Doing more with less

COVID-19 relief by community networks in Southeast Asia

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Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

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Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)

ACHR is a coalition of Asian grassroots community organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), housing professionals, activists and community architects who have been working together and supporting each other since 1989 to promote a community-driven housing and urban development process in cities across the Asia region.

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This paper describes an action-research study in which experienced community networks in four Southeast Asian countries collectively reflected on, compared and documented the innovative work they were doing on the ground during the COVID-19 crisis. The study showed how these networks planned their COVID-19 interventions strategically and used the urgency of the crisis to strengthen and expand their people-driven support systems, tackle the structural causes of poverty, and show elements of a more humane, equitable and environmentally sustainable city development model while addressing immediate COVID-19 needs in the communities.

Contents

Acronyms

ACHR	Asian Coalition for Housing Rights
CODI	Community Organizations Development Institute
HPFPI	Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc
JRMK	Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota Network (Urban Poor Network), Indonesia
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PACSII	Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives Inc
SAJUSSA	San Juan Seaside Settlers Association, the Philippines
ULHOA	United Libis Homeowners Association, the Philippines
UPC	Urban Poor Consortium
WfW	Women for the World

Summary

This working paper documents an action-research study in which community networks in four Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand) reflected on and documented their innovative COVID-19 response work. During the study, these community groups met regularly, presented their work to their peers in other countries, learnt from their respective experiences and collectively reflected on the role the pandemic has played in the progress of their community movements. The study was facilitated by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR). This COVID-19 study follows three other ACHR action-research studies that were also carried out in ways which allowed community organisations to become the principal researchers: poverty lines (2014), community finance systems (2017) and food security (2019). This study adds to a growing body of analysis and reflection on different aspects of poverty – and solutions to poverty – by the poor themselves.

Community networks participating in the study

- The Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota (JRMK) Network (Urban Poor Network) is a network of 29 *kampungs* (informal communities) in Jakarta, Indonesia. The network is supported by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Urban Poor Consortium (UPC).
- The Women's Saving and Development Network in Yangon, Myanmar has worked with the NGO Women for the World (WfW) since 1998 to help Yangon's poorest women come together and develop their own solutions to the serious housing problems they face.
- The Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc (HPFPI) is a national network of urban poor communities. Established in 1995, it is active in 20 cities and uses community-managed savings as the core strategy of a community-led development process on many fronts. The federation's NGO support partner is the Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives Inc (PACSII).
- The Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) is a Thai government institution which supports the strengthening of communities and their organisations as key agents of change and as central actors in development which affects their communities, in close partnership with area- and issue-based community networks across the country.

Using the COVID-19 crisis to strengthen community networks

Disasters have a way of heaping their troubles with disproportionate ferocity upon the poor. The pandemic has been no exception, leaving most of the poor around the world – especially in cities – without work, unable to earn, and without the means to meet their basic needs or feed their families. Their crowded and poorly serviced living conditions and limited access to healthcare have made them doubly vulnerable to the virus. Governments, development institutions and aid agencies have geared up with some large-scale programmes to address the pandemic and its repercussions, but very little of that aid has reached the poor communities most at risk.

At the same time, some organised groups of the poor have used the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis to come together and marshal whatever resources they can to address their common needs in fresh, practical and efficient ways. For these grassroots groups, the pandemic has presented an opportunity to grow; an opportunity that would only have been possible in a dire crisis that shakes everything up. Instead of being a story of unmitigated suffering and loss, the pandemic has in some cases become a story of the strengthening and validation of an alternative community-managed system. This paper looks at how community networks have used the COVID-19 crisis more strategically, to not only address immediate needs but to strengthen, enlarge and legitimise an alternative people's system. This system can address many issues of urban poverty, and constitutes a growing development force as well as a new, more participatory, collective and democratic model in cities.

About the case studies

The paper briefly summarises some of the community-driven and network-driven COVID-19 initiatives that were written up in greater detail in a set of 17 case studies, including:

- Community kitchens in the Bangkok metro area and in four cities in the Philippines.
- Rice distribution projects in the cities of Chum Phae in Thailand, Jakarta in Indonesia and Metro Manila in the Philippines.
- Community garden projects in Thailand and the Philippines.
- Livelihood projects and community enterprises in the Philippines, Jakarta in Indonesia and Yangon in Myanmar.
- Mitigation, health and community quarantine projects in the Philippines, Bangkok in Thailand and Yangon in Myanmar.
- CODI's national programme to support community-driven COVID-19 response in Thailand.

Key findings and conclusions

A set of 11 striking ideas emerged from the experience of planning, implementing, describing and collectively assessing all these community-driven COVID-19 projects in the four countries. In Section 4 of this paper, these ideas are analysed and illustrated with examples from the longer case studies:

- Flexible funding allowed networks to deal more holistically with the crisis
- The crisis activated alternative people's systems when the formal systems were falling short
- The crisis put pandemic-hit communities into the giving and helping-each-other mode
- Networks used the crisis as a chance to go beyond just relief and do a lot more
- Community-driven relief strengthened and broadened the larger community movement
- Communities could do more with less
- Networks built on the collective force in communities
- Communities used the crisis to revive and expand their networks
- Women held everything together
- The COVID-19 projects offered new ideas for a different urban future
- Everything led to housing.

The COVID-19 interventions were strategically designed by these mature community networks to do several things at the same time they were addressing immediate pandemic-related needs. They strengthened people's systems at community and network levels, and boosted their relationships with government and other stakeholders. They showed how to tackle the structural roots of poverty by keeping the focus on getting secure land for housing, using public land for public purposes, building stronger and more inclusive citywide networks, and creating new collective structures that belong to the poor and can help them meet the basic needs they cannot meet as individuals.

1 Introduction

As with almost any disaster – natural or manmade – the COVID-19 pandemic has heaped its troubles and ill effects with disproportionate ferocity upon the poor. While the better off have regular salaries, insurance policies, savings accounts, pensions, entitlements and assets to draw on when earthquakes level, floods inundate or fires sweep away, the poor, by contrast, have none of these protections and can be left with nothing in a moment.

The pandemic, and the public health and economic meltdowns that have come with it, is no exception to the rule. This particular disaster left most of the poor around the world – especially in cities – without work, unable to earn, and without the means to meet their basic needs or even feed their families. Their crowded and poorly serviced living conditions and limited access to healthcare made them doubly vulnerable to the virus. When schools closed and children stuck at home were offered online home study, many poor families did not have computers or internet access or even enough money to pay for phone time, so their children were excluded, and drop-out rates soared.

Worldwide, an estimated 90% of COVID-19 cases are in urban areas (United Nations, 2020) and the virus disproportionately affects the poorest residents. Many of the initial recommendations to control the spread of the pandemic – washing hands, self-isolating and social distancing – assume a certain quality of basic living conditions and access to essential services. But these recommendations are simply not possible in low- and middle-income nations, and especially in low-income and informal urban settlements (Auerbach and Thachil, 2020; Wilkinson, 2020). The economic impact of lockdowns and other restrictions that came with the virus disproportionately affects the vast majority of the urban poor who work in the informal sector and rely on daily wages to survive. By mid-2020, as many as 1.6 billion informal sector workers around the world were estimated to be affected by the pandemic (International Labour Organization, 2020). A study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) of informal-sector worker conditions in 12 cities found that the spread of the pandemic and the accompanying government restrictions prevented almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents from working during the period of heaviest restrictions, with average earnings falling to only 21% of pre-pandemic earnings. The severity of impacts reflects how restrictions did not sufficiently account for large segments of the informal workforce who rely on daily earnings and lack social protection (WIEGO, 2020).

Urban food systems have also been disrupted by the pandemic and by the measures to contain it, leading to greater food and nutrition insecurity, especially among the urban poor (FAO, 2020). With a large proportion of residents of cities in low- and middle-income countries living in informal settlements, responses to the pandemic that do not recognise these realities deepen existing poverty and the vulnerability of large numbers of urban residents, especially but not exclusively in low- and middle-income countries (Corburn et al., 2020; Sverdlik and Walnycki, 2021).

Governments, development institutions and aid agencies have geared up with some large-scale programmes to address the pandemic and its repercussions. But very few aid programmes have reached the poor communities most at risk, whose residents suffer the effects of the virus and the lockdowns most existentially. And when some assistance has reached them, it has been irregular, ill-directed, temporary and insufficient (Auerbach and Thachil, 2020; Gupte and Mitlin, 2020). So as with most

global disasters, the calamity of COVID-19 has affected the poor more seriously, making them poorer, hungrier and more vulnerable.

But we also see instances where organised groups of the poor have used the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis to come together and marshal whatever resources they can to address their common needs in fresh, practical and efficient ways. These community-led initiatives, even when they have been very modest, have strengthened their group power and position in the city in the process (see for example Duque Franco et al., 2020; Fransen et al., 2022; Kimani et al., 2021; Loewenson et al., 2021; Sverdlik and Walnycki, 2021). For these grassroots groups, the pandemic has presented an opportunity to grow – an opportunity that would only have arisen in a dire crisis which shakes everything up and scares everyone out of their slumber. So instead of being a story of unmitigated diminishment and loss, the pandemic has in some cases become a story of strengthening and renewal, and of expansion and validation of an alternative people's system. Nothing perfect or earth-shattering, but we can see real possibilities. There is light enough to show that another ending to the inexorable narrative is possible, in which the most badly affected people are part of the solution.

1.1 Community-driven responses do more than meet immediate needs

We now have plenty of evidence that when poor communities and their networks and federations are organised and supported, they can develop solutions to problems of housing, land, livelihood, services, access to finance and many other things in ways that are faster, cheaper and more effective and equitable.[1] In doing so, they are demonstrating that they make excellent development partners who can deliver solutions to challenges that the state and market cannot, and can do so at scale – since only the poor have the scale of numbers, reach and motivation to address these big societal problems.

