, finance and shall have powers and duties particularly on their own part. The delineation of powers and duties between the state and a local*

ments located inside the southern boundary of Kampaeng Din, outside the old city wall to the north, and east of the River Ping. The area along the Mae Kha canal between the old city wall and the Ping River was initially not included in the city's urban development because it was subject to seasonal floods.

Between 1962 and 1982, the Thai government elaborated the first four national economic and social development plans, which promoted an accelerated industrialization programme for Thailand. Since the fourth plan (1977–1981), Thailand's five-year plans have included policies designed to promote economic growth outside Bangkok Metropolitan Region, and thus economic, political and administrative decentralization. Chiang Mai was selected as the main urban centre for economic development in the northern region. The economic growth of Chiang Mai attracted poor rural migrants who settled in informal settlements, some of which were located on the banks of the Mae Kha canal.[2] The population of the province of Chiang Mai increased from 1,118,271 to 1,603,220 in the period 1977–2003.[3] Tourism is the dominant economic activity in Chiang Mai,[4] as illustrated by the number of guest arrivals in the year 2002, which reached 3,460,886.[5]

III. DECENTRALIZATION

AS NELSON POINTS out, Thailand has been known for its centralized system of government:

"*…though the state's administrative apparatus is not monolithic but highly fragmented… ministries separately delegate their officers to work at the provincial and district levels… there is no horizontal integration at these two levels of territorial administration but a vertical spatial expansion of the ministries from the centre to the periphery.*"[6]

At the level of municipal government, mayors and councils are elected by the local people – in the case of Chiang Mai municipality, the first mayor was directly elected in 1999.[7] However, the provincial government has retained the power to appoint key municipal officials, such as the municipal clerk and section chiefs, it has the authority to dissolve municipal assemblies and executive councils, and it supervises the fiscal affairs of the municipalities.[8]

The 1997 Thai Constitution has laid the legislative foundation for political and administrative decentralization.[9] According to Shatkin:

"*The passage of the Decentralization Plan and Process Act of 1999, which is in the early phases of implementation, heralds the beginning of what is likely to be a profound shift in power to elected local leaders.*"[10]

The current process of decentralization is, nevertheless, to be seen against this complex political–administrative background, which raises a number of issues concerning the shift of power away from central government, administrative corporatization and democratization, among other factors.[11]

IV. INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN CHIANG MAI

A NUMBER OF urban settlements in Chiang Mai have been characterized as "informal",[12] in that such settlements, some of them over 50 years old, lack basic services that are not provided by the municipality. A typical development consists of informal settlements on rented land, which quickly

becomes overcrowded. New generations of urban dwellers, who would normally build their houses on their parents' plots, have no choice but to squat on public land – in many cases, on sites adjacent to the original informal settlement. This is the case with Kampaeng Ngam community, which has settled in the area between the Mae Kha canal and Kampaeng Din. Immigration is also an important factor contributing to the growth of squatter settlements. Together with new generations of poor urban dwellers, immigrants from rural areas squat on public land alongside canals such as the Mae Kha.

Most of those who form a second generation of shantytown dwellers have had very limited access to education. They are mostly employed as non-specialized labour and have limited earning capacity. Local people have little opportunity to own land.[13]

V. INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE MAE KHA CANAL, AND KAMPAENG NGAM COMMUNITY

IN A SURVEY carried out in 1997, Tantayanusorn identified 17 informal settlements along the Mae Kha canal – 11 of them under the jurisdiction of Chiang Mai municipality.[14] Of these, seven were designated as squatter settlements[15] and are typically located on public land. The choice of location along the Mae Kha canal for squatter settlements is dictated by the availability of publicly owned land on which to squat and not by a wish to be located near the Mae Kha canal – a fact that is supported by data gathered through interviews with members of the communities in question.

