

Some thoughts on CODI's First Four Years

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*In October 2000, the **Urban Community Development Office (UCDO)** was officially merged with the Rural Development Fund to become the **Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI)**. The Royal decree which brought CODI into existence allowed UCDO's development activities to continue, but greatly expanded the organization's scope in how it works and how it relates to the poor community organizations it supports. By making CODI an autonomous legal entity, with the status of a public organization (under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security) the decree provides greater possibilities and greater freedom than a conventional government institution.*

Here are a few thoughts on how CODI works, the directions it is moving and the reasons why drawn from a recent conversation with Somsook Boonyabancha (August 2004):

It may be worthwhile to describe very briefly the development of CODI's work in its first few years, and to explain what that work has taught us and how that understanding has led us to do what we are doing now. There has been so much learning going on, and we've developed a great deal of thinking about our work supporting communities in Thailand. But to review all this work and all those concepts isn't easy to understand.

I think it's important that CODI came into being at the start of the new millennium. This timing is symbolic of what we see as a new kind of institution that is trying to offer a new way of doing things and to promote large scale change - by people - in the new millennium. CODI's focus is not only on poverty, but ways in which communities can be the key actors in whatever development they want. We have a system of working in CODI in which we try not to make too many decisions by ourselves. Instead, we keep trying to create more and more space for communities (in a very large scale) to make the decisions, so that CODI can truly be a public institution that is owned and jointly-managed by people, as much as possible.

First Year - 2000 - 2001 : Focus on linking and strengthening rural networks

When the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) was merged with the Rural Development Fund in 2000, the merging of these two funds had a very important implication: we were no longer drawing boundaries between urban and rural - *now we were working for the whole country!* But most of us who had been working in UCDO were urban people. Our experiences had all been in cities and our understanding had been mostly about urban issues. So starting a process in the rural areas was new for us. And we found out later that doing that called for a level of understanding that is much deeper than any of us had at that time. In many ways, this bringing in of rural realities into our work contributed a lot of understanding and sharpened our development directions.

So at the beginning of CODI, the idea was to find a way to link these rural and urban processes. Because we'd been working in the urban area for so many years, we had a lot of confidence in the idea that linking poor communities together and allowing them to collectively manage funds and deciding working activities together was a powerful way of bringing people's groups into the same direction. So it seemed natural to begin using the same strategy in rural Thailand that we'd already developed and refined in the urban context.

In the first year of CODI, we launched a national process to create space for communities and existing community networks in each of Thailand's 76 provinces (both urban and rural) to link together, establish their own joint working mechanisms and start setting their own agenda about what they would like to do, what problems they would like to tackle together - as groups (which included provincial, city or district-based networks, issue-based networks.) During this first year, CODI received an additional special budget of 500 Million Baht (US\$ 12.5 million) from the Thai government. This was in addition to the funds already in the CODI fund, which after the merging of the rural fund (750 million Baht) and the urban fund (1.7 billion Baht) which including the Miyazawa Fund (250 million Baht), came to about 2.8 billion Baht (US\$ 70 million).

With this extra 500 million Baht of special budget, we set up a fund to strengthen networks, community organizations and regional processes - especially in the rural areas (at that time we already have about 100 city networks existed). Part of this fund was used for grants to community networks, and part became a revolving loan fund. The process was similar to the way we managed the Miyazawa fund, during the Asian economic crisis, where the grants and loans all went to community networks (not to individuals or individual communities) and enabled the networks plan and implement whatever development projects they wanted to initiate together.