We also have evidence that the same thing can happen with disasters.[2] As we have seen with the Asian Tsunami in 2004, and with the innumerable typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, floods and fires that have happened since then, those suffering the worst effects of a crisis can become the most active drivers of the most effective solutions to post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation. We now have many examples of community- and network-driven responses to these calamities, and their solutions are well documented and known. Proof of concept is not in short supply. That is all mightily inspiring, and should be absorbed in the prevailing development paradigm much more than it is.

1.2 How the COVID-19 crisis has strengthened community-driven responses

What is less understood and less examined is how organised communities and their larger and increasingly mature networks can use calamities to not only address immediate needs more effectively, but can use the urgency and openings that come with disasters to strengthen, enlarge, consolidate and legitimise a larger people's system. This alternative system can address many issues of urban poverty and constitutes a growing development force and a new, more participatory, collective and democratic model in cities.

In the early stages of the lockdown, the community network in the Thai city of Nakhon Sawan put together and distributed thousands of food packages to out-of-work and vulnerable families in low-income communities around the city © CODI

Designing an effective community-driven response to address a set of urgent immediate needs is one thing – and a great thing – but transforming the implementation of specific solutions to immediate problems into something larger and more strategic, which touches the larger structures in their cities, is something that mature community networks are increasingly learning to do: making the most intense use of specific crises and scant development assistance to do much more, to leverage other resources and to negotiate big gains for

[1] For examples, see the related reading section at the end of this working paper.
[2] See for example publications on community-driven disaster rehabilitation at the end of this working paper.

their movement and their role in cities, and to show the formal system a new way of doing things.

This working paper is based on the collaborative work of the ACHR team, the country teams and the IIED team. In this paper, we look at how established community networks in four Asian countries have used the COVID-19 crisis to do that, in different ways. Even though they have had to make do with dramatically different levels of support, these community networks have been able to think well beyond the immediate crisis – even as they are in the middle of it – and use whatever small and scattered development assistance they can muster to do something larger, longer term and more strategic. This is a habit networks have had to cultivate, since resources are so scarce, projects always so short term, funding priorities so fickle, and development fashions so changeable – when the larger project of community development is long term. Secure land and housing, better incomes and legitimacy as full citizens: these are all long-term prospects.

2

About the action-research study

Between August 2021 and January 2022, four long-established community networks in four Southeast Asian countries – Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand – took part in an action-research study which allowed them to reflect on and document the innovative COVID-19 response work they were already doing on the ground in their own countries. Besides allowing them to expand and deepen that work, with some modest resources, the study also enabled these community groups to meet each other regularly, present their work on various fronts to their peers in other countries, learn from each other's experiences, compare approaches and reflect collectively on the crisis and the role the pandemic has played in the progress of their community movements.

The study was facilitated by ACHR, a coalition of Asian grassroots community organisations, support NGOs, housing professionals, activists and community architects which support each other and learn from each other through a lively exchange of ideas, mutual help and joint projects. After linking together first in 1989, the ACHR groups began exploring ways of joining forces and supporting each other through a growing number of joint initiatives: housing rights campaigns, fact-finding missions, training and advisory programmes, exchange visits, study tours to learn from prominent and innovative projects in the region, workshops, and regional projects to promote community savings and community funds, and citywide slum upgrading and collective housing. The collective experience of all these groups represents a huge quantum of understanding and possibilities – Asia's own home-grown development wisdom. Through this collaborative work over three decades, all these people and organisations in the coalition have found that they had one crucial thing in common: a belief that the key resource to solve Asia's enormous problems of poverty and housing is the people who experience those problems directly, who are most urgently wanting change and most vitally motivated to solve those problems. Communities of the poor represent Asia's greatest and least-tapped development force.

This COVID-19 study follows on the heels of three other ACHR action-research studies which were also carried out in ways which allowed community organisations to become the principal researchers: poverty lines (2014), community finance systems (2017) and food security (2019).[3] This COVID-19 study adds to a growing body of analysis and reflection on different aspects of poverty – and solutions to poverty – by the poor themselves. The rationale in these studies has been the same: just as the people who experience poverty are the real 'experts' and are fully capable of studying and defining its characteristics, so too are the people who have experienced the worst effects of the pandemic and developed their own solutions to the crisis the real 'experts' on community-driven COVID-19 responses.

[3] For more information on the poverty lines study, see Boonyabancha and Kerr (2015) and ACHR (2014). For information on the community finance study, see ACHR (2017) and Boonyabancha and Kerr (2018). For information on the food security study, see Boonyabancha et al. (2019).

Most of the work in this COVID-19 study – organising meetings, gathering information, making presentations, taking part in discussions and developing the case studies – was done by members of the grassroots community networks in the four study countries, with support from their partner organisations and ACHR.[4] These are the 'doers' who also planned and implemented the community COVID-19 projects the study examined.

People in poor communities may not always be great theorists or debaters. They learn best and most immediately by doing things: by taking action, and then sharing what they do with their peers in other places, and seeing what others like themselves are doing. This is learning that comes from taking action right away to address immediate needs, and then reflecting, discussing and comparing notes. This may not be highly theoretical learning, but it is understanding that comes from practice. This COVID-19 study provided an opportunity for these community-based researchers – and the urban poor community organisations and networks they are part of – to collectively examine the projects they have designed and implemented, and to learn, adjust, refine and further scale up their other development initiatives.

The 17 project case studies from which the findings in this paper have been drawn were developed by the four local groups, with assistance from ACHR. Much of the primary material in the case studies came directly from presentations made by the community members and network leaders who implemented the community-driven COVID-19 projects described in the case studies and in this paper. The projects were presented and shared in a series of online Zoom meetings and discussions which took place between September 2021 and January 2022. During a time when in-person meetings and project visits were not possible, the Zoom meetings allowed these active people from the community networks to meet, tell their stories and learn from the projects their friends were implementing in other countries. This lively sharing and cross-pollination of ideas between community doers has itself been a powerful knowledge-generating and knowledge-disseminating process.

Instead of being purely research based, this study focused on action to support poor communities facing the impacts of the pandemic and then helped the implementing groups to discuss and document those actions. The study provided some small but flexible funds for additional activities, which allowed these networks to supplement the work they were already doing, and to experiment and move forward. Here is how ACHR's chairperson Somsook Boonyabancha described the logic of the study:

This study is part of a larger movement of supporting change and generating knowledge through action by people. Action is the key. Poor people live in reality, not in theories. Their way of making change is always by taking concrete action to address the many problems that are part of that reality. If we want to learn from the poor and get their stories, it is always important to bring some needed assistance. This is not to pay them or give them a reward, but so they can use that assistance to make some immediate change by taking action, by showing some new possibilities which go beyond what they have already been doing. Many stories and ideas will always come out of that action. Then, when they share and discuss and tell their stories of what happened and how they made that change possible, we can learn from their change process on the ground. Knowledge that comes from action – and change that is driven by action – is always livelier, because we're not only discussing theories but seeing real, pragmatic new possibilities on the ground.

2.1 About the country partners

The organisations which took part in the COVID-19 study are all mature, experienced community networks. All four have a long history of doing projects in collective housing, settlement upgrading, savings, fund management, land acquisition, disaster rehabilitation, and working with their local and national governments on many fronts. All four networks have known each other and worked together for decades, in a long history of friendship, collaboration, sharing and mutual support, as part of the regional ACHR coalition.

2.1.1 JRMK Network in Jakarta, Indonesia

The Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota Network (Urban Poor Network) is a network of 29 large *kampungs* (informal communities) and six street vendors' cooperatives in the northern and western parts of Jakarta. The network has been undergoing an enormous expansion in the past few years, growing from 12 to 29 *kampungs*, some with as many as 900 households. The network is supported by UPC, a Jakarta-based NGO. All of the *kampungs* in the JRMK Network have fully registered cooperatives now, as part of their long and successful campaign to persuade the Jakarta municipal government to recognise their communities and provide them with collective tenure of the land they already occupy or have negotiated to relocate to nearby.

[4] You can find a full list of the 17 case studies at the end of this working paper.

2.1.2 Women's Saving and Development Network in Yangon, Myanmar

Since 2008, a small NGO called Women for the World (WfW) has been helping Yangon's poorest women squatters and room-renters to come together, start their own savings groups, build their own network and develop their own solutions to the serious housing problems they face. Using their savings and small grants from donors, these women's savings groups were able to collectively purchase tracts of inexpensive agricultural land, subdivide them into very small plots, and build their own extremely low-cost houses, with some basic infrastructure. Against terrible odds, and with lots of obstacles and troubles along the way, what began in 2009 with one small project for 10 families, grew to 12 projects, which provided a self-help model for how to obtain secure, affordable and appropriate housing to 835 of Yangon's poorest households. Along the way, they have done slum surveys in several of the city's most squatter-rich townships and developed partnerships with two microfinance agencies which are now giving the women housing loans at discounted rates. The government took note of this successful community-led housing initiative and in 2019 pledged to give the women's network 2,000 plots of free government land to expand their community-driven housing model. Since that time, the WfW and their partners in the women's savings network have been able to dramatically scale up their housing model to build four large housing projects on free government land in three townships in Yangon, which provide secure land and new houses for 1,017 households. All of this progress, however, came to a halt after the brutal military coup in January 2020.

2.1.3 The Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc (HPFPI)

HPFPI is a national network of urban poor communities that was established in 1995 within the communities of scavengers who live around Metro Manila's mountainous garbage dump in Barangay Payatas. The federation is now active in 20 cities, and uses community-managed savings as the core strategy of a community-led development process which includes land acquisition, community upgrading, housing construction, post-disaster management and reconstruction, city-fund management and partnership with various levels of government. The federation's NGO support partner is the Quezon City-based Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives Inc (PACSII).