The case of Kampaeng Ngam community, one of these settlements, is particularly controversial because it is located primarily on land owned by the Department of Fine Arts – a central government institution in charge of the protection and restoration of historic monuments. To make matters even more sensitive, some houses in Kampaeng Ngam were, until recently, located on the remnants of Kampaeng Din, the city's historic outer wall. These have since been moved as part of negotiations between Kampaeng Ngam community and the Department of Fine Arts.

Kampaeng Ngam originated in the early 1950s with 4–5 families,[16] which could not be accommodated in the neighbouring informal settlement on land owned by the Buddhist temple, Wat Huay Fay. The land occupied by Kampaeng Ngam was originally farming land. The settlement's growth was boosted by the arrival of young families, which could not settle on the plots occupied by their parents in the neighbouring settlement. In addition, migrants from the rural district of Chiang Mai province came to live in the settlement, increasing the size of its population. In 1955, a slaughterhouse was located in the vicinity of Kampaeng Ngam which, combined with the settlement's central location, has been an important factor in its growth. Nearly half of the 132 families currently living in Kampaeng Ngam are ethnic hill-tribe people who migrated from the mountains surrounding Chiang Mai. The remaining families are from low-lying areas around the city.

Like other informal settlements in Thailand, Kampaeng Ngam has no sewage infrastructure nor any garbage collection service. Piped water infrastructure was completed in 2001, with the support of the NGO People's Organization for Participation (POP).[17]

government organization and among local government organizations themselves shall be in accordance with the provisions of the law, having particular regard to the promotion of decentralization", Government of Thailand (1997), Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand.

10. The bill stipulates that the share of government expenditure controlled by local authorities should increase to 20 per cent by 2001 – a goal that was achieved by doubling national government transfers to local government – and should gradually increase to 35 per cent by 2006. Hence, the power and influence of provincial politicians will grow considerably, with consequences for the style and nature of local leadership that are as yet unknown. See Shatkin, G (2003), "Globalization and local leadership: growth, power and politics in Thailand's eastern seaboard", Working Paper Series, Urban Regional Research Collaborative, University of Michigan, pages 20–21, can be accessed at http://www.tcaup.umich.edu/acadpgm/urp/research/workingpapers/URRC%2003-05.pdf (accessed 3 January, 2003).

11. See reference 6.

12. See, for example, Sattayanuruk, A (1999), "Revolution of slum and organization in urban areas: case study Chiang Mai" in Rapeepat Akin, M R L (editor), *Redefining an Urban Community*, the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), Bangkok, pages 65–122.

13. See reference 12.

14. See reference 1, Tantayanusorn (1997).

15. Chiang Mai Municipality (2000), "Number of slum communities in Chiang Mai municipal boundary",

Welfare Department Office.

16. Information was obtained from interviews carried out by the authors with local residents.

17. Interview with Khun Somchai Lang, from POP, November 2000.

18. Kold, R et al (2002), "Investigation of the Mae Kha canal in Chiang Mai, Thailand", unpublished thesis, the Technical University of Denmark (DTU), Copenhagen.

19. *Northern Citizen* (2003a), Vol 2, No 67, 10–16 February, pages 15–16; also *Northern Citizen* (2003b), Vol 2, No 66, 3–9 February, page 5.

20. Interview with the head of the Town Planning Department at Chiang Mai provincial government (February 2003).

21. See reference 18, pages 83–84.

22. See reference 18, page 83.

23. In a number of interviews, Kampaeng Ngam residents and POP repeatedly informed the authors of eviction threats to Kampaeng Ngam as well as other settlements along the Mae Kha canal. See, for instance, Ribeiro, G, K Diaw and J Andreasen (editors) (2000), "Community development in Thailand: the case of Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) and the DANCED-supported UCEA project", Report on a visit to Bangkok and Chiang Mai in November 2000 under the ENRECA project Community Initiatives and Democratization of Planning (unpublished manuscript).