About 300 million Baht of this special budget was used to channel different kinds of grants to networks to link communities to work together through whatever communal network activities and to decide on development projects they would implement jointly, at two different levels :

1. **Provincial linking grants** : Channeled 800,000 Baht (US\$ 20,000) to each of Thailand's provinces (76 total) to link existing community groups in that province to plan together, through exchanges, seminars, meetings and formation of committees. The intention was to link with all sorts of development activities from the past and all sorts of community and network groups which already existed, and then to provide opportunity for scattered community groups and networks to be able to link and learn from each other at communal platform at provincial level. The thinking was that in the long term, we could use this linkage-building strategy to build a *people's own development agenda*, so communities could start having their own development direction in that province.
2. **Grants for network-based projects** : After our analysis, we realized that the community network was a powerful mechanism for linking communities together. So under this program, community networks could apply for grants of up to 200,000 Baht (US\$ 5,000) to fund network-wide projects in welfare, community planning, agriculture, community improvement - whatever they want to work together. The process was open to community network - existing networks, newly-formed networks, area-based networks, issue-based networks, etc. This was seen as a strategy to stimulate communities to have opportunity at various locality or sharing a common issue to come together into networks.

In the consideration process, the networks invited provincial-level mixed committees to review their proposed ideas, before being sent to regional committees and then to the center, where a sub-committee of senior community leaders from around Thailand had been set up to work as a balancing mechanism alongside CODI and CODI's governing board. In this way, the project consideration process itself became another tool to get people from different networks and different parts of the country to work together and prioritize together. Through this process, we create quite large space for communities to begin working together at local, provincial, regional and national levels.

This was a new way of supporting communities, through their own decisions, but along the way it created a participatory working mechanism - a mechanism which provided a way for communities to know each other more by working together, come together, work together and decide together - at different levels. The idea was to make the fund a flexible tool for people to decide their development process which boosted people's confidence by giving the power to manage budgets for their own development. The process also trying to develop a better understanding of the problems being faced by others and to learn from each other's experiences in tackling those problems.

In the first year, the urban work slowed down a bit, because we such a lot to learn about the rural realities. But as these emerging provincial networks were linking rural and urban communities, people were also learning a lot from each other, across the rural - urban divide. Welfare, for instance, was a much higher-priority issue for the rural groups than for urban groups, and these new linkages helped the urban groups to sharpen their own understanding about welfare issues, and to develop their own welfare programs. Whenever there was any representation from these new linkages, it was usually three from rural groups and two from urban - which roughly reflects the population balance between rural and urban. But apart from that, we didn't emphasize the urban sector too much during this first year or two - the work of housing development loans, income-generation, savings and credit and continued as before, but with no major initiation of new initiatives.

Some problems emerged, though, from this process of linking community groups, especially around the distribution of development grants to networks. It wasn't an awful lot of money (only US\$ 20,000 per province), but it allowed the provincial groups to sit together, see the project proposals and decide together which ones to support. These provincial groups, which had just come to work together or know each other for the first time, found themselves with decision-making power over which groups could get the resources and for which projects. The main idea was that CODI didn't want to be the one to *approve or reject* projects - we wanted to transfer that power of decision to the people. But there are sins in managing power for anybody unfortunately. There were problems among people groups as well, because among the leaders on these provincial committees, there were also politics among communities. As happens in the larger political sphere, a host of intermediaries and leaders emerged who began trying to take control of this resource. Some leaders on the provincial committees were biased towards their own groups or their own projects than others. This is an inevitable part of the politics of coming together and the difficulties of jointly managing a common resource. Apart from some very positive aspects of able to link and create learning platform among communities in the province, we realized also that these provincial linkages had, more or less, unintentionally, become a *power-building* tool among communities as well. There was uneasiness with this, but at the same time, there was a lot of discussion and a lot of learning came out of this.