2.1.4 The Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), Thailand

CODI is a Thai government institution, under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. CODI's mission is to support the strengthening of communities and their organisations – in both urban and rural areas – as key agents of change and as central actors in development which affects their lives and communities. Besides the government budget which supports many of its ongoing programmes, CODI's chief financial tool is the CODI revolving fund, which provides soft loans to community cooperatives and community networks to undertake a variety of development initiatives they plan and implement themselves. These initiatives include housing, land purchases, livelihoods support, community enterprises and many others. CODI's status as an independent public organisation gives it a degree of freedom to more flexibly channel government funds to a development process which is driven by communities themselves. CODI facilitates change by people, at scale. CODI's focus is not only on alleviating poverty, but also on finding ways by which communities can be the key actors in whatever development they determine is needed. Instead of making most of the decisions within the institution, CODI works to create space for communities to work together as managers and implementers of various development initiatives, so that CODI can be a public institution that is jointly managed with people as much as possible.

Community networks are key partners in all of CODI's work: CODI's demand-led facilitating structure touches the lives of people across Thailand, in all the country's urban and rural areas. A crucial role in working at this scale is played by community networks. Since it was founded in 1992, CODI has supported the establishment and strengthening of new networks and the linking together of existing community networks across the country. Networks now exist at just about every level in Thailand: 77 province-level networks, five regional-level networks, hundreds of active city-level networks, several issue-based national-level networks and more than 6,000 ward-level community councils in rural areas. Besides all these area-based networks, there are issue-based networks that bring together communities around common issues such as welfare, housing, a common landlord or tenure situation or organic farming. Communities in Thailand are now linked into a crisscrossing web of area-based (at city, ward, district, provincial, regional and national levels), and issue-based networks at a quite dramatic scale, and these networks provide innumerable platforms for sharing, learning, mutual supporting and negotiating a whole range of holistic development issues. That space allows people and networks at scale to get together, talk, plan, do things and collaborate with other key development agencies.

3

COVID-19 impacts on the urban poor in the four study countries

People's capacity to cope with the virus and its repercussions has much to do with conditions that are not only medical but also economic, social and political. The pandemic, which has also triggered an economic catastrophe, has made those structural inequities sharper than ever. No matter where we look, those dying of the virus and suffering from its direct and indirect effects are more likely to: be poor and uninsured; suffer from bad nutrition and chronic health problems; have no savings or safety nets; be unable to afford healthcare; and live in shoddy and crowded housing conditions where precautions like social distancing and frequent hand washing are impossible. But the effects of these health-affecting inequities have been made worse by economic inequities.

For the poor, the pandemic very rapidly became a challenge to their very survival. A common message coming from urban poor communities across Asia was some variation of this: 'If we don't work, we don't eat. We're more afraid of starvation than the virus.' By March 2020, when the first lockdowns in Asian cities were already preventing the poor from working and earning, some variation on this stark reasoning was repeating itself in urban poor and vulnerable communities around Asia. The pandemic also wreaked havoc on children and the progress of their education. Schools were closed and children were stuck at home, where many families in poor communities did not have the computers or internet access –or even spare money to buy phone time – to enable their children to take part in online home classes.

The first case of COVID-19 infection outside of China was identified in Thailand in January 2020, and the situation quickly got much worse. Within a couple of months, the virus was spreading across Asia, with wave after wave of infections and one after another new variants of the original virus. As this paper is being written in March 2022, another wave of the virus – the new and more contagious Omicron variant – is sweeping across most countries in Asia, so the pandemic is far from over. In the first months of 2020, when the pandemic was beginning in Asia, governments imposed various types of lockdowns and curfews to limit the spread of the virus, and these measures continued, on and off, all through the year and well into 2021. Things began to open up again when the vaccination programmes began in 2021, though by March 2022, large portions of the population in most Asian countries were not yet fully vaccinated.

The following sections briefly outline the trajectory of the pandemic and its effects on the urban poor in the four countries in this study. These descriptions are drawn from the 17 case studies and from presentations made by the local community groups who implemented the projects during a Zoom meeting on 5 August 2021, and are based on their intimate – but unacademic – understanding of the local COVID-19 situation and the direct and indirect effects the pandemic was having on their communities.

3.1 Impacts in Indonesia

The pandemic hit Indonesia in March 2020. Infections soared, the death toll climbed, hospitals were overwhelmed and the country became for a while one of Asia's hottest COVID-19 hot spots. Municipal governments soon began imposing a series of semi-lockdowns, which greatly limited people's ability to move around and gather. In Jakarta, which has had the country's greatest number of infections throughout the pandemic, roads were blocked, curfews were imposed, transport systems were shut down, and people going out were stopped and questioned by police. Government policies required companies to reduce by 50% the number of employees coming into the workplace and the rest had to work from home.

During those early stages, the urban poor had an especially hard time coping with both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. Everything happened so suddenly. Many of the urban poor work in the informal sector and earn their living day-by-day. But all the streets, sidewalks, commercial areas and public spaces that they normally used for their vending and small trading businesses were off-limits under the lockdown restrictions. At the same time, motorcycle taxi and pedicab drivers had fewer customers, and workers in many sectors – such as building construction – were laid off without pay. The poor lost their incomes and their means of supporting themselves. At the same time, the prices of food staples rose sharply. There were no clear policies or programmes from the government to support the urban poor or provide them with any welfare assistance in the pandemic crisis. On top of that, social distancing was almost impossible for people who live in small houses in crowded *kampungs*. The government's vaccination programme began in early 2021, but by March 2022, only about half the country's population of 274 million were fully vaccinated.

3.2 Impacts in Myanmar

For weeks, government officials had dismissed warnings that the virus could overtake the country, claiming that the Burmese diet and tropical climate would stop the disease from spreading. People were warned to avoid large social and religious gatherings and some festivals were curtailed, but things remained fairly normal. It was not until April 2020 that Myanmar's first cases were confirmed. As a precaution, schools and universities were closed, government offices were ordered to reduce their staff by half and quarantine centres were set up. The official number of cases remained low for several months, but very few people were being tested. Myanmar's healthcare spending is among the lowest in Asia, and many feared the virus was already quietly spreading around the country. In the first year of the pandemic, it was not the virus itself but the closure of factories and loss of jobs and earning opportunities that most affected the urban poor. To make matters worse, hundreds of thousands of people who had migrated to neighbouring countries to work as labourers, fishers, domestic workers and factory hands rushed back to Myanmar when those countries began closing their borders to ward off the pandemic. That meant no remittances and more mouths to feed for their families at home.

The pandemic was completely eclipsed when the military seized control of the country in a coup d'état on 1 February 2021, just weeks after national elections had delivered the military-backed parties a resounding defeat. Citizens all over Myanmar took to the streets to protest the coup and the overthrow of their democratically elected government, but these peaceful demonstrations were brutally put down. The protests continued though, and turned soon into an armed civilian resistance movement, which eventually joined forces with several armed ethnic groups around Myanmar, which had been in long-simmering conflicts with the army. By May 2021, Myanmar had descended into civil war, with continuous brutal violence, massacres and burning by the military. In Yangon, the political unrest affected all aspects of daily life. The junta closed the banks and imposed limits on the amounts of money people could withdraw from ATM machines. Food-supply systems were curtailed and prices of essentials skyrocketed. People lost jobs and the economy ground to a halt. Continuous violence and surveillance by the military created an environment of terror. As the pandemic worsened, the military took over public hospitals, arrested doctors sympathetic to

the resistance, refused care to COVID-19 patients and outlawed the purchase of oxygen by ordinary citizens for their virus-infected family and friends.

On top of all these troubles, several months after the coup, the junta launched a campaign to forcibly evict poor and informal settlements in many areas of Yangon and to grab the land they occupied. Since September 2021, tens of thousands of the city's poorest and most vulnerable families have been violently evicted by armed soldiers and their houses have been bulldozed, leaving them homeless with no alternative housing or assistance. In this terrible situation, when all public systems were breaking down, self-help became the only possible support system for people in the city, and social media and smart phones became the only way for people to organise their self-help initiatives. In the city's poor communities, for example, a system became common in which a yellow flag hung from a house or apartment meant the family inside was sick and isolating and in need of medical supplies. A yellow flag and a white flag hung together meant the occupants needed both medicines and food. Neighbours looked out for these flags and helped each other as best they could.

3.3 Impacts in the Philippines

The first COVID-19 cases in the Philippines were identified in January 2020. Two months later, the national government began imposing 'enhanced community quarantine' – the government's term for an almost total lockdown and curfew, with a temporary closure of all non-essential shops and businesses and severe restrictions on people's ability to move around, work and get the things they need to survive. The first enhanced community quarantine was imposed in Metro Manila, a city where about 40% of its 13 million inhabitants live in squalor, crowding and insecurity in informal settlements. It is hard to imagine a more congenial environment for a virus to spread rapidly. Similar 'enhanced community quarantine' orders followed in provincial cities around the country. Despite these strict measures, however, the virus spread rapidly. In many informal settlements and low-income communities, residents put up barricades and guarded the entrances around the clock, to keep strangers from coming inside their community and possibly bringing in the virus.

Under these very strict rules, banks, offices, construction sites and businesses were all closed, and this had a domino effect on jobs and economic activity, leaving millions without work and worried about their daily subsistence. People were forced to stay in their houses, and those who ventured out looking for some way to earn risked being caught by the police and fined or arrested. The country's urban poor, who live and earn day by day, have suffered the worse consequences of these lockdowns, especially when it came to food. Without being able to go out and earn any income, families could not put food on the table, and there was a lot of hunger. At the same time, the interruptions in transport and commerce drove the cost of basic foods and vegetables higher and higher. Many families coped by eating fewer or less nutritionally complete meals, relying on donated staples such as rice, instant noodles and canned goods – or by just going hungry. The government responded with some emergency measures to distribute food packages or cash aid to poor and out-of-work households, but these initiatives did not reach everyone and fell far short of meeting actual needs. The quarantines have continued, on and off, as waves of the pandemic have come and gone, but things began to improve after the government's vaccination programme began in March 2021.