24. At the time of writing this paper, negotiations were taking place between the authorities and Kampaeng Ngam and other Mae Kha canal

VI. ENVIRONMENTAL DETERIORATION

A 1978 REPORT indicates that the Mae Kha canal was already heavily polluted at that time, with the water quality being classified as standard type 5, that is, unsuitable for drinking or bathing. In their study, Kold et al. found that the waste produced by informal settlements along the Mae Kha canal contributes only marginally to its pollution,[18] and yet, Kampaeng Ngam dwellers are often perceived as being responsible for polluting the Mae Kha. In an article published in the Northern Citizen in February 2003, for instance, it was proposed that the pollution of the Mae Kha canal could be solved by providing sewage infrastructure to the squatter settlements in question.[19] This suggestion clearly perpetuates the perception of squatters as being responsible for polluting the Mae Kha. When interviewed, Kampaeng Ngam residents stated that, in their view, the main sources of pollution of the Mae Kha canal were private companies, such as the slaughterhouse and factory located upstream.

The Chiang Mai provincial government[20] is aware that the squatter settlements along the Mae Kha canal contribute only marginally to the pollution of its waters. The problem is more complex. It relates to the fact that Chiang Mai's sewage system only partially serves the area under the jurisdiction of the municipality (outside the municipality, no sewage system as such has been implemented). The analysis of the Mae Kha canal water carried out by Kold et al. reveals that the pollutant parameters in the Kampaeng Ngam area and neighbouring informal settlements are:

"…*very stable* ", which "…*indicates that the contribution from the (informal settlements) area (are) low compared with the contribution from the city (centre).*"[21] The study also found that "…*the major pollutants to the Mae Kha canal (are) located in between two specific point sources, which convey effluents from areas in the city centre.*"[22]

The disintegration of the historic city wall, Kampaeng Din, can similarly not be blamed on Kampaeng Ngam residents. It has been destroyed in several areas, notably in the city centre, and particularly in connection with the construction of commercial buildings relating to the development of tourism. There seems, nevertheless, to be more tolerance of this kind of illegal development by more wealthy private parties.

VII. EVICTION THREATS

KAMPAENG NGAM HAS been under increasing threat of eviction,[23] and this has recently come to a head with the elaboration of plans by the Department of Fine Arts to restore Kampaeng Din and the moat (Mae Kha and Koowai canals).[24]

The processes set off by these projects, and the risks of eviction of the informal communities along the Mae Kha canal, have stimulated the involvement of several interest groups and organizations. Among these are, as mentioned above, Chiang Mai municipality, the Department of Fine Arts, the Lanna Association of Architects[25] and, of special interest in this paper, two organizations that have had a distinct role in their support to the communities facing threats of eviction, namely the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) and the NGO, People's Organization for Participation (POP).

In this paper, we look at the community of Kampaeng Ngam and the above-mentioned organizations, examining the ways in which environ-

mental issues are addressed in the light of each group's different political agenda.

VIII. CHIANG MAI MUNICIPALITY

CHIANG MAI MUNICIPALITY plays an important part in the status granted to informal communities, which is a function of services that are or are not provided by the municipality, such as water and electricity supplies, garbage collection, sewage infrastructure, health services and, in particular, house registration.[26] House registration affects a household's access to basic services such as children's public schooling, public health care and the right to vote. Voting in elections for a mayor and municipal councillors has been an important reason for households in informal communities to be given the right to house registration by the municipal government – that is, house registration is used for political purposes.[27] The same is true of the provision of services to informal communities. Kampaeng Ngam community has been given financial support by the municipality for the implementation of environmental improvements such as paved footpaths, piped water and electricity, and for cleaning the Mae Kha canal.

