

# Editorial: Addressing poverty and inequality; new forms of urban governance in Asia

DIANA MITLIN AND DAVID SATTERTHWAITE

## THE ASIAN COALITION FOR COMMUNITY ACTION (ACCA)

This issue of the Journal has seven papers on different aspects of an Asia-wide initiative to address urban poverty and inequality at scale – the Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) – which was launched in 2009 and is active in 19 Asian nations. As the first paper in this issue on “learning by doing” describes, the programme sought to do things differently, namely to show that it is possible in all Asian nations to upgrade “slums”<sup>(1)</sup> or informal settlements at scale by supporting the initiatives of their residents and their community organizations, and then from this, to help them work together at city scale and bring in local governments as partners. The catalyst for this was support for community-driven upgrading initiatives. Since its inception, the ACCA programme has supported 950 small upgrading projects in 165 cities in 19 different

nations.<sup>(2)</sup> In each of these, it was the residents and their community organizations who chose what should be done, how it should be done and how the finance should be managed.<sup>(3)</sup> This was supported by US\$ 11 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which allowed ACCA to develop this new finance system to help low-income groups change their poverty conditions in so many different cities and nations.

The paper also describes how this process can create needed political changes. As several community initiatives are supported in a city, so this encourages more community organizations to undertake initiatives – and with these organizations visiting each other to see what each is doing and with many initiatives in a city underway, this attracts the attention of local government. As papers in this issue of the Journal describe, this often leads to local government support – and the development of a citywide platform where representatives from grassroots organizations sit as equals with local government officials and other stakeholders. It often leads to the establishment of a city development fund (CDF), in which all the active community organizations have a stake and through which larger-scale initiatives can get support. ACCA has supported the setting up of 107 CDFs and also 110 larger housing-related initiatives.

1. The term “slum” usually has derogatory connotations and can suggest that a settlement needs replacement or can legitimate the eviction of its residents. However, it is a difficult term to avoid for at least three reasons. First, some networks of neighbourhood organizations choose to identify themselves with a positive use of the term, partly to neutralize these negative connotations; one of the most successful is the National Slum Dwellers Federation in India. Second, the only global estimates for housing deficiencies, collected by the United Nations, are for what they term “slums”. And third, in some nations, there are advantages for residents of informal settlements if their settlement is recognized officially as a “slum”; indeed, the residents may lobby to get their settlement classified as a “notified slum”. Where the term is used in this journal, it refers to settlements characterized by at least some of the following features: a lack of formal recognition on the part of local government of the settlement and its residents; the absence of secure tenure for residents; inadequacies in provision for infrastructure and services; overcrowded and sub-standard dwellings; and location on land less than suitable for occupation. For a discussion of more precise ways to classify the range of housing sub-markets through which those with limited incomes buy, rent or build accommodation, see *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 1, No 2, October, available at <http://eau.sagepub.com/content/1/2.toc>.

2. The statistics on the number of initiatives were supplied by ACCA. This Editorial also draws on conversations with Somsook Boonyabancha, ACCA’s director.

3. ACCA builds on previous work of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and on the experience with funding community organizations within UCDO and CODI – see Boonyabancha, Somsook (1999), “The Urban Community Environmental Activities Project, Thailand”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 11, No 1, April, pages 101–115; also Boonyabancha, Somsook (2005), “Baan Mankong: going to scale with ‘slum’ and squatter upgrading in Thailand”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 17, No 1, April, pages 21–46; and Boonyabancha, Somsook (2009), “Land for housing the poor by the poor: experiences from the Baan Mankong nationwide slum upgrading programme in Thailand”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 2, October, pages 309–330.

