



# ALL TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

## ASIAN FORUM

ATD Fourth World Regional Team :  
region.asia@atd-fourthworld.org

August 2007

### Highlighting communities' potential

*ATD Fourth World teams are dealing with this question  
and share their reflections about it.  
What's been experienced elsewhere ?*

*Ending  
Extreme Poverty  
A Road To Peace*

### The challenge to build a Community Center with a slum community in Bangkok

#### *The ATD Fourth World Bangkok team wrote:*

About 50 families live in a slum community where we have been running street libraries with the children and activities with the families for 19 years now. Some of them have been living there for 30 to 40 years.

In 2004, the families voiced their wish for a Community Center that could be used for activities with the children; for shelter when they are playing, reading, or doing their homework; for community meetings and celebrations. More than that, it could be a place used by everyone as a kind of center to share news or important events and to welcome special guests respectfully.

We adopted this idea as part of our project and started looking for support to realize it. Even though the Community Center project originated in the wishes of the people, the challenge remains to strengthen solidarity within the community and to unite people in taking responsibility for this action. We know that there would be no future for the project if we were to be the ones that organized everything.

We have contacted members of Thai organizations working with poor communities where similar projects had succeeded. We know some active people from other communities and we invited them to the community, to share their experiences. They in turn invited the families with whom we are involved to visit their place in order to see how they organize themselves and build solidarity within the community.

Many past events have made it difficult for the families to establish good links between them. In the early nineties, a Buddhist monk built a small school there and managed to have all the houses registered. Later on, however, several families were evicted because of the construction of a road, although some of them managed to rebuild in the part that was left. The density of the shelters became higher leaving the families with even less privacy. In 1997 and again in 1998, fire broke out, destroying many shelters. A lot of the families were forced to leave but several of them came back later. However,

according to Thai law, squats that have been burnt down are not allowed to be rebuilt. This is how most of the houses lost their registration. Today, most of the people residing there are the tenants of a few of the inhabitants who have more power in the community.

Another important challenge is the fact that the slum is situated on private land. The people living there wish they could have a Community Center but also want to settle down without the permanent threat of eviction.

Could a Community Center become a symbol of unity within the community? What if the landowner finds out about it? Would it instead increase the risk of eviction for the families? **These are just some of the questions that have to be faced at the moment.**

\*\*\*

*New Full Time Volunteers of Asia in Training :*



### The risk of being labeled as "Professional Squatters"

#### *News from the ATD Fourth World Philippines team:*

This year there has been a lot of talk about intensified efforts to evict and relocate many poor families that are "squatting" in different areas of Manila. This is mainly due to a government program to re-house the urban poor but is also linked to the "beautification of Manila" program. According to an NGO that helps families facing evictions, an estimated 150,000 to 180,000 families will be displaced from their slums to relocation areas.

The relocation packages vary from the provision of land only, to packages that include a house and money to start a livelihood project. All of the packages are based on loans to the families that can be repaid in small increments over a number of years. Those who remain in the sites and keep up with their payments will eventually own their own house and land, which is very positive. However, we are concerned about those who do not manage to keep up with their payments or

decide to leave the relocation sites. There is a risk that if they return to Manila, they will be blacklisted as “professional squatters”.

We went to visit some of the families who had been relocated to a site 3 hours away from the city. The families we visited there had rebuilt their houses with old materials brought from Manila. Even though they had not yet finished building, many of them were very positive about the move. At another immense site south of the city, families had been given loans for new materials but the money had oftentimes run out before the houses were finished.

Unfortunately, we have realized that the relocation will not be successful in the long-term for all families:

Mrs. B. explained that her husband is blind and spends most of his time in Manila, begging. He could only come back home at the weekend. After one year, the whole family has moved back to Manila to be together.

Another lady got upset telling us that she could no longer visit her grandson in prison because it was too far.

Mr. N's son is mostly left with his cousins because his father is working in Manila, trying to get some money for the family. A teenage girl, whose father is also still in Manila, expressed how she often felt lonely and hungry and was missing the city.