Second Year - 2001 - 2002 : Focus on issue-based strategic directions

After seeing in the first year that the weak point was the politics of these provincial mechanisms, there were reflections and discussions among communities and finally we tried in the second year to refocus more on issues and more on determining a set of common community development strategies by community people as a whole. Through the provincial and national linkages which had been built and strengthened in the first year, people entered into an extensive process of discussion, in different regions of the country and at many levels, about what could be people's own development agenda. Communities all over the country began asking themselves *what are we doing and where do we want to go?* This was a way of moving the focus away from the politics of making decisions about money to more fundamental questions about what kind of development people want to be part of - in their communities, in their provinces and in their regions. This involved an extensive and inward-looking process whereby communities were invited to analyze their situation, such as why communities have increasingly crippling debts? And then they began discussing what they want to change, what they wanted to do to improve their lives, to make their communities more sustainable and self-reliant. All the crucial issues which affect the lives of Thailand's rural and urban communities were brought up and discussed. Some issues were very hot and problematic issues (like local control over natural resources and local land) and some showed great potential for activities (like community funds, welfare or community recycling activities). It was like a big university!

The underlying question in all these discussions was: *How could communities be a key actor in tackling these issues and how could the power to manage these issues be pulled back into the hands of local people, as much as possible, to make Thailand's communities more self-reliant?*

From all these discussions and all this analysis in communities and regions around the country, a set of 20 common issues were identified which covering to a highly focused agenda for the country's community development direction.

1. community-managed forests
2. land tenure and land availability
3. community water management
4. community-managed fisheries
5. community savings and community funds
6. community welfare
7. community planning
8. sustainable agriculture
9. community enterprise
10. community radio and community's own media
11. community garbage management
12. housing and livable cities
13. local wisdom
14. local health care
15. ethnic groups
16. local clothes and weaving
17. local whiskey production
18. local culture and folk arts
19. youth groups
20. the elderly in communities

This extremely lively, national discussion culminated in a fittingly lively celebration of *"The Power of Thailand's Community Life"* in a big 3-day community fair and seminar held at the Thailand Cultural Center in January 2003. This event drew together community groups from all over the country and showcased community products and community wisdom. On the last day, the Prime Minister was invited to join the discussion and to hear the presentation of these twenty issues, which the people emphasized was their common agenda. As one community leader put it, *"These twenty issues are not for the government only! We aren't waiting for the government, we are starting our work, and later, if the government can join us or support us, good! The presentation is for us to make a consensus and to set our own agenda and what to do. And we are focusing on our work, on planning, on activities - we're not for only slamming the government for its policies or whining about problems!"*

Besides identifying these 20 issues to focus work on, a list of five key "strategic directions" were identified to guide the work of CODI and the national community process in its next phase :

1. ***Promoting subsistence economies*** in which people learn and manage to live in self-reliant ways with what they have and produce and build stronger subsistence economic development. This includes protecting, maintaining and reviving their natural resources and environment, in ways that allow communities to be the key actor. It also includes the promotion and expansion of community-managed development funds.
2. ***Promoting welfare and community savings*** as a means of building people's own financial base and establishing their own means of taking care of their own people - from birth to death.

3. **Strengthening people's means of communication** through the promotion of community's own communication channels such as community-to-community exchange, community radio, etc. This also includes finding ways to increase the understanding of community issues by non-poor groups and civil society and , through better communication and media.
4. **Building stronger and better quality people's organizations** and linkages with other civic organizations as well as local authorities
5. **Broadening community learning** between communities, developing indigenous knowledge, local wisdom and using that exchange of ideas together with external appropriate knowledge to revive communities' abilities to deal with their own lives and development.

Each of the country's five regions became very active in developing their own regional plans along these five strategic directions. Accordingly, the second year's budget was designed to follow the plan of these five *strategic directions* and to support work on the twenty key issues. Regional committees were formed to deal with each of these five strategic directions, and these committees brought together people from across borders, from different provinces, to work together in a common direction.

Committees, taskforces, etc., were formed within each province to deal with above development direction. This was a friendly, non-confrontative way to diversified those provincial mechanisms from the first year and to transform into a series of much more *issue-based* platforms for discussion and planning and work. It was like turning what had been a "central committee" type of mechanism into a series of departments getting various expertise to deal with different kinds of people's issues in that province. This was also a way to diversify and create new spaces for a lot more new people and various local institutions to join in the process and to involve many new kinds of expertise.