We had encouraged the network of institutions involved in the ACCA programme to submit papers to this issue of *Environment and Urbanization* – and were delighted that after peer review, seven were accepted for publication. The decision to publish seven papers on this initiative was in part because it needs a range of papers to report on the scale and scope of this programme, and in part because each paper examines in some detail different aspects of the initiative: how it evolved and from what it drew; how it uses finance to unlock the potential of community action and community engagement with local government; what it supports on the ground and how this contributes to larger-scale change; the methods by which these initiatives and changes are being assessed; and the roles of community architects and other professionals in initiatives that are community led. Each paper also includes descriptions of particular initiatives that, when viewed together, show the scale and scope of ACCA. We also decided to include seven papers on ACCA in part because the authors of the different papers bring different perspectives, including those of community leaders from informal settlements and young professionals. One of the most insightful papers in this issue is a transcript of a discussion between Somsook Boonyabancha, the director of the ACCA programme, and two community leaders from the Philippines (Ruby Papeleas and Ofelia Bagotlo), who describe in detail the difficulties that community organizations face in getting land for housing and useful support from NGOs, external donors and activists. They also describe how they developed a different development path in the Philippines through their federation (The Philippines Homeless People's Federation Inc.<sup>4</sup>), with help from the ACCA programme – that is, trusting community organizations to prioritize and use funding to address needs;

bringing in community skills and contributions so that more can be achieved and more people brought into the process; using small projects to get people to believe in their own power to get things done and learn how to manage funds; and through the small projects, help prepare community organizations for larger, more complex initiatives such as getting land and building housing, and then using the many small projects to encourage others to act, and bringing all this into citywide processes with alliances built with other federations and urban poor organizations. As and when local governments see what community organizations can do, so more of the constraints on community action are reduced or removed.

What was disappointing was the relatively few other papers submitted to *Environment and Urbanization* on the theme of **Addressing poverty and inequality; new forms of urban governance in Asia**. Four papers that were submitted were not accepted for publication following the recommendations of external reviewers, and several more required substantial revisions and were not re-submitted in time for consideration in this issue. However, this did allow space for five papers on climate change adaptation and four in feedback – including Arjun Appadurai's reflections on the April 2012 issue of the Journal on mapping, enumerating and surveying informal settlements and cities.

### Addressing inequalities in voice

Statistics on inequalities usually relate to income or assets, living conditions or health outcomes (such as infant and child mortality rates). But one of the most profound inequalities is rarely mentioned – how those living in informal settlements have no influence on local government or service providers (who ignore them and their needs) and no influence on decisions about development investments and priorities. Bilateral aid agencies and multilateral development banks are finally beginning to see the scale and depth of urban poverty that includes around a billion people living in informal settlements, yet they do not engage these billion people in determining responses. Even if the residents of an informal settlement gain some improvements – for instance, a school or communal water taps – they are not consulted

4. Several papers published in previous issues of the Journal have described the work of this Federation; see Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Inc. (2001), "Meet the Philippines Homeless People's Federation Inc.", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 13, No 2, October, pages 73–84; also Yu, Sandra and Anna Marie Karaos (2004), "Establishing the role of communities in governance: the experience of the Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc.", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 107–120; and Teodoro, John Iremil E and Jason Christopher Rayos Co (2009), "Community-driven land tenure strategies: the experiences of the Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc.", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 2, October, pages 415–442.

about whether this is their priority or how the funding might best be used. As noted by Ruby Papeleras, a community leader in the Philippines Homeless People's Federation Inc.: *"Because we're poor and because we live in slums, nobody trusts us, nobody believes in us. We don't have money, our jobs are illegal, our communities are illegal, our connections to electricity and water are illegal."*<sup>(5)</sup> She also notes how donor agencies never treat urban poor communities as equals and never trust them to make decisions about how best to use limited funding. Meanwhile, as she notes, NGOs who work with the residents of informal settlements compete with each other, while activists want to draw them into their agenda, not the residents' agenda.

### From small projects to citywide processes

The ACCA programme seeks to channel the energy, resourcefulness and motivation evident in the inhabitants of most informal settlements into a larger, more focused and more collective force to address larger problems of housing, access to land and basic services and finance. With the small grants available to them, it is up to each community organization to choose what to do, how best to do it and how to use the money. This choosing, planning and implementing draws in people from the settlement, as a particular initiative that will benefit the settlement is chosen and begun – for example, building a road or walkway, a drain, a playground or a toilet. In each city, several such initiatives are supported and this encourages and supports the communities to visit each other and learn from what the other is doing.