3.4 Impacts in Thailand

The first COVID-19 infections in Thailand were detected in January 2020. The government moved swiftly to contain the outbreak, launching a national system of isolation, treatment and contact tracing, which worked in tandem with the country's public health care system. These measures helped to slow the virus initially. But in April 2020, in the face of the growing spread of the virus, the government began to impose lockdowns. The lockdown measures were graded and colour-coded according to the severity of infection rates. In the densely-populated Bangkok metro region, for example, which has remained the virus epicentre throughout the pandemic, the strictest 'dark red' lockdown measures were imposed. For several months, shopping malls, schools, universities, sports and entertainment venues and many businesses and government offices were closed, and the entire country was put under a night curfew. Some provinces closed their borders to traffic in and out of the province, and most Thais followed the government's suggestion to wear masks in public and practice social distancing. But even in the worst months of the pandemic in Thailand, cities were never closed down as completely as they were in Indonesia or the Philippines. Markets, grocery stores and convenience stores all stayed open, public transport systems continued to function and people could move around the city and buy food from many restaurants, small shops and some vendors.

But for the urban poor, the effects of the lockdowns were felt immediately and severely, and initially, they were felt economically much more than medically. The urban poor lost jobs, work and earning opportunities, and without money to feed their families, many faced the dire reality of hunger. Some who had villages to return to left the cities before the inter-provincial bus transit was stopped, and were at least able to eat from their farms and gardens. But most had no choice but to stay in the city, and for them, things got very bad. The situation gradually improved, though, and the government's vaccination programme began in June 2021, but waves of the virus continue to prevent the country from fully re-opening.

Figure 1. COVID-19 data from the four countries

	POPULATION	INFECTIONS	DEATHS	% FULLY VACCINATED
Indonesia	274 million	5.9 million	152,000	51%
Myanmar	55 million	0.6 million	19,406	35%
The Philippines	110 million	3.7 million	57,441	57%
Thailand	70 million	3.2 million	23,709	71%

Source: Data from the COVID19 dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University, USA. Data correct as of 13 March 2022. https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

4

COVID-19 responses: what the community networks did

Some of the community- and network-driven COVID-19 initiatives that were written-up in the case studies were entirely self-supported, and some were also partially supported by locally raised funds and small grants from overseas development agencies. Only in Thailand were these community-driven initiatives more systematically and substantially supported by the government, through CODI's national COVID-19 support programme, which is described briefly below. In each of the four countries in the study, a modest budget of US$10,000 for action research was added to these layered resources, and this flexible extra funding allowed the groups to supplement the work they were already doing on the ground and innovate further. In this section of the paper, we present brief descriptions of the community-driven initiatives that were documented in the case studies by the groups in the four countries.

4.1 Food projects and community kitchens

In the early stages of the pandemic, long before any vaccination programmes had begun, municipal and national governments imposed different kinds of lockdowns and curfews to contain the spread of the virus. These measures meant lost jobs and drastically reduced opportunities for informal-sector economic activity, which is the lifeline of most urban poor earners. Without income to pay for necessities such as food, many families began having serious troubles eating well – or eating at all. That is why many of the earliest community-driven COVID-19 initiatives involved quickly surveying who needs what, and getting food and groceries to families in the greatest need. Some community networks used their own resources and donations to distribute packets of essential food staples, and some worked with local aid organisations and government agencies to help direct food aid to those in the communities who needed it most.

Many communities and networks quickly decided to deal with these urgent food needs more collectively by setting up community-based kitchens, which produced ready-to-eat meals in large quantity to distribute to hungry families. Community kitchens were not only an efficient way of producing nutritious meals at scale, but also became an important tool for reaching out to needy communities and expanding the circle of assistance and information sharing about the pandemic. There were also several projects in which community networks used very different strategies to acquire and distribute rice – the essential staple food in all four countries in the study – to needy families, either at cost, at a discount or for free.

4.1.1 Community kitchens in Thailand

Between April and July 2020, 71 community kitchens were set up by urban community networks in many of the districts of the Bangkok metro region (where the effects of the virus were most serious initially) and later in other cities. Most of the community kitchens were set up and managed by organised communities that had redeveloped their housing with support from CODI's Baan Mankong housing programme.[5] All of these kitchens were staffed by volunteers from the communities and they cooked for needy families in other communities in the network, which developed their own lists of needy families and sent them to the community kitchens.

In Bangkok, 30 of the city's 50 districts have active district-level community networks. These district-level networks include a variety of upgraded and informal communities, but many of them are led by the strong communities that are veterans of Baan Mankong housing projects. There are also city-wide community networks in cities in other parts of the country and in other cities in the Bangkok metro region. All these urban networks link together and with CODI in many overlapping area-and issue-based forums and working committees. They intensified their linking and collaboration during the COVID-19 crisis in weekly central team meetings. All of CODI's programmes are designed, developed and adjusted in close collaboration with these community network structures, and the COVID-19 support programme was no different.

The community kitchen set up by the Suan Phlu community in central Bangkok, which served meals to needy families in nearby communities such as this large squatter settlement at Lang Thammasat © ACHR

Initially, in response to urgent immediate needs, many community networks used their own network funds and local donations to start community kitchens right away. The networks then used their regular meetings with each other and with CODI to discuss the needs, examine these initial good practices and then design a national programme to support these community-managed COVID-19 initiatives in a larger and more systematic way. In the programme they quickly invented for community kitchens particularly, an agreed-upon subsidy of 30 Thai baht (US$1) per meal was provided to network-run community kitchens, up to a ceiling of 200,000 Thai baht (US$6,500) per network. With that support, and with the substantial additional resources the networks were able to muster locally, those 71 community kitchens were able to cook and distribute 300,000 nutritious meals to vulnerable and hungry families in the most precarious and most hungry early stage of the pandemic. Five of those community kitchens in Bangkok were described in detail in the Thai community kitchen case study: three kitchens run by Baan Mankong communities (in Bang Bon district, Phasi Charoen district and Sathon district); one kitchen managed by a railway squatter settlement (in Ratchathewi district); and one kitchen run by the homeless centre in Taling Chan district.

4.1.2 Community kitchens in the Philippines

The community kitchen case study in the Philippines describes three community kitchens that were set up by urban poor communities that are part of the Homeless People's Federation in the Philippines. Unlike the Thai kitchens, these community kitchens served only members of the community in which they operated. The community kitchen in the sprawling San Juan Seaside Settlers Association (SAJUSSA) community in Davao partnered with a neighbouring Catholic convent to set up a series of kitchens in various parts of the community which provided regular lunches to the community's vulnerable children, with the mothers doing all the cooking. Another community kitchen which focused on feeding children was set up in the Agaw-Agaw community in Metro Manila – an extremely precarious new resettlement site for families recently evicted from informal settlements, on land belonging to the New Bilibid Prison. The Agaw-Agaw community collaborated with the local government's healthworkers to run their child-nutrition programme, which was also seen as a way to organise the community at a time they were still struggling to negotiate for secure land tenure.

[5] For more information on CODI's Baan Mankong Programme see the list of related publications at the end of this working paper.

The third kitchen was set up in Iloilo City, where a very poor community of Indigenous people from the Ati tribe developed their own community kitchen to feed everyone in the community one good meal each day, using donations and vegetables and protein sources they grow in their own gardens.

The community kitchen was set up to feed all 150 people in the community with at least one good meal every day during the pandemic, in the Ati Tribe community in Iloilo City, the Philippines. (Photo credit: HPFPI)

4.1.3 Rice distribution project in Chum Phae, Thailand

In the small provincial city of Chum Phae, in northeast Thailand, the community network has for many years managed its own collective rice farm on the outskirts of town. The farm both feeds community members and provides a source of income for those who participate in the rice cultivation. When the COVID-19 crisis came, the network in Chum Phae developed a system for buying all the surplus rice produced on the farm at a fair price, using first its own network resources and later grants from CODI, and then distributing the rice, for free, in five-kilogramme bags, to families identified by each community as being in most urgent need. During 2021, the network bought six tonnes (6,000 kilos) of surplus rice from the community rice farmers to distribute to families in the 13 communities in the network. Because the effects of the pandemic were not as bad in Chum Phae as in larger cities, the network decided to donate and truck two tonnes of that rice to the urban networks in badly hit Bangkok, as a direct, people-to-people gesture of solidarity.

4.1.4 Rice distribution project in Jakarta, Indonesia

In Jakarta, the JRMK Network developed a programme to purchase bulk rice directly from a network of farmers in the Kendeng region of Central Java and then sold it at cost to members of the community cooperatives. During the early stages when the communities were still in lockdown and people were struggling to cope, the network subsidised 50% of the rice-selling price to cooperative members with donations they raised locally. This good-quality and inexpensive rice became a lifeline for urban communities during the hard times of the lockdowns and community quarantines. Besides eliminating all the middlemen who usually take most of the profits from buying and selling rice, the relationship between these urban and rural community networks bolstered the campaign of the rice farmers in Kendeng to resist being evicted from their ancestral land to make way for environmentally catastrophic lime mining operations. By January 2022, the network had purchased and distributed about 60 tonnes (60,000 kilos) of rice, and the distribution project continues.

Members of one of the *kampung*-based cooperatives weighing and packing organic rice which the JRMK Network purchased in bulk directly from a farmer's network in the Kendeng region of Central Java, and then sold to cooperative members at a subsidized rate during the pandemic © JRMK Network

4.2 Community garden projects

Hunger and poor nutrition are problems that can be invisible in urban poor communities, where levels of family income flunctuate, and they are getting worse as health problems from pesticide-laced produce and corporate junk food become more common. For several years now, people in urban poor communities across Asia have begun directly addressing this problem by finding whatever space they can – inside their communities and on borrowed land outside – to grow vegetables and produce their own food. As the three community garden case studies (Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar) show, food production has become a type of collective community welfare programme in which everyone can participate in the cultivation and everyone can take part in enjoying the harvest. Community gardens give communities a means of addressing these problems and of creating awareness through action which allows them to start right away producing their own healthy food, even in very limited spaces. The pandemic has brought new urgency and relevance to Asia's community garden movement, when suddenly many out-of-work urban poor had no choice but to grow what they eat, as much as possible, in order to reduce their food expenses and eat better. The community gardens and larger food-security issue have also given community networks a 'soft' avenue to build positive new working relationships with local governments and land-owning agencies, and to negotiate with the formal city structures about using idle private and public land for urgent public purposes like food production.