In fact, when people start dealing with such specific issues like "community-managed forests" or "community welfare", it is inevitable, on the upper front, that they able to dealing in some way with relevant government departments, with ministries - with *policy*. And when each province has a group of communities and networks that are linked together around an such issues as community-managed forests, they can approach the Department of Forestry or with the Ministry of Natural Resources. Why? Because now they are no longer isolated communities, but a province-wide block, which a common agenda and the clout of numbers. These kind of *issue-based* linkages and *issue-based* community networks are able to speak the same language as the respective ministries and departments, and that common language is a bridge between the formal government system and the informal community process.

Key theme of self-reliance : In some ways, this second year was an important watershed in providing community people a strong development direction. And one significant aspect of this year's work was that all the regions came into the main strategic direction of *self reliance*. This was something that came out very strongly and clearly in all the regions. This was the overarching theme that informed all the twenty issues and all the five strategic directions. And this was something so encouraging for all of us, because it showed us that people's desire to be self-reliant is still there and as strong as ever.

But when it came to the process of managing the budget in people's decentralized manner, we found that this new focus on issues also created a new set of problems. The management of the budget by people is a must, but it is process which can easily go astray. For us, this was the real crux of the question of how real decentralization can work or not. In order to channel money to the regions to support these strategic directions, all sorts of "issue-based" committees and taskforces were set up to draft plans and propose budgets for the various directions. And the idea was that the budget would be passed across to these committees, which would then use the money, according to whatever they planned. In general, it worked out all right, but there were also problems.

In the southern region, for example, they had identified thirteen issues to work on and had formed 13 different regional committees, linking all key community networks and making plans of all the issues to support groups throughout the region. Now each of these issue-based committees had to work on their issue across a vast area covering several provinces! So that committee had a lot of work running around and coordinating numerous projects over this very large area. In this process, we found that the disadvantage side of it is that good leaders were being pulled out of their own communities and into regional process of coordination, so their energies were being dispersed in this regional process - too many links, too many meetings, too much travel! This wasn't a reason to dismantle the whole process, but it was a problem which we had to figure out how to correct in the third year.

Third Year - 2002 - 2003 :

By this time, having built the linkages and identified the key strategies by communities in all the regions (by this time, slightly about half to total number of communities in the country were linked to the CODI process), we were in a good position to focus more on specific issues, and could begin linking this newly-strengthened national

people's process to various government policies to tackle these issues. As a result, several programs have been set up and are demonstrating the great potential of people's involvement in tackling problems of poverty and development in Thailand. The Baan Mankong Upgrading program is just one of these.

In the third year, we tried to minimize regional level project consideration and coordination. It is the process to select and sharpen certain community strategic process and concentrate on qualitative as well as broader policy and social practice on that particular subjects and process to be changed. Finally the key strategic process agreed to concentrated were as following :

1. Community culture
2. Community managed natural resources
3. Research and Learning - an institution under CODI called "college of social management" was set up
4. Community economy for self reliance including community fund and savings
5. community planning
6. Baan Mankong was later added

We then organized sub-committees for each of these themes at national level to link and facilitate the processes in each of the regions, trying to minimize the facilitating and coordinating and running around within the regions. And in each theme, we tried to see what kind of *strategic moves* to work out and support. We didn't want to use this flexible money to keep financing the usual ongoing activities and running costs. We tried to identify strategic interventions and support activities that could bring about *breakthroughs*, activities which can *leverage change*.

So people who came together from the second year along different themes now had to sit and talk about what kind of activities they could initiate which would create these kinds of *breakthroughs*. The manner in which our funding support moved changed significantly in the third year. It became more like a process of planning, in which the people working together on each of these themes sat down and actually assessed the situation: who is doing what, what processes are good and show potential, what could be a strategic move to make to support that particular theme, to push this agenda further, to change policy? And the question was not only what kind of policy change do we want, but how to make that change happen?