This forms or strengthens a network of community organizations that can begin to work at city scale – for instance, in gathering the information needed to assess the scale and nature of citywide problems that need addressing. As this takes place, so it reduces the isolation of those living in informal settlements in a city as they learn how many others share their difficulties, and they begin to consider what causes them all to have such problems. The many community-driven initiatives in a city become more visible and often, initially,

local governments are surprised that different community organizations are building roads, bridges, schools... which are meant to be their responsibility. However, this has often supported the engagement of each community and the network of which they are part with local government and other key stakeholders. Many aspects of poverty reduction at scale are not possible without collaboration from local government. As community organizations demonstrate their capacity through these small projects, networks or federations of urban poor groups are seen as viable development partners for local government and other groups, such that a platform for negotiation and partnership is built at city scale. As local government comes to work with them, they are no longer seen as illegals but rather, as citizens with legitimate claims and relationships with local government.<sup>(6)</sup> This also opens up more possibilities for addressing access to land, thus making larger-scale ACCA funding available to support this, but as loans. Here, more ambitious or larger-scale initiatives begin – for instance, negotiating for tenure of the land they occupy or purchasing land for housing.

### Finance active in on-the-ground development

The paper by Somsook Boonyabancha and Diana Mitlin explains how money can be an instrument to create reciprocity and challenge exclusion if it allows the urban poor to be the key agents of change. The way that any financial system is designed and structured obviously defines (and limits) what can be funded and who has the power to decide what receives funding. It is also influenced by who it is accountable to. ACCA challenges us to see a working finance system in which urban poor organizations have the power to decide what is funded, with decisions being accountable to them as well as to external funders; also a finance system that helps build needed linkages with local governments and that manages to work in more than 150 cities in 19 nations without a large staff. This and other papers on ACCA note how rare it is for funding to reach urban poor groups and their own organizations. Yet every city with a

5. See the paper in this issue of the Journal on "A conversation about change-making by communities".

6. For more detail, see the paper in this issue of the Journal on how poor communities are paving their own pathways to freedom.

proportion of their population living in informal settlements needs mechanisms to improve conditions there and get local government engagement to support this. ACCA is an example of a finance system that does reach the poorest groups and supports the building of a citywide financing system – the city development fund (CDF), which is accountable to them. This must be one of the most important issues for the international development community to consider, as it reflects on achievements (and serious failings) in the Millennium Development Goals and what needs to come after these. The Millennium Development Goals were clear about what they wanted to achieve but very unclear about what institutional changes were needed to do so. The importance of local government and of grassroots organizations and other civil society organizations for meeting the goals got little attention. If large, centralized development assistance agencies cannot work direct with urban poor groups and their community organizations, can they learn to work with and through intermediary institutions on the ground that finance, work with and are accountable to urban poor groups?<sup>(7)</sup> Where are the funding agencies that can support these kinds of financial systems that work with and are accountable to the very people whose needs legitimate the existence of aid or development assistance agencies?

The paper by Diane Archer provides a more detailed account of how finance is managed in the ACCA programme. ACCA is unusual in that it provides finance to community organizations to address collective needs – unlike microfinance or cash transfers that focus on individual/household needs. ACCA also supports existing community savings groups and encourages new ones – and then supports them to move beyond local projects to work at scale at city and national level through the establishment of CDFs.

Urban poor groups almost always have difficulty accessing formal finance – for instance, they lack the documentation needed to open a bank account or the proof of income needed to get a loan.<sup>(8)</sup> They often form savings groups

and the savings group members manage the loans and help identify needs. Small grants from ACCA support the initiatives they choose. The community-driven initiatives then lead to the establishment of CDFs. These are made up of contributions from different sources, including community savings, ACCA seed funds and contributions from local or national governments or other actors. These CDFs are revolving funds and create bridges between community processes, local governments and formal finance systems. They encourage collaboration between communities and increase the scale of what communities can do, especially where local government supports the process. This includes more ambitious housing projects financed by loans. CDFs engage local government in joint management committees, so local government staff are involved in these funds even if they do not contribute any finance. Most CDFs have a number of funds – loans for house repairs, disaster funds, insurance funds should incomes fall or for disasters or welfare. CDFs can also operate at different scales – for instance, between groups of communities with shared problems or goals, or on a citywide scale, or at a national scale as in the Philippines, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. The eagerness of community groups to set up CDFs shows their desire to have their own independent financial system; it does not provide large amounts of money but it supports them in organizing and helps leverage support for larger initiatives from other sources.

