A call for developing more Collective Housing



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Here is what collective housing does:

- solves our serious housing problems
- tackles poverty comprehensively and leaves no one behind
- builds inclusive, resilient and sustainable communities
- achieves the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- puts the New Urban Agenda into action

In early July, 2024, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) organized an international conference in Bangkok, Thailand, on collective and community-driven housing, around the theme *"Let people be the solution."* The conference was hosted by the Thai Government's Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), along with ten organizing partners from Thailand and around the world.

The conference brought together over 200 representatives of grassroots communities and networks and their support NGOSs, civil society organizations, housing professionals, local and national governments, international development institutions and universities from Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. The conference aimed showcase and foster exchange learning about innovative experiences developing collective housing in the Asian context, while analyzing bottlenecks and exploring ways to scale up these innovative community-led housing initiatives.

Collective housing takes many different shapes, according to each local context, but several key principles are common:

1. **COLLECTIVE DEVELOPMENT:** Residents from low-income communities play a central role in collectively planning, producing and managing their housing and broader living environment, with technical and public support.
2. **COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP:** Collective ownership or leasehold of land and buildings, as a common asset rather than a financial commodity, takes them out of the speculative housing market and ensures the housing remains permanently affordable to the residents.
3. **COLLECTIVE FUTURE:** Shared spaces, solidarity, pooled social assets and financial resources by the residents are key features that contribute to the development of other aspects of people's lives, empowerment and sustainability, long after housing is completed.

During the course of the many panel discussions and workshops and project visits which took place during the workshop, several key ideas emerged and were agreed upon about the potential for community-driven and collective housing to solve our housing problems at scale, and about what factors could unlock the enormous development force in poor communities and lead to greater support for this crucial housing development strategy. The ideas from the conference are summerized in this declaration.







WHAT IS COLLECTIVE HOUSING?

A theme with many variations in Asia

Asia is a region that is rich in collective forms of housing - both traditional and newer forms. And variation is the rule: there are many models, many types, many arrangements, and many cases of collective housing initiatives in one place inspiring new variations in another. Like its dizzying array of cuisines, Asia's examples of collective housing all contain the flavors and ingredients of their locality, and bear the marks of their particular history, politics and societal ways.

We use the terms "collective" or "community-driven" because there aren't yet many countries in Asia with legal structures to support the kind of cooperative housing we see more commonly in Europe, Canada and other parts of the world. "Collective" is a looser and more encompassing term, which makes room for the great variety of housing initiatives that people plan, build and manage themselves, in many different ways, as groups rather than as individuals.

We don't use the term "collective" too loosely, though. There are many common threads which run through these housing projects, and these threads could be called principles, or common responses to needs which are similar across countries. And they all present an alternative model to individualized and market-driven housing models that are oveMhelming everything and making housing ever less accessible, less affordable and less human.

All in the sane boat...

Many times, when a community housing project is being developed and the community organizes as a group and takes a loan to build new houses, the very poor get left out because they can't afford to repay the loans. That's not much different than what happens in the real estate market. The Thais have an interesting take on this problem. The hundreds of collective housing projects that the Thai community networks have developed over the past twenty years are all different, but they are all animated by an important common principal: that no matter what form the housing takes, everyone in that community should be part of it, even the poorest.

As one community leader put it, a community is like a boat, and the job of a boat is to keep everyone on board, safe from the sharks and the dangers of falling into the sea. When a community begins working on their new housing, one of the first steps is to survey their members, understand together who are the poorest and most vulnerable, and find ways that the project makes room for those community members too. Nobody is excluded and everyone is in the boat.



"We should declare loudly how important and essential collective housing is for everyone's sustainability. Collective housing is based on an alternative set of values - people-centered values. Collective housing is not housing alone; it is a way for us to restore and rejuvenate the shared values of our humanity, which we have lost in the process of capitalism."