4.2.1 Community gardens in Thailand

In Thailand, community gardening has been part of the national community movement's agenda since 2013, when the urban community networks collaborated with the Thai government's Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth) to develop community-managed projects in which community members began growing safe, healthy, organic vegetables and fruits in pots, planter boxes and on common land and around their houses in low-income communities. The project was later expanded with support from CODI. By 2020, some 50% of Thailand's low-income urban communities had become green: growing their own organic vegetables, improving their community environments with vegetable gardens and fruit trees, reducing their expenditure on food and empowering community members (and especially children and youth) to learn how to garden, to nourish themselves and to take greater control over the food they eat. A process which began as a project intervention had grown into a national green community movement to become a major part of the Thai urban community network agenda.

A proud harvest of leafy green vegetables at one of the community gardens in the Bang Bua canal-side community in Bangkok © CODI

The COVID-19 crisis has added a new layer of urgency and relevance to these community gardens, and provided an unexpected opportunity for an enormous scaling up of Thailand's nation-wide community garden movement. It did not take long for the effects of the pandemic, and the lockdowns that came with it, to reach poor communities – especially in the country's larger cities, which quickly became pandemic epicentres. With loss of jobs and opportunities to earn, food security became a big issue right away. Those who could migrated back home to their villages, where they would at least be able to eat. But for the many who stayed in the city and had only the market to supply their nutritional needs, food became a serious problem.

With support from CODI's COVID-19 programme, the networks in many cities began inviting communities to develop projects to improve their own food security by starting community gardens and producing their own food. Communities got very creative and started their gardens in a variety of ways. If there was enough vacant space inside the community, they would start their gardens there. But if there was not much land, they would start by letting each family grow their own vegetables in the small spaces in front of their houses, or even in pots. Many communities were able to negotiate permission to cultivate vacant pieces of nearby land, including vacant land along the railway

tracks, land belonging to Buddhist temples, land that had formerly been used as garbage dumps and land belonging to private owners. In many cities, the community networks helped with these negotiations and partnered with public and private landowners who allowed communities to cultivate vacant plots of land and grow food. The Thai case study profiled four of these community gardens.

Koh Klang (Klang Island) community garden in Bangkok

The award-winning community garden in Bangkok's Klong Toei district was developed by the 58 families in the Koh Klang community, in their tightly packed inner-city settlement built on a small island in the middle of the river. The decentralised garden is cultivated on hundreds of small bits and pieces of land and in all manner of pots, containers and hanging vessels throughout the community. The garden is a good example of how, even in extremely crowded urban settlements with very little vacant space, it is possible to raise a lot of vegetables and herbs and create a green, healthy, abundant and flower-filled environment. The garden is cared for and used as a collective asset, as the community's 'common fridge', and is just one of many collective projects to reduce household expenses and increase the health of community members, before and during the pandemic.

Sri Buarai community in Surin

The Sri Buarai community, in the northeastern city of Surin, turned the crisis of lost jobs and dwindling incomes during the pandemic into an opportunity to revive their native practices of self-sufficiency by borrowing a piece of neighbouring land from a Buddhist temple and creating a collective community garden. Out-of-work mothers and out-of-school children were able to grow their own healthy food and learn about organic cultivation and food production in the process. The garden, which provides a bounty of nourishing organic fruit, vegetables, eggs and fish to dozens of the city's most vulnerable families (both inside and outside the community) was developed with good technical collaboration with the provincial government, which already had a policy to promote organic gardening in the province.

Urban farm in Chiang Mai

In this unusual community garden, a group of canal-side informal communities teamed up with a team of community architects to develop a large community garden on a piece of public land which had been used as a garbage dump – and which they had tried unsuccessfully to negotiate to use for housing some years ago. The use of the land for gardening was more acceptable to the mayor and provincial governor, who both became supporters of the project. The project attracted supporters and participants from many sectors of the city who were longing for a bit of green space in their fast-developing city. Besides providing a regular supply of organic vegetables, fruit and eggs to jobless families in the canal-side communities nearby, the garden has become a popular civic amenity that belongs to the whole city, where school children come to learn about gardening.

Railway garden in Khon Kaen

When people began losing jobs and becoming hungry, lots of communities in the northeastern city of Khon Kaen began growing their own vegetables and fruit. But families living in the crowded informal settlements along the railway tracks had little space around their houses for growing anything. At the same time, there was a new elevated train being built, and underneath that track structure was a very long strip of land that was not being used. The railway communities proposed using that land for growing vegetables – and the State Railway of Thailand eventually agreed. By November 2021, more than 100 families from 11 railway communities were cultivating gardens that filled a four-kilometre-long strip of land under the elevated tracks with a vivid green patchwork of vegetables. Local universities, plant nurseries and civil society groups pitched in with organic seedlings, gardening expertise and publicity. Once the railway gardens were established, the urban farmers started producing more than enough vegetables to feed their own families. Some of the surplus produce was used in the community kitchens that sprouted up in several communities during the COVID-19 crisis, and some were sold to neighbours for a little extra income.

The community garden developed by members of the informal settlements along the railway in Khon Kaen, Thailand on the strip of land under the city's new elevated train tracks © CODI

4.2.2 Community gardens in the Philippines

During the height of the pandemic in the Philippines, multiple lockdowns and 'enhanced community quarantines' prevented most of the urban poor from going out to earn. Without income, families could not afford to buy food, while the cost of basic foods and vegetables soared. Many families began finding small spaces within their communities or on bits and pieces of borrowed land in the city to grow vegetables or raise animals such as chicken or fish for both eating and selling. Some without space even grew leafy greens in pots and recycled containers. But even though the Philippines is a hugely fertile country where just about everything grows, conditions in densely crowded informal settlements in cities like Metro Manila are not ideal for growing food, with a lack of space and light, bad soil and polluted water.

The Homeless People's Federation Philippines used the COVID-19 crisis to partner with local governments and other support organisations in several cities to initiate more substantial and more collective community gardens in several cities – some on land within the communities and some on borrowed public or private land nearby. By activating communities, unlocking their collective development force and collaborating with other stakeholders, these community garden projects have been able to do much more than families could do individually. These gardens are now feeding hundreds of hungry families with nutritious vegetables, fruit, eggs, chicken and fish. At the same time, these gardens are providing new tools for collaboration and new avenues to bring more vulnerable communities into the federation's programme of savings, livelihoods support and housing.

The federation's largest community garden project so far, in Quezon City, was documented in the case study. The federation was one of several grassroots and civil society groups invited by the city's progressive woman mayor to identify idle land plots for potential cultivation, and then helped negotiate permission to use those plots temporarily for growing vegetables. The federation's first garden was on a 450m^2 piece of private land in Barangay Payatas ('barangay' is the term for urban subdistricts in Philippines cities), where a group of 38 poor mothers from nearby communities prepared the soil and began planting vegetables, with seed kits and technical assistance provided by the municipal government's agriculture office. The garden soon expanded into a much larger piece of adjacent land, where a new group of mostly women gardeners began raising vegetables for their own family's consumption and to sell for income.

Women gardeners at the Amlac village urban community garden in Barangay Payatas, Quezon City, the Philippines © HPFPI

A few months later, the federation was invited by the city government to help develop another new community garden – the largest yet – on a 1.2-hectare plot of idle land in Barangay Pasong Tamo. The city had negotiated to borrow that land temporarily from a private landowner. The city's idea was to use this large plot not only for community gardens, but as a demonstration farm for training more people from vulnerable communities to grow healthy, organic vegetables and produce other food such as eggs, poultry and fish. The federation was initially allotted 200m^2 for their part of the garden, where they organised a group of 60 urban farmers from nearby poor communities to grow vegetables. Since large portions of the 1.2-hectare site were still available, the municipal government invited the federation to mobilise more community groups to come and join this large community garden and start cultivating vegetable plots.

4.2.3 Community gardens in Myanmar

Even before the pandemic hit, the large community housing projects that had been built by members of the Women's Savings and Development Network in Yangon, with support from WfW, had been incorporating vegetable gardens and tree planting. In the earlier projects, where their land plots were very small, community members grew whatever vegetables they could in the small areas beside and in front of their houses, and the projects were soon bursting with greenery. In the later housing projects, which were much larger and built on land provided by the local government, the house plots were a little bigger and the women were also able to include areas for communal gardens in their site planning.

These communal gardens became an important source of both healthy food and extra income for the members of these housing projects. But when the COVID-19 crisis brought an economic slowdown and loss of jobs, the community gardens became crucial to people's survival.

Harvesting morning glory greens from the community garden in one of the large housing projects of the Women's Savings and Development Network in Yangon, Myanmar © Women for the World

Then a year later, when the military coup d'état plunged the entire country into a deeper crisis, the community gardens became more important than ever. In all the housing projects, there were community members who used to do farming in rural areas, and throughout all these epidemiological and political upheavals, they became the trainers and technical supporters for a new generation of urban farmers. Besides helping out-of-work, hungry and seriously traumatised people to feed their families, the community gardens have also yielded enough surplus to allow many families to make a little extra income by selling their produce to neighbours.