But the political and administrative functions of Chiang Mai municipality are often in conflict. While on the one hand, a master plan was developed in 2002 by the Lanna Architects Association for the municipality, which proposes the creation of a park and a promenade along the Mae Kha canal,[28] on the other hand, the mayor of Chiang Mai stated in a meeting with the community of Kampaeng Ngam on 21 February 2003 that he would work for the right of these communities to stay in their current location along the Mae Kha canal. Considering that the land is owned by the Department of Fine Arts (central government), this is a source of further conflict. At the same meeting, the elected community leader for Kampaeng Ngam, Khun Namtheep Payopo, referred to the relationship between governmental bodies (central, provincial and municipal), with regard to projects for the Mae Kha canal, as one characterized by conflict. Also at the same meeting, the mayor of Chiang Mai, on four occasions in his address, pleaded for votes in the forthcoming election.

IX. THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS (DFA)

THE DFA (CENTRAL GOVERNMENT) has commissioned studies for the rehabilitation of the city of Chiang Mai, which include a proposal for the restoration of the fortification system that consists of the city wall and the moat (Mae Kha and Koowai canals). The 200-year-old city wall, Kampaeng Din, is, according to the DFA, a potential asset for boosting tourism and, in the view of the DFA, the communities located along the Mae Kha canal are spoiling an historical site.[29] The DFA's policy is to preserve Kampaeng Din as an historical monument and to evict the informal communities located in the area to a site ten kilometres from Chiang Mai city centre. A DFA official has openly stated that Kampaeng Din, the Mae Kha canal and the area in between form an historical monument that should not be squatted on by informal settlements.[30] In a meeting with Kampaeng Ngam community in February 2002, the DFA official in question conceded that informal settlements such as Kampaeng Ngam should be allowed to remain in their current locations, on condition that the dwellings built directly on

communities fighting eviction. See reference 19, *Northern Citizen* (2003a). A National Housing Authority (NHA) project has been designed to house Mae Kha canal (and other) squatter settlements in the Nong Hoi district. See reference 19, *Northern Citizen* (2003b); also *Chiang Mai News* (2003), Vol 12, No 4205, 18 January, pages 1, 2 and 11.

25. The Lanna Architects Association is a regional branch of the Association of Siamese Architects. They have assisted Chiang Mai municipality with a number of urban design projects.

26. In 1996, the Thai government passed a law giving people in informal settlements the possibility of registering their houses at the provincial registry department. See Gill, T A (2002), "Slum communities claim a stake in their community's future", (online) page 2, can be accessed at http://www.changemakers.net/journal/02january/gill.cfm (accessed 17 December 2004).

27. Atkinson and Vorratnchiphan draw attention to the fact that despite mayors and municipal councillors being directly elected by the people, there has been "…*a strong tendency towards clientelism.*" See Atkinson, A and C P Vorratnchiphan (1996), "A systemic approach to urban environmental planning and management: project report from Thailand", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 8, No 1, April, pages 235–248.

28. See, for instance, reference 19, *Northern Citizen* (2003b).

29. This view was openly stated by a DFA official in an interview conducted by the authors (February, 2002).

30. Interview with a DFA official (February, 2002).

Photo 2: House built on the city wall, Kampaeng Din (photo taken in February 2002)

Photo 3: House built on the city wall, Kampaeng Din (photo taken in February 2002)

Kampaeng Din (Photos 2 and 3) were moved to land between the wall and the moat. A scheme was then presented by the NGO, People's Organization for Participation (POP), developed in collaboration with architects hired by the Community Organization Development Institute, which fulfilled the requirements of the DFA. However, after the meeting with Kampaeng Ngam community, the DFA official stated in an interview conducted by this paper's authors that this was only a temporary concession. In the long term, a project for the preservation of the historical monument was to be implemented.

Following the meeting, Kampaeng Ngam community, with the assis-

Photo 4: New houses built in 2002 for the families moved from Kampaeng Din (photo taken in February 2003)

tance of the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) and POP, removed the houses on Kampaeng Din to a neighbouring site (Photo 4). The mayor of Chiang Mai was taken to see the new houses after his meeting with human-rights and slum-dweller representatives and Kampaeng Ngam community on 21 February 2003.