(Lean Heng Chan, Malaysia Science University in Penang)

What makes a housing process COLLECTIVE?

A collective housing project is like an extremely elaborate and difficult recipe, and it will always have ma ingredients. The degree to which these different ingredients are collective can vary widely from project project, depending on the needs of the group that made the project and the context in which it was born. They all different, and some projects are more strongly collective in certain ways than others. As we try understand Asia's multicolored array of collective housing projects, and look for ways to make them strong and more numerous, it may be useful to look at the elements that are common to all of them and to ask how the separate elements can be designed so that they bolster the collective strength of the project as a whole:









PLAN TOGETHER: Communities are taking part in planning their n housing in many ways: finding and mapping land together, planning housi layouts and public spaces together, designing houses and infrastructu together and working to make sure the needs of all the diverse members the community are accommodated in the new plans, so nobody is left o

BUILD TOGETHER: In some projects, communities opt to hire local contra tors to build the entire project, but collectively supervise the work, wh others save money by doing all or part of the work themselves, organizi community teams to manage different aspects of the construction, hiring c to builders only those parts they can't manage themselves.

OWN TOGETHER: Collective tenure can be one of the most importa elements of a project, because it provides a lasting structure for keepi people together in their housing and using their group power to protect the from both market forces and the crises of poverty which often cause peop to have to sell out and move back to a slum.

FINANCE TOGETHER: Saving together and managing the money togeth during a project can be powerful ways to build the kind of collective spirit a collective financial management capabilities a community will need, as th repay their loans and manage their housing in the future.

LIVE IN TOGETHER: Once a housing project is finished, people will s have needs of various sorts. The collective systems a community forg during an intense housing project can be extended to create long-term soci and financial self-support systems within a community which can deal wi whatever needs arise in the future, such as welfare and livelihood.

Slums have many collective aspects...



Slums provide housing to an overwhelming majority of Asia's urban poor. Conditions in these settlements may be bedraggled and substandard in every way, but they provide a lifeline to poor families who would have a hard time surviving on their own. And they have many collective aspects: they provide a degree of security and social support; residents share food, day-care and earning strategies, and sometimes work together to improve common spaces and facilities. But like the larger societies they are part of, this form of housing is also full of inequities, and because it is mostly built on somebody else's land, most of it will eventually be pushed out.

But all of them are insecure, all face eviction

THE NEED TO DEVELOP COLLECTIVE HOUSING AT SCALE





Some 1.1 billion people around the world are now living in slums, and the number keeps growing. This fact makes it clear that top-down approaches to providing housing and basic services to low-income citizens have failed around the world. In the five decades since the Habitat I Conference in 1976, top-down approaches have dominated the discourse on how low-income housing should be understood and developed. These approaches remain rooted in the old ideas that housing as just a 'sector', that project design and delivery excludes community members as active stakeholdersctors to collectively house themselves at scale, conventional finance system and collateral-based micro-finance which most poor are unable to access, and lack of sufficient land provided for low-income housing.

On the contrary, the process of 'collective housing' have been successful in not only providing low-income housing and basic services, but they have also resulted in the building and strengthening of strong local communities. As a new paradigm, 'collective housing' builds on people's collective initiative, strengths, resources, and resolve to hands-on not only affordable housing for all members but building a lively and sustainable community. Collective housing not only tackles the problem of low-income housing for the poor but also builds sustainable human settlements through strengthening the communities' capacity for their social, economic and environmental living system.