4.3 Livelihoods projects

A bit later in the pandemic, the networks in all four countries began directing their efforts to helping pandemic-hit community members to boost their incomes and add new opportunities to earn when many had lost jobs or were prevented from doing their normal informal businesses because of lockdowns, quarantines and the larger economic downturns. Many of these livelihood initiatives served two purposes at the same time: generating income for out-of-work community members while also providing much-needed goods and services to community members in the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

4.3.1 Livelihood projects in Indonesia

The JRMK Network started right away to discuss collectively what they could do as a network to deal with the multiple hardships people were facing during the COVID-19 crisis, including lost jobs and lack of income. After much deliberation, the network launched several initiatives which used the strength of the new *kampung*-based cooperatives, which were in the process of being formed, to address some of these problems by offering various goods, services and assistance to cooperative members. The network's first project to acquire and distribute subsidised or at-cost rice to needy families addressed urgent food needs, but did not address livelihood needs. Two other cooperative-managed initiatives that came later did address both pandemic-related needs in the community and also livelihoods.

Herbal drinks powder enterprise

The network's first experiment in cooperative-based enterprises began in Kampung Marlina, a large and densely crowded informal settlement of 882 households, built on state-owned land sandwiched between factories and warehouses in North Jakarta. A group of women leaders in the newly formed Kampung Marlina cooperative developed a community enterprise to make and sell traditional herbal drinks powders, which are called *jamu* in Indonesian. At a time when people were stuck at home during lockdowns, with no vaccines yet and hospitals inaccessible, the inexpensive, locally made herbal drinks were a traditional way to boost people's health and deal with colds, coughs and other ailments. Demand for the powders quickly increased, and the enterprise soon provided five women with full-time work and extra income for their families. They sell the *jamu* for 15,000 rupiah (US$1) for a 250-gram packet, but during the worst of the pandemic and lockdowns, they used a small donor grant to subsidise the selling price for cooperative members, who paid only 5,000 rupiah (US$0.33) for the packet – one third of the normal price.

Women cooperative members making a medicinal herbal drinks powder (*jamu*) in Kampung Marlina, Jakarta, Indonesia © JRMK Network

Laundry service enterprise

The JRMK Network also launched a project to deal with an aspect of community life that might not immediately seem related to COVID-19: washing clothes. Washing clothes in Jakarta's crowded *kampungs* is a toilsome business, even in the best of times, and is a task that invariably falls to women, who spend two or three hours every day washing and ironing the family's clothes. Their task is made harder by frequent flooding, erratic electricity supply and serious water supply and water quality problems. The pandemic only increased the clothes-washing burden for women, with people changing clothes more often after going out, and the clothes of family members who had gone out or who might be infected having to be washed separately and in warm water, to kill the germs. At the same time, with unusual numbers of people stuck at home during the lockdowns, demand for water increased dramatically and the already-meagre supply decreased to a trickle. The network used some modest grant funds to help launch a set of cooperative laundry services to lighten the clothes-washing burden of women in the *kampungs*.

Laundry that has been washed and ironed by members of the cooperative laundry service at Kampung Akuarium being delivered to a JRMK Network member in a *kampung* in Jakarta, Indonesia © JRMK Network

The first of five planned laundry services was set up and run by the newly formed cooperative in Kampung Akuarium, a large community on public land that was in the process of being rebuilt as low-rise blocks of cooperatively managed apartments. The JRMK Network provided a start-up package of laundry equipment (one high-capacity professional washing machine, one drying machine, one heavy-duty steam ironing machine, a large table and a stock of good laundry soap). The package cost 30 million rupiah (US$2,083), which the cooperative will gradually repay to the network. The enterprise is run by three women cooperative members who work fulltime, washing and ironing up to 60kgs of clothes every day. For the full service of washing, ironing and home delivering the clothes, they charge 6,000 rupiah (US$0.42) per kilogramme, which is 15% lower than the standard rate local women in the *kampungs* charge for doing other people's laundry. In the first two weeks of operation, the pilot laundry service in Kampung Akuarium washed 720kgs of laundry, which came from 147 customers in nine *kampungs* in the surrounding area, including Kampung Akuarium. Some customers from offices in the area are also using the laundry service.

4.3.2 Livelihood projects in the Philippines

The Homeless People's Federation wasted no time in taking action to develop an organised response to the many pandemic-related needs of their member communities across the regions. One of the most crucial needs was to boost incomes, since so many had lost jobs or were unable to work during the lockdowns. With support from their partner NGO PACSII, the federation conducted a quick livelihoods survey in November 2020 to better understand the livelihood needs and to gather ideas about how the federation could help. The survey confirmed that since the onset of the pandemic, people's monthly earnings had decreased substantially due to workplace closures, lost jobs, lack of earning opportunities, unavailable transportation, loss of customers for informal businesses, and major strains on family income like hospitalisations and funerals. The survey made clear that people needed help finding new ways to earn, so they could feed their families and get back on their feet.

Communities that are part of the federation practice several kinds of savings, for different purposes, and these collective savings are the community's own revolving loan fund, from which members can take loans for emergencies, education, medicines, household needs and livelihoods support. These community-based and community-controlled savings groups are a lifeline for community members, whose only other option for getting credit is usually from informal moneylenders, who charge 20–25% interest each month. But within a few months of the lockdown and the community quarantines, with so many needs and so little money being earned, members had no choice but to withdraw their savings. At a time when they were most urgently needed, most of these community savings funds were badly depleted. After some discussions, the federation decided to use part of the small grant resources to support several more collective income-generating projects in cities around the country.

Livelihood loans in the SAJUSSA community, Davao

In the sprawling sea-side informal community of the San Juan Seaside Settlers Association, there is a strong group of women savers. Most of them are vendors, selling flowers, fish or fruit and vegetables from baskets or small carts. But like so many others, they found their savings depleted after successive lockdowns. Without any outside support or funding, they have managed to develop their own community-managed and self-sustaining livelihoods loan programme. They work together in small clusters of 20 or 30 women, and the women in each cluster put up their own seed capital, and then loan it to the members for their livelihood projects. Most use the loans to buy stock to sell in their vending businesses. The members save 200 pesos (US$4) every Sunday, as an investment in their cluster's livelihood fund. They charge a monthly interest of 5% on the loans. That may sound high, but because the loans are small and the women repay them quickly, it is not a great burden. In addition, the interest goes back into the common fund. Then at the end of the year, they divide the interest they have collected during that year among the group members and begin again with the same capital. The capital keeps growing, due to the additional 200 pesos saved weekly by the cluster members, which is added to their original loan capital. The women in these clusters also contribute an extra 20 pesos (US$0.40) every week into their own social fund, which the members can use for emergencies, health needs, medicine or family bills.

A meat shop and small provisions store run by a member of the small cluster livelihood loans scheme in the SAJUSSA community in Davao, the Philippines © HPFPI

They keep this fund separate: for these types of family and emergency needs, they can withdraw it only from the social fund, not from their livelihood capital. During the pandemic, when community members had so much less income and so many more needs, this small cluster loan system was very helpful, and new clusters quickly formed and began their own self-managed livelihood loans.

Rice loan enterprises in Metro Manila

Communities in two different cities in Metro Manila developed rice-distribution projects which emphasised income generation in different ways. For some years, the savings groups in both communities had experimented with buying rice cooperatively in large quantities, at bulk prices, and then selling it at cost to savings group members, so they could get good-quality rice at cheaper rates. But as incomes and mobility dwindled during the lockdowns and access to food became a serious issue, the two communities developed the idea of selling rice on credit, and letting people pay back their rice loans in instalments over a short period. The two rice loan enterprises are managed a little differently:

- **Rice loans in the Smart Tower Community in Muntinlupa:** The women's savings group here uses capital from donor funds to buy rice in bulk once a month in 25-kilogramme sacks, at 950 pesos (US$19) per sack. They add a 200 peso (US$4) markup and then 'loan' the rice to community members for 1,150 pesos (US$23) per sack. That is about the standard market rate for the rice, but what the scheme offers people is the advantage of paying for the rice gradually, in two payments, on the 15th and the 30th of each month, which for many workers in the Philippines are paydays. Once a family pays off its rice loan, they can borrow another bag of rice. A small part of that 200-peso markup covers the cost of transporting the rice sacks to the community and then delivering them to members at their doorstep. But most of it is added to the capital of a special community loan fund, which gives short-term livelihood loans to savings members at a 3% monthly interest rate. During the pandemic, when so many people in the community have had no income at all, the 3% loan fund has been a lifeline, and there have been many takers for small loans from the fund. Some take 3% loans to cover daily family needs, to pay school fees or buy phone time for their children's online classes. But most take loans to support their small vending or food businesses. As the capital in the loan fund has increased, the women have been able to expand their livelihood lending.

- **Rice loans in the United Libis Homeowners Association (ULHOA) community in Valenzuela:** The women's savings group in the ULHOA community runs a similar rice loan project. They buy rice in bulk in 25-kilogramme sacks for 1,000 pesos (US$20) per sack, add a markup of 200 pesos (US$4) and then 'loan' the rice to community members for 1,200 pesos (US$24) per sack. Members repay the rice loan in two payments, over a one-month period on the 15th and the 30th day of the month. If families repay their rice loan within the month, there is no interest charged on the loan, but if the family is not able to repay the rice loan on time, they are charged 5% monthly interest, as an incentive to repay on time. In Smart Tower, the profits from the rice loans went back into their 3% livelihood loan fund, to add to the loan capital and expand their lending. But here in ULHOA, the rice loan project is managed as a profit-making group enterprise for the savings members who invest 1,000 pesos (US$20) and become shareholders in the scheme. Here, the profits generated by the rice loans will be distributed among the shareholders as a dividend at the end of the year.

4.3.3 Livelihood projects in Myanmar

In Myanmar, the ongoing political crisis has further disrupted an economy that was already struggling because of the pandemic. At a time when many have lost their jobs, increasing fuel prices and transport costs have brought about shortages of food, medical supplies and other essentials. The price of everything necessary for survival has increased steeply. In this context, the women's savings groups have become a crucial lifeline for community members. Many have taken small loans to buy stock for their small-scale selling and vending businesses within the communities. And even when the collective savings funds have dwindled, as members withdraw money to buy food, the savings groups have used their group power to experiment with enterprises which provide essential goods at a cheap price and also allow community members to earn a little extra income.