X. LANNA ARCHITECTS ASSOCIATION

THE ROLE OF the Lanna Architects Association has been one of consultant to the municipality of Chiang Mai in the elaboration of a 30-year master plan covering an area of 30 square kilometres, and entitled Urban Design Strategy & Design Guideline 2020. This master plan outlines a vision for the future of Chiang Mai, with a strong focus on the conservation of its historical heritage. This heritage includes both such buildings as Buddhist temples as well as urban elements such as Kampaeng Din and the Mae Kha canal.

The master-plan proposal for the outer fortification of the city of Chiang Mai is to restore the wall and the moat and to create a park in the area. Community participation is built into the planning of the project through the inclusion of public hearings.

XI. COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (CODI) AND THE URBAN COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES (UCEA)

SINCE ITS INCEPTION as UCDO in 1992, the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI),[31] a public organization under the National Housing Authority (NHA), has consistently implemented community development programmes that adopt a bottom-up approach. These programmes aim both to improve the living conditions of urban poor communities and to strengthen their organizational capacity. They range

31. In 2000, the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) merged with the Rural Development Fund to become CODI.

32. Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) (2000), "Some more network snapshots from processes in cities around Thailand", *UCDO Update*, October.

33. See reference 32.

34. CODI relies on collective involvement through community groups and, increasingly, through community networks to achieve a type of management and decision-making that aims to represent the interests of socially and economically excluded groups. In that way, CODI aims to provide alternatives to decision-making initiated by authorities (local or central), by learned professionals (specialists, academics), by NGOs and by individuals with illegitimate power within communities (e.g. community leaders (called *nakleng*) who are involved in criminal activities such as drug-trafficking). See, for instance, Phongpaichit, P and S Piriyarangsan (1994), "Corruption and democracy in Thailand", the Political Economy Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. CODI reports occurrences of misuse of power and funds within its sphere of activities, but has documentation to support the argument that community-led processes are self-regulatory and that mismanagement and corrupt practices will be counteracted in time within community groups and networks. See reference 32, UCDO (2000), page 12.

35. The Baan Mankong – "secure housing" – programme "…*channels government funds, in the form of infrastructure subsidies and soft housing loans, directly to poor communities, which plan and carry out improvements to their housing, environment and basic services and manage the budget themselves.*" See CODI (2004), "Introducing Baan Mankong", *CODI Update* No 4, Community

from the provision of credit to poor communities, through the organization of savings groups, to loans for housing improvement and income genera-tion.[32] In order to achieve these objectives, CODI relies on a revolving fund which is made available to all urban poor groups who organize themselves to apply for loans for their development projects. By 2000,

"…*over half Thailand's 2,000 urban poor communities in 50 provinces… linked together into 103 networks through a broad range of community develop-ment activities, including housing, income generation, environmental improve-ment, community enterprise and welfare…*" were members of CODI.[33]

In its role as a support mechanism, CODI has been a catalyst in a process of social change, which aims to promote "…*a large scale community-driven development movement,*" and places the decision-making and management of responsibilities largely with communities and community networks.[34] Under the administration of the prime minister, Mr Taksin Shinawatra, CODI has come to play a prominent role in the improvement of housing conditions for the poor. The nationwide Baan Mankong programme, aiming at the provision of land tenure to urban squatters, is currently being implemented under the direction of CODI.[35]

In 1996, the Danish government, through its now extinct environment and international aid agency, DANCED (Danish Cooperation for Environ-ment and Development),[36] provided the Thai government with a US$ 1.3 million grant for a project targeted at the improvement of environmental conditions in urban areas occupied by low-income communities. CODI was responsible for coordinating the implementation of the project in a number of urban areas in Thailand.