So it was more like a people's plan, which community people in the regions prepared together. This planning happened from area level to national level, from the smallest scale of local areas, and the national plan was a collection of all those plans from the local areas. And this planning was not simply a matter of promoting some policy changes. It became clearer and clearer among the people involved that if we just ask the government for something, it may not mean anything! Making change, as we've come to see it, involves action at three levels :

1. How do deepen and strengthen the community process, to make it more inventive, more pro-active.

And how communities could develop more links so that they could learn more what works and what doesn't, and so they can develop the confidence and capacities to do things by themselves.

2. How to link with civic groups, local authorities and other local actors to better understand and to support what people - and their community organizations - are doing. How to improve the links between the community process and other development and civic processes. Otherwise, the community movement tends to get isolated from these other groups, and from the larger development processes. How to take the step forward to get the local authority to become part of your process? How to change the local politics and build activity space so that community become key participants and have stronger roles to determine local development system.

3. The third layer is the national level government and policies - the laws, the systems of governance, the government policies, the budget allocation process, the practices of Ministries.

Dealing with the national government is only one-third of the work, so the point is that what *concrete activities can be planned to influence change at these three layers*, and make qualitative change for that specific theme.

Now the allocation of budget during the third year was different than the first two years. Instead of allocating the budget to the regions, in the third year the money went through these national development process dealing with each of the five or six themes. Baan Mankong is one of these, because it addresses the urban issues of housing and land tenure. Baan Mankong was, in fact, emerged at the end of 2003 as government special program at the time.

Fourth Year - 2003 - 2004 :

In the fourth year, we followed the direction of working on these six themes, but with a much more action-oriented focus. During the third and fourth years, some of these issues have really taken off and become very important, while others have been slower to develop. The pace is different for each, and each depends on the opportunities. We are trying to institutionalize these things. This institutionalization has happened very clearly

with Baan Mankong and Community Planning, but not yet with the others. But with all these themes, community people are linking together in similar ways - at local, provincial, regional and national level - and then using their work to push on the national level to make change.

Theme 1: Urban housing and land tenure :

The *Baan Mankong* Program has created new way of delivering housing to poor communities. Until a few years ago, it was only the National Housing Authority that did various kind of housing and community upgrading projects. When this national housing program was first announced two years ago, the Minister at that time proposed dividing the work into two parts: the slums would be upgraded by CODI under the *Baan Mankong Program*, while the new housing construction would be handled by the NHA under the *Baan Ua Arthorn Program*.

These projects helped to change people's perceptions, and now community-driven upgrading has become a *national policy - a formal policy!* So now when the Prime Minister was announcing his policy about housing, he said clearly, *Baan Ua Arthorn and Baan Mankong*.

But the point of the Baan Mankong story is that we started from scratch, and from scratch we changed perceptions and we changed the policy. And what we accomplished with the issue of urban housing, we can accomplish with other issues as well.

(Well, we didn't *totally* start from scratch! We did start Baan Mankong with a strong national urban community movement which already had good links, good savings groups and a lot of experience implementing various activities by people, and we'd had a lot of experience working on community savings and credit activities and providing housing loans for more than 50 housing projects to community organizations.) And the Baan Mankong Program doesn't look only at housing or physical planning, but looks at ways to rebuild communities and rebuild their social and economic foundation, while their physical environment is improved. It is a new qualitative level of community-led housing development at city and country scale.

Theme 2: Community planning :

Now, we are working in similar ways to promote community planning. Khun Prayong Ronnarong, who just received the Magsaysay Award, is the father of the community planning movement in Thailand. There has been some attempts to do community planning activities undertaken with support of the Social Investment Fund (SIF Menu 5) during the economic crisis. And then it stopped. But community groups have picked up this theme again, and set up a steering committee, composed entirely of community people, to link with communities throughout the country and to help them start doing community planning. What does this mean? It means they start surveying their settlements and their problems, they make plans and see what kind of things they want to develop, step by step, and very holistic approach by themselves, and then implement by themselves or propose or negotiate their plans with their local authorities - and to other institutions and government agencies - for support. So it's not a group of projects or activities, but a national *movement*. Today, people and government system in general accept the idea that communities can - and should - plan their own future. This is comprehensive planning, not only the physical improvements which require resources, but covering all sorts of things, all aspects of community life - social, economic, physical, spiritual, etc.