In some communities, the savings groups are collectively buying essential products such as rice in bulk at wholesale prices, and the selling them at cost (20–30% cheaper than market prices) to community members. They have also set up bamboo-and-thatch markets in two of the big housing projects in East Dagon and South Dagon townships in Yangon. Each market has room for about 30 individual stalls, where community members can sell surplus produce and eggs from the communal gardens, as well as prepared foods and household items.

4.4 Mitigation and health projects

All the community networks in the study worked hard to slow the spread of the virus early on in the pandemic: distributing masks and alcohol gel, disseminating information about the virus, tracking infections within the communities and distributing food packages to out-of-work households. But by the time this action-research study began, a year into the pandemic, the situation in most of the four countries had become a little better and most of the networks were focusing on medium-term and longer-term responses to the pandemic and its effects. Nevertheless, some early mitigation projects were documented in the case studies.

4.4.1 Mitigation in the Philippines

The Philippines COVID-19-mitigation case study describes how four communities in the Homeless People's Federation in four cities (Mandaue, Valenzuela, Davao and Muntinlupa) used their group power to deal with various needs that emerged early on in the pandemic.

One of the hand- and foot-washing stations set up by the Philippines Homeless People's Federation in the city of Iloilo at the entrance to one of the informal communities, early in the pandemic © HPFPI

Activities that these organised communities undertook included setting up hand- and foot-washing stations, carrying out information campaigns about COVID-19 safety, surveying and mapping vulnerable families to look after, setting up community committees to deal with various issues such as health and food, linking with local and national government agencies to channel programmes to distribute face masks, supplying emergency aid and food packages to those most in need, setting up community-managed quarantine facilities for infected community members, and taking part in district- and city-level forums on pandemic response.

4.4.2 Mitigation in Thailand: community-based quarantines in Bangkok

Thai community quarantine and home isolation case study from Thailand describes the initiatives of six community networks in the Bangkok metropolitan region to set up network-managed systems for dealing with COVID-19 infections in the community. The objective was to take care of people at home or within the community as much as possible, during a time when the hospitals were overrun with serious COVID-19 patients and nobody wanted to go into the government-run quarantine centres. These community-managed quarantine systems included using COVID-19 tests to identify and isolate infected people, tracking infections, sharing community data on infections and vaccinations with the public health authorities, and then helping to isolate those infected people either at home or in community-managed isolation centres.

The community quarantine centre in Bangkok's Phasi Charoen District was set up in an old community centre and is managed by the community network, with support from the district authority and private sector © CODI

When people had enough space and were able to isolate at home, the networks developed systems for supplying those people with food, medical care and visits by community members and public health volunteers. If people lived in crowded households and could not isolate at home, they could stay in multi-bed community isolation centres the networks had set up, where people would be fed, looked after and receive medical attention by their friends in the community, until they were clear of the virus and well enough to go home. Some of the isolation centres were set up in community centres, closed schools or even Buddhist temples. In all these community-managed quarantine systems, the networks worked closely with local governments and coordinated with the Health Department's community health volunteers, most of whom are women from the communities.

4.4.3 Mitigation in Myanmar: community centre renovation in Yangon

After the February 2021 military coup d'état, the junta declared martial law and outlawed all public gatherings. At a time when people were seriously traumatised by both the pandemic and the violence and upheaval, the women in the savings network desperately needed a safe place to meet and to organise their various COVID-19 and network activities.

A meeting of women members of the Women's Savings and Development Network taking place at the newly enclosed and upgraded community centre in the network's large housing project in South Dagon Township, Yangon, Myanmar © Women for the World

The Women's Savings and Development Network had open-air community centres at their three largest housing projects, but nobody felt safe there. So instead, they renovated and enclosed the three community centres, using building materials that were donated or bought cheaply from stalled construction sites. In the coming months, these community centres became vital meeting points and safe places for the savings network to organise many different activities.

4.5 National COVID-19 support programme in Thailand

CODI's national COVID-19 Relief Programme (April 2020–May 2022) is a rare example of a community-driven COVID-19 relief and rehabilitation process that has been systematically supported at scale by the government. While the community networks in the other three countries in the study had only modest donor funds to work with, Thailand gives us a chance to see what a community-driven process can achieve when it is systematically supported and legitimised. Instead of the typical top-down pattern of government planning and budget allocation, the CODI programme offered flexible funding in the form of grants up to certain agreed-upon ceilings directly to city-based community networks and to individual communities. There were a few clear objectives that were common across the country: the projects had to address the various needs of people affected by COVID-19 in the communities and they had to strengthen the people's process. Many community networks were able to link with other aid projects and government initiatives, so the CODI grants acted as a bridge to bring these disparate initiatives together and make them work much better, to reach those who really needed help.

Because the pandemic has been dynamic and needs have kept changing, CODI's COVID-19 support has responded to these changing situations with several phases of its programme, each with its own emphasis and package of support. The Thai CODI National COVID-19 support programme case study describes how the first two phases of the programme dealt with needs arising from the waves of infections from the first Alpha variant of the virus. The third and fourth phases dealt with the upsurges of infections from the Delta variant, while the fifth phase is currently dealing with the effects of the more contagious Omicron variant. The different phases of the support programme had distinct goals and funding parameters, and there were some gaps and overlaps, but the community COVID-19 activities were continuous.

- In the first phase of the CODI programme (April–September 2020), CODI provided grants totalling US$4.5 million, which supported community-managed COVID-19 projects by 234 urban networks and 1,729 rural sub-district networks. The networks used these funds to implement a wide variety of projects, but many of them focused on providing food, which was an especially crucial problem for out-of-work families in the early stage of the pandemic: food distribution, community kitchens and community gardens.
- In the second phase (January–September 2021), when the COVID-19 variants had led to second and third waves of infections (mostly in the Bangkok metro region), grants totalling US$550,000 were given to 180 community networks nationwide to continue their community-driven COVID-19 activities, with more emphasis on virus prevention, job creation, food production and collaboration with local agencies.
- In the third phase (June–October 2021), with a budget of US$925,000, the grants to community networks continued (with grants of US$1,500–4,500 per network, depending on the number of communities), but grants were also given directly to individual communities (US$600–1,200 per community) to carry out their own local COVID-19 initiatives, with the networks acting as their mentors.
- In the fourth phase (September–December 2021), a smaller budget of US$270,000 was given in grants to community networks with more focus on community-based quarantine centres and food production and community gardens, with some funds being used to strengthen links between rural and urban community networks to supply much-needed vegetables, herbs and rice to virus-blighted urban communities.
- In the fifth phase (January 2022–present), as Thailand is experiencing a new surge with the Omicron variant and many in poor settlements are again unable to work and earn, a new round of community kitchens and community quarantine centres are being supported by the programme.

5

What have we learnt?

The COVID-19 study provided a fertile opportunity for these implementing community networks to reflect on their community-driven projects, present their work and ideas to their peers in other countries, and to compare and learn from each other's actions. This happened in an intense series of regional online meetings which took place between August 2021 and January 2022, with ACHR facilitating the sharing process. Because successive waves of the pandemic made travel impossible during that time, all the meetings took place on Zoom, and PowerPoint presentations and virtual community visits of necessity took the place of real visits. In some meetings, the groups reported more generally on the work they were doing. In others, the presentations and discussions were more focused on common themes and common types of projects which several of the groups were undertaking, such as community kitchens, community gardens, rice-distribution projects and livelihoods initiatives.

A number of striking ideas gradually began to emerge from the experience of planning, implementing, describing and collectively discussing and assessing these community-driven COVID-19 projects in the four very different contexts. These ideas all overlap and interconnect, but for purposes of discussion and enlightenment, we have made an attempt here to extract each of them, and show how they manifest themselves in the various projects.

5.1 Flexible funding allowed networks to deal more holistically with the crisis

Poverty has many dimensions, and the needs in poor settlements at all times – especially during times of crisis like the pandemic – are many: both individual needs and community needs. The study showed us that when communities and their networks were given space and resources which allowed them to flexibly and collectively address those complex and overlapping needs, even if the resources were very modest, they could be very creative in how they responded to those needs, according to the dynamic situation on the ground.

In Jakarta, for example, the JRMK Network surprised everyone when they decided to use some modest COVID-19 grant funds to set up a cooperatively run laundry service. Laundry might seem an unlikely priority for a list of urgent pandemic needs. But the women in *kampungs* in Jakarta understood that washing clothes became a huge problem during the pandemic. The network decided to support the setting up of the first cooperatively managed laundry services, priced very cheaply to be affordable to those overworked and pandemic-stressed women in the *kampungs*. Here is how Asmiawati, who helped start the first cooperative laundry service in Kampung Akuarium, described it:

During the pandemic, the burden of work in the house increased for women – especially washing and ironing clothes, which takes up more time and energy than other chores. If one family member got infected with the virus, or was even suspected of being infected, we had to separate that person's clothes from the others and wash those clothes in warmer water, to kill the germs. And we couldn't re-use the clothes we wore when we went out, since they may be contaminated with the virus. Some family members changed into clean clothes several times a day. The piles of clothes to be washed grew very quickly. To make things more difficult, water is always scarce in some kampungs*, and the scarcity increased when everyone was stuck at home during the lockdown. All this makes it even harder for women to wash their family's clothes.*

In Thailand, instead of deciding what should be done or what activities to support, CODI's COVID-19 support programme provided community networks in different cities with a flexible budget, up to certain agreed-upon ceilings, and gave those networks the freedom to design their own projects and manage their community-driven COVID-19 relief together. For the first phase, the budget ceilings were between US$1,000–US$9,000 for each network, depending on the number of communities in that city or urban district or, later on, according to the severity of COVID-19 infections in that constituency. The networks proposed all kinds of activities: meetings, economic and livelihoods support, basic welfare, food distribution and production, community kitchens, face masks and alcohol gel, community gardens, and setting up spaces for meetings, exchanging news and dealing with multiple needs.