Decades of pragmatic experience across the world has shown that the community-led and bottom-up 'collective housing' process can be supported by broad participation of actors, civil societies, national and local governments in an increasing number of countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The big question is: How to scale up the successful policies, processes, performances, financing, partnerships and institution-building at the global level for providing low-income housing and basic services through 'collective housing' by active people's process. This requires global advocacy, partnerships and financing for advancing the collective housing agenda especially with regard to the reforming and/or formulating housing policies at global national and local levels, developing new financial system to support at the international, national- and local-level delivery systems, institutional strengthening, and large scale capacity development.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: PEOPLE ARE SUFFERING



- **Growing numbers of people are living in informal settlements.** The annual tracking of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 shows that the global "slum" population has been constantly growing and currently stands at 1.1 billion. This is a huge challenge to the national, sub-national and local governments. But those who suffer most are the low-income communities.
- **Low-income communities face multiple problems.** Some of these problems include poor quality housing, the lack of adequate infrastructure and services, insecure land tenure, little or no access to finance for secure housing, and the lack of basic rights and exclusion to participate in their own planning and development.
- **Climate change affects the poor disproportionately.** In both urban and rural areas, climate change is adding new layers of difficulties and challenges to low-income communities living in informal settlements, which are often in locations most vulnerable to storms, floods, and landslides.

UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF OUR HOUSING PROBLEMS



- **Rural and urban poverty are driving housing problems.** In many countries, national policies have focused on urbanization and infrastructure led economic growth. As a result, rural areas remain neglected and their development lags. The lack of livelihood opportunities in rural areas, haphazard and unplanned expansion of cities, rural land capture (e.g., for real estate development), the construction of infrastructure causing eviction and land speculation has resulted in the outmigration of rural populations, especially the youth, who end up living in informal settlements in urban areas.
- **Climate change is making housing problems worse.** The increasing impacts of climate change are felt in rural areas in the form of loss of land due to floods and landslides, and change of weather patterns, low precipitation, extreme heat waves, and droughts. "Since 2008, over 376 million people have been displaced as a result of climate disaster," according to one estimate. The deeper the poverty of people, the more they are affected by climate change and emergencies. At the local level, the severity of this challenge is also due to the lack of "collective power of local communities to plan and deal with climate change". In many countries, the power to plan for local areas is vested with the central government. Sectoral planning is conducted by different central governments departments. Consequently, it becomes difficult for the local governments and communities as they are not given the mandate and resources for making local-level plans and climate sensitive development.
- **Conventional top-down housing planning approaches have failed.** There is a growing realization around the world that the conventional top-down approaches to urban and regional planning in general, and that for the provision of low-income housing and basic services have failed to achieve development results. Without planning inputs from local communities, informal settlements continue to be unorganized, under-serviced and unsafe. Moreover, many local projects fail to develop linkages between local communities and their surrounding local area for social and economic development and environmental improvement. Area-based and sustainable development approaches are a critical missing link in project-based modalities.
- **Land for housing is inaccessible to the poor.** In most cities, land is increasingly seen as a market commodity and not as a public good. There are very few measures to balance or control the forces of the market on land. As a result

of speculation, land prices in many countries have risen multiple times faster than average incomes. In such overheated urban land markets, poor individuals do not stand a chance to buy private land.