Theme 3: Community Culture : We've had some good discussions with the Ministry of Culture to make this stronger. Community culture is a very strong basis for Thai society, perhaps, for most oriental society. It is deep rooted but very much undermined by invading national laws and western individualistic culture.

Theme 4: Reviving rural community lives and local development system : This key development direction is to work on reviving communities and local processes in a more holistic way. This is a strategy which is going to be stronger from now on in CODI. Having spent three years linking networks and promoting provincial and issue-based mechanisms for resolving problems and promoting change, we see this strategy as a way to bring the process back to people on the ground and from the ground up.

The idea is to find ways to revive the knowledge, capacities and collectivity so that communities can become key actors and can negotiate with other stakeholders about how they want their district, their village or their city to develop. We're trying to find a way by which communities in each locality are able to do their planning, and then deal with various development conditions - economy, natural resources, bringing people from that place back home, finance (which means funds), welfare, changing and rebuilding relationship between communities and local institutions (like local authorities, schools, temples, etc.) - how to bring these different groups into a new relationship in which the communities are a key actor, and how communities will be able to determine the development process, with other institutions, how to get schools to teach more local knowledge, and the monks work more along the lines with local needs - the idea is to revive the village or town or district - in such a way that opportunities are there and a good life is available there, so people don't have to move away to the city. So rural areas are not leaking!

In places like Japan or Europe, if people chose to live in small towns or rural areas, there's not a big difference - they still get all the facilities, income, social benefits and enjoy all the same benefits as those who choose to live in the cities. Why shouldn't it be the same way in Thailand (or in other Asian and African countries) - where the

differences now between urban and rural realities are very stark. Indeed, it is development direction to reverse this wrongly global development trend.

So we're starting by getting each province to look at what kind of initiatives already exist within that province which show promise. What are the existing good models for sustainable development, for farming, for welfare, for income generation, that are already reviving rural localities? And from being very good in these areas, how could those initiatives be expanded to being good in other areas also? How to begin with what is already there and already working, to expand that to cover other issues of rural community life, to meet other needs? And then, once we've identified a number of areas, we could draw a line to link these strong groups and see how the not-so-strong groups could relate to that, province to province.

There's sufficient money at local level now - if people are ready and the thinking is clear, people could find budget from several current government programs (such as the million-baht village fund, or the prime minister's new SML fund). There's no shortage of resources, but the important thing is the *thinking* and community's own plan. Otherwise, the village fund and the SML fund will just melt away in financing consumer purchases - mobile phones, televisions, refrigerators and motorcycles for the rural poor! There are farmers who go to the rice fields with mobile phone in his pockets these days.

In fact, there are really only two directions the development in Thailand's communities could follow:

- ***Globalization and Consumerism*** : One option people have is to join the sweeping tide of consumerism, which seems to be one of the most prominent aspects of globalization, in which people are becoming more and more isolated and individualized, just buying whatever they like to buy, racking up debts in the process, and fulfilling their aspirations by acquiring certain objects from the market
- ***Self reliance*** : Or they could opt for community self reliance, in which you take control of your life and your locality. Power of people to be more horizontal. And you could protect yourself from too much consumerism, and challenge this consumer onslaught and negotiate something else.

Baan Mankong also went against the tide of developer-driven housing, and the conventional belief that the market can provide for all.

So we are now very busy, as usual, to move the fourth year, I hope, in a clearer development direction and support roles for CODI. However clearer we see, to find ways to work effectively is quite difficult since they are not in any textbook. It is a great challenge for us to go to in this fourth year of CODI.