The Urban Community Environmental Activities (UCEA) project (1996–2002) follows, as the name suggests, DANCED's overall policy of placing local communities at the centre of environmental programmes and giving them responsibility for decision-making, design and implementa-tion.[37]

UCEA initiatives have included the following:

- "…*providing grants to low-income urban communities that are actively involved in environmental improvements;*
- *creating self-managed development in the communities, meeting the inhabi-tants' 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.*

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."[38]

In line with CODI's approach, the UCEA project focuses on a process where environmental improvement is seen not as an end in itself but, rather, as a means of promoting social change.[39] These environmental interven-tions are fragile in nature and may in fact only be temporary, and this can be seen in connection with two aspects, namely, the focus of UCEA on activ-ities as tools for people's education and empowerment, and the fact that the low-income communities in question are under threat of eviction by the local authorities, so that the location and pattern of their settlements may be

Photo 5: Eroded embankments on the Mae Kha canal have been restored by residents a number of times. This photograph shows the use of plants and bamboo fences to protect the embankment from erosion (photo taken in February 2003)

altered in the short term.

According to DANCED, "…*UCEA aims at changing interactions and power relationships between organizations, networks, groups and individual stake-holders in a complex setting*" through a focus on environmental management.[40] UCEA adopts a bottom-up approach in which communities are the main actors in the processes of problem identification, project design, decision-making, budget management and implementation. This public participation in environmental projects aims, among other things, to create ownership of interventions (sidewalks, bridges, etc.) by the community involved. By actively contributing to a project, whether through decision-making, design or implementation, the community will be in a better position to appropriate the project as its own and to look after its maintenance. UCEA could be seen as an example of a radical approach, through its focus on environmental *processes* instead of environmental *products*.

UCEA gives priority to the process of learning and to strengthening the organizational capacity of communities.[41] An example is the project for the restoration of the embankment of the Mae Kha canal in Chiang Mai where it crosses Kampaeng Ngam settlement.

The Mae Kha canal used to be very narrow at Kampaeng Ngam, and this caused flooding during the rainy season. Access to and from the community was cut off and, among other problems, children were prevented from going to school. The community therefore decided to widen the canal in order to channel the excess water. The community planned and executed the restoration of the embankments of the Mae Kha canal, but this work was destroyed by new floods. After a second restoration, the embankment was destroyed once again.[42] In a visit to Kampaeng Ngam in February 2003, this paper's authors witnessed the latest restoration of the embankment, with the use of plants whose roots should help to hold the soil in place (Photo 5).

The director of CODI, Soomsook Boonyabancha, who has overall responsibility for the implementation of UCEA, makes the point that the priority in this, as in other UCEA projects, was the process of learning by

Organizations Development Institute, Thailand, June, page 1; also the paper by Somsook Boonyabancha in this issue of *Environment and Urbanization*.

36. DANCED was established in 1994 with the objective of contributing to the greatest possible extent to the protection of nature and the environment in developing countries. With the coming to power in November 2001 of Venstre (a right-wing liberal party), international development aid from Denmark was severely cut. In addition, the environmental concerns which figured very highly on the political agenda of the Social Democratic Party were relegated to a secondary plan. DANCED was closed and its projects placed under Danish Development Aid (DANIDA).

37. Boonyabancha, S (1999), "The urban community environmental activities project and its environment fund in Thailand", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 11, No 1, April, pages 101–116; also Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) (1998a), "Completion report UCEA 1996–1998"; Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) (1998b), "Project proposal. Urban community environmental activities phase II"; DANCED (1999a), "Final evaluation report. Urban community environmental activities project phase I", Danish Ministry of Environment and Energy; DANCED (1999b), "Project document. Urban community environmental activities project phase II", Danish Ministry of Environment and Energy; and DANCED (1998), "Evaluation of DANCED country programmes in Thailand and Malaysia", Danish Ministry of Environment and Energy.