- **Public land used for housing the poor usually ends up in the market.** There are a few countries that have used public land for housing the poor. However, in most cases, the land ownership is transferred to at individual level, and not collectively to a community or group. This makes individual plots of land a marketable commodity. Thus, governments are losing their precious land to market due to faulty individual housing delivery systems and the lack of understanding about the importance of collective land ownership for collective housing for building strong community
- **Finance for housing initiated by communities is not available.** At present, there is little financial investment from multilateral development banks or national (i.e., domestic) lending institutions in low-income people-initiated housing. This is because the multilateral development banks argue that the provision of individualized financial assistance to the urban (and rural) poor is marred with the problems related to lack of collateral and the high administration costs compared to the size of low-income housing loans. Therefore, there is an urgent need to not only provide individual lending for housing but also develop more collective housing finance.
- **Private sector actors have commodified housing for profit.** Private sector has focused on providing high-income and middle-income housing for higher returns. Irrespective of countries, the private sector has stayed away from providing low-income housing due to regulatory support and low profit margin. In many cases, smaller private sector provides low-income rental housing but there are quality and liveability healthy concerns.
- **Centralized governance structures have inhibited reform and innovative policies.** While international advocacy for decentralization and devolution abounds, regulations and governance continue to remain too centralized and too slow to keep up with emerging needs and demand. As a result, more and more gaps emerges, cities and low-income communities are left with little powers to develop and innovate processes to undertake their own needy development. Moreover, conventional project-based delivery systems often constrain the achievement of local level goals for integrated area based solutions for sustainable development.
- **Low-income housing has disappeared from the international development agenda.** Housing, which used to be the core of urban development assistance, has considerably been left out in the urban development agenda of most international development institutions. As a result, too little knowledge and development or actual operational work is being done by international development institutions on housing for the poor. The knowledge on the practice of collective housing for example is lagging behind among international development institutions. The focus is more on infrastructure investments aimed at economic growth. As a result, there is unnoticeable policy and capacity on human housing and social development.
- **People are being evicted from their traditional lands and settlements.** Old settlements have been their traditional living system with family and social networks which were developed over decades, if not centuries - both in urban and rural areas. In most countries, traditional social systems have been destroyed directly by forced evictions or indirectly by redevelopment schemes. The residents have no protection, no affordable housing production for them and, therefore, discontinued the long social development system. They are often replaced by the top-down process or market development for profit. As a result, the new housing available is either very costly or too far away from their traditional habitats without social support structure. All of this is a growing pain for the low-income communities. "To get rid of their old housing but the new one doesn't suit them."



Showing another way . . .

Meanwhile, there are considerable emerging experiences and communities around the world that have come up people-led initiatives and solutions, supported by some city governments, civil society organizations, universities, and philanthropic organizations. In a number of countries, some government institutions have been developed to provide substantive and financial support directly to local communities to help them build their collective housing and organise and manage community development activities.

These government institutions have helped local communities to build local partnerships with local governments, civil society and universities. Such multi-stakeholder collaboration has resulted in sustainable development of effective and participatory low-income communities. This momentum has also led to the development of citywide collective housing and urban upgrading strategies and programs and scaling up of the collective housing and many aspects of collective city development.

HOW TO SUPPORT AND SCALE UP COLLECTIVE HOUSING?

1 SCALING UP WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS



- **Communities represent the "demand side" of collective housing and settlement upgrading.** By promoting this demand function, the communities can become active agents and driving forces of demand-driven development for various possible collective housing and settlement upgrading. Thus, community organizations at scale should and can lead their own development efforts.
- **Seeing organized communities as the solution for collective housing.** Community organizations are built on the mobilization and bringing together of all households living in a community in order to tackle collectively the problem of housing, services and development for all. Community should be the "active" actor in their own integrated development activities for sustainable development.
- **Community capacity at large scale.** This is a key to the success of organized communities in their pursuit of collective housing and settlement upgrading. Community capacities need to be built with regard to community mobilization and organization, networking, community-led survey and mapping, participatory local area planning, community-led management of saving-and-credit groups, management of collective loan repayment, and community-led social welfare programmes, etc. This process can start at small scale and incrementally taken to large scale as per the requirements.
- **Multiply the housing development actors and supporters.** Scaling up will require multiplication of the actors and stakeholders involved in collective housing. These include the government institutions, city governments, local communities, civil society organizations, universities, and the private sector.