### Collective processes

The paper in this issue entitled “How poor communities are paving their own pathways to freedom” describes how ACCA initiatives are planned and undertaken by the residents of informal settlements as collective processes: collective information collection (settlement mapping, citywide surveys<sup>(9)</sup>); collective definition of problems and search for shared solutions; bringing together networks of savings groups to establish collective funding systems that they manage (the city development funds); building collectively a platform for

7. This discussion of finance draws on a conversation with Somsok Boonyabanha in June 2012.

8. See the papers in the April 2012 issue of the Journal; also see Arjun Appadurai's paper in this issue of the Journal; and Solo, Tova Maria (2008), “Financial exclusion in Latin America or the social costs of not banking the urban poor”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 20, No 1, April, pages 47–66.

9. See the April 2012 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* that had 10 papers on community-driven surveys, mapping and enumerations.

negotiation and partnerships at city level with local government and other key stakeholders; collective claiming as citizens; and as land is obtained or tenure negotiated for land already occupied, collective land tenure. All these are important in poverty reduction – and yet so few funding agencies have recognized this. They also provide the means through which the urban poor see their capacities to address their development needs – the needs that their societies have never provided them with.

### **Learning from and assessing community-driven processes**

The paper on assessing the ACCA programme describes a process that is in keeping with ACCA's core principles – namely a continuous process of assessment and learning that involves the key actors (those engaged in community action). So urban poor groups are assessed by their peers, that is, other urban poor groups. The paper describes how assessments or evaluations of community-led initiatives are never subjected to peer review, but notes how peer review is central to the assessment of any book or journal article, as it is reviewed by academics with expertise on that topic and who are best placed to understand the work and judge its suitability for publication. However, development projects that are meant to benefit urban poor groups are not assessed by their peers (community groups and NGO supporters). They are assessed by outside (usually foreign) professionals, who visit the projects briefly and who have no expertise in living in informal settlements on very low incomes or in avoiding eviction or negotiating with local government. External evaluations so often involve only a check to see whether what was done matches what was specified in the project proposal.

The paper then describes the development of an assessment programme, where the ACCA-supported community initiatives were assessed by their peers. This sought to build a more horizontal system for assessing, learning from and refining the hundreds of projects that ACCA has supported in different countries. Teams of community leaders and their partner NGOs who are actively implementing their own ACCA projects assess the work of their peers in other cities and nations, through visits to ACCA

projects and discussions with the people who are implementing them. The paper describes how this new assessment method opened up a large new space for two-way learning, sharing and building mutual assistance links across Asia, and helped expand the range of what community people see as possible.

What these discussions also showed was how each community-driven initiative is hands-on training for residents for agreeing on what should be done, but also for learning how their cities and government function and what they must do – dealing with rules, regulations, different agencies and departments. Community organizations also get to see places where their peers have negotiated key changes with local government – for instance, over lower standards or getting tenure of the land they occupy – and this helps them consider how to get comparable changes in their cities.

### **Networks**

The paper on networks, platforms and the social relations that support a people's process describes how networks can reduce the isolation of low-income and disadvantaged communities and can build their confidence – and through the ACCA programme, produce finance to support their priorities. This helps people gain skills, capabilities and confidence to negotiate and, as noted above, can allow the formation of joint working groups or platforms with local governments and other groups.

When asked about the changes that have accompanied the ACCA projects in Newara Eliya (Sri Lanka), one of the women leaders replied:

“Oh, many big changes! Before ACCA, we didn't know each other. Now the women in all the settlements in the whole city, we know each other very well and visit each other all the time. Now there is a very strong relationship between the municipality and the people. Before the ACCA started, we all kept our distance. Those chairs you are sitting on were loaned to us by the municipality! The mayor is very aware now of our work and our struggles and he supports us – not because he has suddenly become a good man, but because we are now working together as a force. We used to be afraid to go to the municipality for any work but now it is like our home.”



## CLIMATE CHANGE AND CITIES

The five papers on climate change and cities in this issue of the Journal have very different focuses. Two are on particular cities. The first is William Solecki's detailed description of the measures being taken or planned in New York City in response to climate change, and also how New York City has addressed environmental crises in the past. The second is Ibidun Adelekan's paper, which considers changing climate risk patterns and emerging vulnerabilities of inner-city residents of Ibadan. It assesses windstorm-induced damage and the vulnerability characteristics of residents of wind-damaged houses in Ibadan's high density core area and older suburbs. The period 1989–2008 shows a significant increase in maximum gusts.