38. See reference 37, Boonyabancha (1999), page 102.

39. Interview with Boonyabancha, in Ribeiro et al. (2000), see reference 23.

40. See reference 37, DANCED (1999a), page 5.

41. Interview with Boonyabancha, in Ribeiro et al. (2000), see reference 23, page 102; also see reference 37, Boonyabancha (1999).

42. See reference 23, Ribeiro et al. (2000), page 16.

43. Interview with Boonyabancha, in Ribeiro et al. (2000), see reference 23, page 3.

44. See reference 26, Gill (2002).

45. See, for example, reference 19, *Northern Citizen* (2003a).

46. Koolhaas, R (1995b), "The generic city" in Koolhaas, R and B Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, Monacelli Press, New York.

47. Thailand's tourism receipts in 2002 were US$8.357 billion (World Tourism Organization). Chiang Mai's tourism receipts in the same year were US$0.7158 billion (Tourism Authority of Thailand).

48. The impact of mass tourism on Chiang Mai, and the degradation of its physical and cultural environment, have been discussed in a number of articles in *The Nation*, notably after Chiang Mai was classified by *National Geographic* in 2004 as a "getting ugly" destination. The *National Geographic* article included the following statement: "*What was once 'clean and green' is increasingly overcrowded and polluted.*" See Tourtellot, J B (2004), "Destinations scorecard: 115 places rated", can be accessed at http:// www.nationalgeographic. com/traveler/scorecard/ 115_destinations_article.pdf (accessed 4 January 2005). *The Nation* articles draw attention to "…*urban development that has seen many temples and historic houses*

doing by the local people. The fact that the community identified a problem, provided a solution, implemented it and then learned from its mistakes was the most important thing.[43]

XII. PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION FOR PARTICIPATION (POP)

CODI HAS MADE use of its national network, in association with local organizations, to implement UCEA in different urban areas throughout Thailand. In the case of Chiang Mai, CODI's main local partner in implementing UCEA has been the People's Organization for Participation (POP), a nationwide NGO whose Chiang Mai branch has worked for many years with informal settlements with insecure land tenure. With the implementation of UCEA, a network of squatter communities along the Mae Kha canal was formed, and POP assisted them in dealing with various problems relating to the environmental deterioration of the canal. Some of the problems were local, such as the decay of the canal banks in the settlement of Kampaeng Ngam. Other problems were, and still are, common to all the settlements, such as the heavy pollution of the canal water. CODI and POP worked with a network of canal communities to organize events, such as a canal-cleaning weekend, that could help change the perception of the communities as being responsible for the pollution of the Mae Kha canal, thereby placing them in a stronger position in their fight against eviction.

Gill quotes Bonrueng Pala Rangsi, a member of Kampaeng Ngam community, where he states:

"*Not only have we been working together to clean up the canal, we have also been planting trees along the canal and are now preparing to make a new bridge (across the canal)…*"[44]

A number of interviews conducted by this paper's authors and others[45] support the argument that the perception by Kampaeng Ngam residents of their role in the maintenance of the canal has been strengthened through their participation in environmental projects supported by POP and CODI.

XIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

UCEA HAS STOOD as an alternative approach to dealing with environmental issues in Kampaeng Ngam. With its focus on the empowerment and education of poor urban communities in environmental management, UCEA has reached beyond short-term political agendas.

But UCEA has also remained an isolated initiative, and there is little sign that its experiences and approach have any chance of being integrated into other programmes and projects dealing with the city of Chiang Mai and, more specifically, with the Mae Kha canal.

There seems to be very little communication between the above-mentioned projects. In an interview on 26 February 2003, the director of the Lanna Architects Association acknowledged the lack of communication and coordination between the organizations responsible for the different projects that deal with the Mae Kha canal and the informal settlements along its embankments. This lack of communication is seen here not simply as a lack of a forum for dialogue between the different stakeholders but also as a deeper divergence between political agendas and economic interests concerning the physical and cultural environment of Chiang Mai and the

status of the informal settlements in the area.