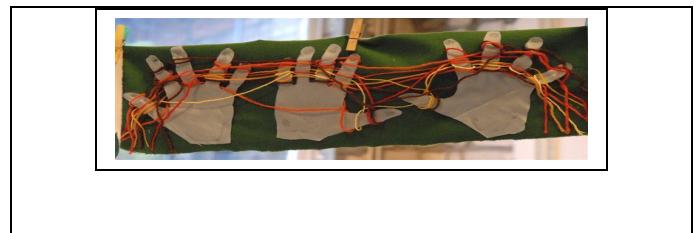
Finding work and a means of livelihood near the relocation sites is the biggest challenge being faced. People are left with no choice but to go back and forth to Manila, to the places that they know they can find work or earn some money that day. The same can be said for education and healthcare; many

families have returned to Manila so that they can be treated at the hospital or because their children are having their education sponsored by a local association. The sheer size and isolated location of most relocation sites is another factor. Families who were used to living in close proximity with one another (squeezed under a bridge or along the rail tracks) now find themselves spread out and far from neighbors who used to support them. Some of them are scared to leave their block because they “might get lost in this place”.

During the regular Adult forums the families came together, shared their experiences and fears of eviction, this sharing unified the families and helped them to have a clearer picture of the situation. Even the families from the different communities supported one and other through these hard times.

We would like to concentrate more effort in the future to building partnerships between families targeted for demolition and public authorities so that the relocation can be successful for everyone.

\*\*\*



## “The most vital force in the battle to eradicate poverty”

### *Claude and Patricia Heyberger :*

We are ATD Fourth World full-time volunteers who arrived in Bangkok in March 2007 to join the Asia regional team. We have a lot of things to discover, as it's our first time in this region.

For the past 10 years, we lived in Burkina Faso, West Africa, and before that we spent 15 years in various ATD Fourth World European teams.

In Ouagadougou (capital of Burkina Faso), we ran an action with children living in the streets together and with their families, who we visited regularly, in order to find pathways for the children's future.

Paul, a young boy we met when he was living in the streets is one of those who made it visible to us. He managed to return to his family but during the first 3 years, he often left the village, even though he always returned in the end. Anyway, progressively Paul became involved in a number of income-generating activities with the help of family and friends and managed to find some stability in his life.

How did it happen? Paul's parents seemed very poor to us but we discovered that they had to be considered as part of their extended family in the area. After working with his parents during the rainy season, Paul left to do seasonal work in the garden of an uncle. He was not paid and just received some gifts in exchange for his work. Then a second uncle employed Paul to drive a tractor on his farm and this time Paul was paid for his labor. A third uncle took Paul on to work at his secondhand clothing stall in the market. Another uncle introduced him to buying and selling chickens to merchants from the city that came to the market to buy poultry. Paul also worked with friends and relatives to make clay bricks for construction and learned how to breed chickens, goats, and pigs. “Working with members of the family changed their opinion of me. They told me I had changed.” Paul told us. In the end, supporting his family clearly became an important part of his life.

The story of Paul's return to the village showed us how the stability and coherence of the family and community setting can provide a level of access to fundamental rights such as education, work, training and housing. Paul's extended family network provided him the opportunity to begin contributing his family's welfare and at the same time, lay the foundations for his own future. It revealed to us that relationships within the community can also provide material security, even when the community itself is not so rich. As European people, we were not familiar with that reality.

We are aware that community links are obviously not an unconditional guarantee against poverty and social exclusion. But in Burkina Faso, fundamental links between people still constitute the best defense against hardship and this must be taken into account and regarded as a strength.

In spite of their frailties and weaknesses, and regardless of the enormous challenges facing them, the Director of the United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development believes that “*families all over the world remain the most vital force in the battle to eradicate poverty... The irony is that, often, the central role played by the family has escaped the attention of policy makers. (They) are only beginning to realize that programs to eradicate poverty and to provide basic services must recognize the efforts that families have already made and support them*”.

ATD Fourth World teams in Asia are faced with this same challenge: Devising a project for an entire community with the active participation of the most fragile of its members and then creating the necessary consensus for its implementation. Each culture has its own way of achieving this and no doubt that Asian societies will reveal paths to us that will enrich the fight against poverty in the world.

<sup>1</sup> Johan Schölvinnck, *Foreword by the United Nations, When Extreme Poverty Separates Parents and Children*, ATD Fourth World, March 2004.