2 COLLECTIVE FINANCE FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES





- **Building community-led and collective financial management systems.** This is an important alternative to the prevailing finance systems which are all for individual. Flexible and community-friendly finance systems have been tested and learned with the reality of poor people's lives and earning patterns get together in a wide scale successful simple community savings and credit activities implemented widely. Community organizations and their saving groups can and need to develop and manage their own collective finance systems linking each family or individual to a group and community finance system.
- **Collective management of communities' internal finances and external loans and grants.** The concept of collective finance connotes the provision and implementation of "new" and tested finance mechanisms to support collective housing by providing collective loans to community organizations. They can borrow external financial sources for the whole community and manage the repayment of their loans collectively. It can help match the formal and informal finance system to work together The system of collective finance has been tested over decades in several countries, like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Philippines, Bangladesh and Thailand.
- **Collective housing finance is bankable.** In different countries' experience, there have been successful attempts to make collective finance work. Either it comes directly from the government budget, or by creating a financial institution which then reaches out to communities and provides collective finance in the form of different loans to people's development finance. In other cases, it works as guarantee fund that enables the private bank to give the loan to community organizations. In a number of European countries, the more mature collective housing systems and the banks give loans to "cooperative housing", as the loan to any private sector. This has allowed the expansion of collective housing to be able to link with the market finance system. It is to concluded that in fact, low-income housing loans are bankable. Experiences of CODI in Thailand, for instance, shows the capacity for collective financial management to poor communities has loan repayment rates of 98 percent in community housing projects.
- **The need for new forms of funding from banks and multilateral finance institutions.** Scaling up of collective housing finance will not be possible without the active engagement of and support by new kinds of financial system to the collective finance agenda in the form of large-scale funding and/or related guarantees. Therefore, there is an urgent need to update and develop the knowledge and capacity of financial community and institutions on how collective finance works. Likewise, the regulatory mechanisms within the multilateral financial institutions as well as national financial institutions need to be updated to provide appropriate collective finance to community organizations so that collective housing and community-led development can be upscaled at a faster and reasonable rate.

3 COLLECTIVE LAND TENURE



- **Collect ive land tenure arrangements are crucial for collective housing.** Collective land tenure arrangements are needed in order to protect low-income housing from market forces and to ensure that the people living there have secure housing and supportive communities permanently. It is essential to keep this housing from being penetrated by market forces and to keep the land from being a commodity. It is the way of taking land for living and build up social community for everyone and ensuring it is used for people's housing and community needs.
- **Collective land tenure is a social function for social production.** Collective land tenure acts as a social function" for social production and a binding force to keep people together. Collectively owned or leased land is a protection against the market forces. This is land for the people to build their collective living and social development system for all ages and all possible collective activities
- **Using public land for collective housing, with collective tenure.** There is limited public land, and there must be a way that to secure as much of that public land as possible for the public good from collective housing. This is because collective housing is one of the public goods. The public land supply should be managed in such a way that more public land is allocated for the living system of the people, through the collective housing arrangement. As private land prices grow ever more out of reach for the urban poor, there is an urgent need to use public land for collective housing, and to work together with government for the SDG Target 11.1: "By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums."
- **Collective land is a key to sustainable urban development.** Collective land makes collective housing a collective asset, rather than an individual asset and commodity. As a "binding force" for long-term collective sustainable development, collective land makes community a force that can deal with any problem and any development challenge in the long-term. The land of the city and country should be protected from becoming a market commodity. It should be used for community building social and public development.

4 TAKING A CITYWIDE APPROACH TO COLLECTIVE HOUSING

- **A citywide approach is the key to developing housing solutions at scale.** It is further helpful in bringing communities and city partners together and developing collective solutions so no one is left behind. This way, every community can be part of the sustainable development process at the city level. Thus, the citywide approach to collective housing is a realistic way to achieve "the right to the city" by allowing all poor communities to be recognized, involved and to be "active actors" to solve their citywide housing problems together and to become active participants for their various possible collective housing solutions and sustainable development.
- **Citywide networks promote alliances and collaboration.** Citywide approaches to collective housing support the mapping of all low-income communities and informal settlements, understanding the availability of potential land available for collective housing, building cooperation and collaboration among communities and their partners, exchanging lessons learned with other communities, and providing support to each other.