A combination of the search for a quick fix to solve environmental problems, the lack of public participation and the lack of coordination between different projects and stakeholders makes the provision of a robust solution to the upgrading of the Mae Kha canal an unlikely event.

Instead, the process of urban development and environmental management in the city of Chiang Mai is dominated by struggles at the political, economic and cultural levels. At a political level, there is a struggle between central and local governments and civic representation. As we have argued, each of these political levels has a different agenda and relates to the others in complex and often conflicting ways. As pointed out above, divergences and conflicts are sometimes found even within an institution, such as in Chiang Mai municipality.

A recent development, in which CODI plays a central role, is the implementation of the Baan Mankong (secure tenure) programme. This is an (unexpected) example of a sudden reversal in the political balance, which will no doubt improve the chances of the communities settled along the Mae Kha to remain in their current location.

The economic level involves complex private-sector interests, ranging from companies which channel their sewage into the Mae Kha canal to owners of land along the canal. Of especial interest to this paper are the interests associated with the tourist industry, which are closely related to the cultural issue of historical identity of the city of Chiang Mai and the Mae Kha canal. The point made by Rem Koolhaas in his article "The generic city", about the effects of mass tourism undermining historical identities, is relevant to the present discussion.[46]

As we have attempted to document, urban development in Chiang Mai, and notably housing conditions in squatter communities along the Mae Kha canal, is being shaped by conceptions of environmental management and historical identity on the part of local and central government and their political agendas. A conception of environmental management in terms of the promotion of tourism emerges as an important factor in the formulation of the Lanna Architects Association's master plan and the Department of Fine Arts' programme of architectural preservation. The fact that the very development of tourism has led to accelerated economic growth[47] and a continuous depletion of the environment[48] of Chiang Mai is, however, not addressed in the formulation of these two projects. The focus instead is on particular conditions that some consider eyesores, and that would discourage the choice of Chiang Mai as a tourist destination. This attitude was apparent in the protests against the construction of highway flyovers proposed by the Highways Department (central government), where organizations, including the Lanna Architects Association and the Chiang Mai Tourist Board, were strong opponents of this highway development.

Environmental management takes the form of beautification through the creation of parks and the eviction of squatters, a move which only superficially addresses the current environmental problems of the Mae Kha canal and its surroundings. Attitudes to environmental management also go hand in hand with the preservation of an historical identity. Conceptions of how this historical identity is affected through the complex urban developments taking place in Chiang Mai as a result of accelerated urban development boosted by tourism are, however, not well formulated, and fail to consider the contradictions implicit in mass tourism, economic and infrastructure development, environmental decay and historical identity.

dwarfed by unsightly billboards and new concrete buildings which tower above the height restrictions". See *The Nation* (2004a), "Chiang Mai brainstorms to change 'ugly' image", September 26, can be accessed at http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=2&id=106621&usrsess= (accessed 4 January 2005).
Also, "…*in all too many instances in tourist destinations in Thailand, it is a case of milking the tourism cow dry, with many tourist assets being destroyed as resources are increasingly depleted*". See *The Nation* (2004b), "Day VIII: thinking globally, acting locally", June 22, can be accessed at http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=6&id=101071&usrsess= (accessed 4 January 2005).
Also, the problem of "destination decay" due to environmental depletion. See *The Nation* (2004c), "State of denial or sheer incompetence?", June 14; http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=3&id=99823&usrsess= (accessed 4 January 2005). Also "…*Chiang Mai's unharnessed and unplanned growth*" under the pressure of development and mass tourism. See *The Nation* (2004d), "Letter from the north: the good, the not so bad and Chiang Mai", June 5, can be accessed at http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=3&id=100081&usrsess= (accessed 4 January 2005). And the degradation of Thailand's historical heritage through the impact of mass tourism. See *The Nation* (2004e), "Not enough support for heritage sites", May 2; http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=11&id=98091&usrsess= (accessed 4 January 2005).