The paper by Tom T Heath, Alison H Parker and E Keith Weatherhead presents a Rapid Climate Adaptation Assessment for water and sanitation providers, which generates recommendations on climate proofing for local service providers, utilities and local governments. The methodology was developed through fieldwork with communities in Lusaka (Zambia), Naivasha (Kenya) and Antananarivo (Madagascar).

Benoit Lefèvre's paper identifies key elements that need to be taken into account when developing a post-2012 framework on climate change that includes cities. Although the importance of incorporating cities and local governments into any agreement is obvious, there are technical challenges (for instance, getting agreement on the measurable, reportable and verifiable procedures for urban greenhouse gas emission inventories and how emissions are assigned), political challenges (including agreement by national governments on the new roles for urban governments) and economic challenges (including how to develop finance systems that support cost-effective solutions and that leverage public money and private finance). There are also difficulties in reaching agreement on how targets can take into account differences in capacity to act and differences in the sectors where city governments have jurisdiction.

The paper by Anna Brown, Ashvin Dayal and Cristina Rumbaitis del Rio describes the Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN), a network of secondary

cities in South and Southeast Asia that have engaged in a process to analyze vulnerabilities and plan and implement measures to address them. It also reports on how this new empirical base of practice provides important learning to help guide the refinement of both theory and practice in the field of urban climate change resilience.

## FEEDBACK

Feedback includes two papers on the theme of the April 2012 issue of the Journal on **Mapping, enumerating and surveying informal settlements and cities**. The first is a commentary by Arjun Appadurai on the case studies presented in that issue, and discusses why it is important for communities to have the right to undertake their own research and how this can become an irreversible force for their own political self-consciousness and for stronger negotiations with those who see them as a burden, a blight or a vote bank. The second paper, by Zlata Vuksanović-Macura, discusses how the mapping and enumeration of poor informal Roma settlements in Serbia has helped focus more attention on their inhabitants' needs and priorities.

The other two papers in Feedback contribute to themes in previous issues. Yves Cabannes examines the financing of small-scale urban and peri-urban agriculture, drawing on research in 17 cities, and discusses how the needs and demands for finance from urban poor engaged in urban agriculture, agro-processing or marketing can be better met. The paper entitled "Off the map: the health and social implications of being a non-notified slum" by Ramnath Subbaraman, Jennifer O'Brien, Tejal Shitole, Shrutika Shitole, Kiran Sawant, David E Bloom and Anita Patil-Deshmukh provides an in-depth understanding of why health is so poor in Kaula Bandar, a long-established informal settlement in Mumbai that is not recognized by the government as a "slum". Data were collected from 1,701 households, including 913 children. The paper describes in detail the poor quality and high cost of water, the lack of provision for sanitation, drainage and solid waste collection and the difficulties facing the inhabitants in accessing schools and obtaining official documents.

## REFERENCES

- Boonyabanacha, Somsook (1999), "The Urban Community Environmental Activities Project, Thailand", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 11, No 1, April, pages 101–115.
- Boonyabanacha, Somsook (2005), "Baan Mankong; going to scale with 'slum' and squatter upgrading in Thailand", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 17, No 1, April, pages 21–46.
- Boonyabanacha, Somsook (2009), "Land for housing the poor by the poor: experiences from the Baan Mankong nationwide slum upgrading programme in Thailand", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 2, October, pages 309–330.
- Solo, Tova Maria (2008), "Financial exclusion in Latin America or the social costs of not banking the urban poor", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 20, No 1, April, pages 47–66.
- Teodoro, John Iremil E and Jason Christopher Rayos Co (2009), "Community-driven land tenure strategies: the experiences of the Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc.", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 2, October, pages 415–442.
- Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Inc. (2001), "Meet the Philippines Homeless People's Federation Inc.", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 13, No 2, October, pages 73–84.
- Yu, Sandra and Anna Marie Karaos (2004), "Establishing the role of communities in governance: the experience of the Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc.", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 107–120.