- **A citywide housing approach helps achieve sustainable urban development.** City governments benefit by developing a citywide strategy for collective housing, building collaboration and partnerships between government, people and other stakeholders, developing collective solutions, facilitating the process of securing collective land and tenure, and providing the necessary infrastructure and services to the low-income communities. A citywide approaches to collective housing helps city governments link housing development to city planning, land, infrastructure, promote economic growth, social and welfare activities leading to sustainable "people centric" city development.

5 PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY PLANNING



- **A new kind of design professionals can empower people.** In participatory community planning, architects and planners unlock the energy and ability of the people to collectively plan their own communities. In the conventional way, the architect plans the housing for the clients. But in the collective housing process, a good "community architect" will work with the community and try to understand the needs and dynamics of the community, and how the planning of the new community could improve people's collective living with focus on affordability and liveability. Thus, the "community architect" empowers people and enhances the quality of their living system and community managed environment.
- **Participatory planning integrates housing with the urban system as a whole.** First, it improves the living conditions of the community and the connection to the neighbouring areas. It further promotes the physical, social, economic and environmental development at sub-city level.

6 BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION



- **The need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership.** Experience has shown that there is a wide array of actors involved in collective housing process. They include local communities, civil society organizations, professionals (architects and planners), local governments, universities, the private sector, and philanthropists. Collaborative mechanism means: people need change, and they become the driving force to link all relevant stakeholders for assistance. Better coordination can come when communities can join all stakeholders to sit together at the same table, as equal partners, on planning and ongoing process. When all stakeholders collectively see the picture together, plan together, then they are able to learn and address the problem together from different angles. This helps built multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership and local support for collective housing.
- **And partnerships with private sector actors also.** Private sector includeslarge, medium and small enterprises. It is known for its efficiency and capacity. While private sector focuses on profitable business, some enterprises also contribute to social and environmental causes. Therefore, it is important to build partnerships with the private sector to harness their efficient approaches and financial contributions for collective housing. There have been examples where private sector has built new housing projects for former residents of low-income settlements (e.g., land sharing). These housing projects could expand and can become more sustainable using collective housing approaches.

7 THE NEED FOR FLEXIBLE NEW HYBRID SUPPORT SYSTEMS



- **Create "hybrid" institutions which combine top-down and bottom-up approaches.** Government systems are often slow as compared to the changing needs. People are good at actual processes of implementation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to combine and build synergies between the two and create "hybrid systems". For instance, this has been done in Thailand, where the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI), established and functioning under the Ministry of Social Development Human Security. The government provides financial assistance and regulatory oversight through the Ministry, and CODI combines it with the people-led collective housing process that it supports through capacity development for the low-income communities, channelling financial assistance, facilitating community-led collective housing in urban and rural area at national scale. In many cities, collaborative mechanism between city government, civil society, community and other stakeholders are also functioning as new forms of governance and hybrid mechanism at the city level. This process could support the participatory SDG localization at the city and sub-city levels.
- **People as the key development mechanism and implementing mechanism.** It is simple for government to work with people by building a collaborative platform for discussion and implementation. Government can let people be their development mechanism. For example, when a housing plan in Namibia was slow to implement, , the government engaged the community network, which implemented it much faster. Likewise, governments can support community organizations and their networks to be the "implementing mechanism". This is because communities are faster, better, cheaper, more efficient to reach the goal, according to the plan. If communities, with appropriate capacity, become part of the planning and implementation process, then collective housing can be upscaled much faster.

8 THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

- Multilateral cooperation and support are essential for going to scale in collective housing development. In reality, governments may not have sufficient funds to support low-income communities for collective housing. Conventional financing mechanisms of multilateral lending, such as projects and programmes, have not yielded results, as is evident by the growing number of people living in informal settlements. Therefore, meaningful discussions need to take place with multilateral development and financial institutions in order to develop new institutional systems and people-oriented financing mechanisms that can help upscale collective housing processes in countries around the world. It is necessary for multilateral institutions to better understand the functioning of collective housing and how to design financing systems to appropriately support collective housing development at scale.