In Yangon, the Women's Savings and Development Network had very meagre funds to support their COVID-19 relief activities, and needs in the communities were many. But one of the needs everyone agreed was most urgent was for a safe place to gather and support each other in the crisis. In three of the big housing projects that had been completed just before the pandemic, the communities had built simple covered structures which served as open-air community centres. But during the violent mayhem after the coup d'état, some of these community centres were looted and damaged. At a time when public gatherings of any sort were outlawed by the generals, nobody felt safe being there. After discussions with their partners in WfW, the communities began a process of gradually upgrading these three community centres: building fences around them, enclosing them with walls and sturdy lockable doors and windows, repairing leaky roofs, laying floor tiles and adding fans and false ceilings to make the rooms inside cooler in Yangon's fierce heat.

A lot of the building materials were donated or bought very cheaply from nearby construction sites that had stopped work after the coup. In the coming months, these community centres became vital meeting points and safe places for the savings network to organise all kinds of activities.

5.2 The crisis activated people's systems when the formal systems were falling short

In all four countries, formal efforts to deal with pandemic needs of the urban poor were slow, cumbersome, bureaucratic and fell far short of addressing the real nature and scale of needs. But while governments dithered and delayed, organised communities of the poor were already actively taking steps to help out their neighbours, using their own funds and whatever small resources they could muster locally from politicians, friends and donors. They distributed food, made face masks and hand sanitiser, set up community kitchens, kept track of needy households, and linked with their local governments to help channel public assistance to the families that most needed it. Cases of community members spontaneously helping each other in various ways blossomed everywhere. As ACHR chairperson Somsook Boonyabancha put it,

We see immense energy among the people to deal with things when they are in a desperate situation like the Covid crisis. But when people wait for assistance to come from the system of the authorities, it kills that energy. And they're probably not going to get that assistance anyway, because most formal programmes are designed from the sky, not from the ground realities. But when communities realise that there are a lot of things they can do by themselves, that energy is unearthed. Communities have no problem collectively inventing all sorts of ways to address the Covid crisis in appropriate, cheap, pragmatic and creative ways. Why? Because they are the ones who experience those problems and benefit from those solutions directly. In these ways, the poor can not only be part of the virus response planning, but they can lead the way. If we move fast to support them, communities can be the first to act, in real time: they can quickly survey the needs, talk together, make their plans and then take action right away. This is what we see happening in many cities, where communities are leading the response to the virus.

In Thailand, for example, as soon as the first outbreak of infections sent the whole country into a panic, the government advised everyone to wear special N-95 masks, which are manufactured only by certain companies. Within hours, all the N-95 masks in stock were taken and no such masks – or any others – were available in any store. At a time of high infection, when people most needed those masks, none were available. So the Thai public was mobilised: people donated whatever masks and protective equipment they could find to the hospitals and medical people who needed them most. They even brought food to the overworked health workers. People also started making their own cloth masks, including the informal sector. Sewing machines began humming all over the place, and resourceful seamstresses in the communities started making masks, working day and night. Suddenly there were masks everywhere. The markets and street stalls were bursting with face masks, in all sorts of beautiful colours and designs. It turns out the mask problem was not so difficult to resolve after all, and these cloth masks worked relatively well. Suddenly, there was an alternative solution to a serious problem, and that solution was supplied by the people, at a huge scale. People had taken ownership of the situation, and the message that came with those colourful cloth face masks was this: this is our community, our crisis, and we are going to take care of each other – we are not only waiting for others to rescue us.

In similar ways, the information quickly gathered by community networks in their surveys of who needs what help in the communities became a crucial tool for local governments and aid agencies to direct various types of COVID-19 relief to those most in need. This was information that cities did not have and could not get – but communities did have it and could get it very quickly and accurately. During the early lockdowns, for example, when people were not allowed to move around the city, information from the community vulnerability mapping done by groups in the Homeless People's Federation in several cities in the Philippines was used by *barangay*-level and city-level governments to distribute aid, support vulnerable households and track infections for quarantine purposes. In Thailand, the detailed surveys that communities undertook and continuously updated, to track infections and identify vaccination status in low-income communities, helped the district-level networks to work with the local authorities and local hospitals and temples to set up community-managed quarantine facilities and keep as many infected people out of hospital as possible, at a time when the country's public healthcare system was badly overloaded with serious COVID-19 cases.

5.3 The crisis put pandemic-hit communities into the giving-and-helping-each-other mode

During the pandemic, pandemic-hit communities responded to the crisis with an outpouring of mutual support. In the conventional welfare-style approach to disaster aid, the poor and vulnerable are seen as being helpless victims and are targeted for assistance that is designed and bestowed by others. That assistance is usually bestowed individually, to those the aid-givers decide are suitably needy. But in a crisis like the pandemic, when everyone is in desperate need and struggling alone for their own good, that individualised approach forces people to think only about themselves and to compete with each other in a scramble for scarce resources.

But deep down in human nature, there is an impulse to help, to share and to care for others, and times of crisis invariably bring this out. This impulse to help others can be even stronger when the people experiencing a shared crisis are surrounded by people who are like themselves and are facing the same problems. The COVID-19 crisis has shown us that when that human impulse to give and to help is unlocked and brought together into an organised force, its power can be immense. In the Thai community kitchens, for example, most of the volunteer helpers who came every day to chop vegetables and cook meals which brought sustenance and hope to others were poor, jobless community people who were also victims of the pandemic. After giving up half their day to the sociable toil of cooking 500 meals for others, they were also glad to sit down together to enjoy a nourishing bowl of their chicken and vegetable soup. One observer had this nuanced reflection about the role of caring for others in the community-driven COVID-19 work in Thailand:

When organised communities reach out to unorganised and vulnerable communities in different ways, using the Covid intervention as their tool, they are offering different kinds of care to those more vulnerable communities. The care they offer makes those communities less vulnerable in three important ways. The first and most immediate layer of caring is to provide some tangible assistance (a bag of rice, a bowl of chicken soup, some face masks, a friendly face), which lets those people know they are not invisible, that someone cares and is keeping track of them, that they are not alone after all. The next and deeper layer of caring is to bring those vulnerable families and communities into the network, and by doing so to bring them into a larger system of collective caring and support which can meet needs

of many other sorts – not only Covid: communication, knowledge, information, collaborations, allies, welfare, organising, access to savings and loans and access to CODI programmes. The next and most profound layer of caring is to get these vulnerable and invisible communities on track to getting secure land and housing, through the Baan Mankong programme, and to becoming full, visible, legitimate citizens in the process. Each layer of caring decreases their vulnerability and increases their participation in and access to that larger, collective system of mutual caring that is the community network and the community-driven housing movement.

Another crucial point about caring for others in a crisis is that it is good therapy. When people are traumatised by a disaster and experiencing all kinds of troubles, instead of falling into a depression or waiting passively for help, looking after others in active and outwardly directed expressions of caring can work like a powerful tonic to boost people's spirits, make them stronger and more resilient. In the Zoom exchanges during the course of the study, community members again and again described feeling physically and morally better after helping others. It is almost as though some restorative chemical is released into the physiological system when traumatised people direct their attention outwards to helping others.

The situation in Myanmar makes a vivid example of this, where the trauma people have faced from the pandemic has been compounded by the violence and upheaval of the military coup d'état. Yet despite all the dangers and losses, the women in the community savings groups keep finding ways to use their COVID-19 relief activities to actively bolster their systems of mutual support when they are most needed. Van Lizar Aung, the director of WfW, described it this way:

People are overwhelmed by so many difficulties – they cannot pay back their housing loans, they're afraid, there is violence and uncertainty everywhere. People have nothing – no electricity, no jobs, no food, no internet, no water, no vaccines, no medicines or hospital. But somehow, even after going through all these crises, still they survive. Where does that energy come from? As soon as we meet with the communities and talk about what we can do together to help each other, we all feel healthy again, we feel joy again. We work all day on our community gardens, our housing projects, our savings groups, our meetings, our community markets. And at the end of the day, we're tired and sleep well. We're not thinking about those awful generals any more. And then the next day we are working again, helping the communities and each other. Working with the community and for others is the best medicine, if you want to be happy.

5.4 Networks used the crisis as a chance to go beyond just relief and do a lot more

Where formal COVID-19 assistance has reached poor communities, most governments and aid organisations focused their efforts on responding to the immediate needs that the pandemic created. This is understandable, and the intention has clearly been to relieve people's suffering and make things better. But in this kind of intervention, the pandemic itself is treated as the object, and all the resources and manpower are then marshalled to tackle those particular problems at that particular time. Once those immediate problems are dealt with, the work is done.

But if we focus solely on the crisis itself, and respond only to immediate needs, we miss a big opportunity. Every crisis gives us a chance to look at things in a new way and to do things differently. If we look at the pandemic as the subject of an intervention, on the other hand, we can accomplish the same things, but we will address those needs and perform those relief activities in a different way, so they will have a larger and longer impact. Thinking of a crisis as a subject, rather than as an object, can profoundly affect the way a crisis intervention is structured. As ACHR's chairperson Somsook Boonyabancha put it,

That's the difference between a social welfare model and a development model. In a social welfare model, the meeting of immediate needs is the beginning and the ending. But in a development model, you will think about how to move forward, using the impact of whatever immediate crisis has emerged.

This kind of strategic thinking is something that mature community leaders in all four countries in the study have brought into the centre of their movements. Most of the community-driven COVID-19 initiatives showcased in the study were explicit in aiming higher than just providing a little assistance to a few poor families or treating the symptoms without treating the causes of poverty and vulnerability. The direction of that kind of thinking and activity planning is important.

The poor are poor and vulnerable for many reasons, and the list of problems they face – even in non-pandemic times – is very long. Poor people cannot solve all of these problems at once, no matter how strong their communities and networks may be. But when communities take some concrete steps to solve some very real and urgent problems they face, and when their solution has some success, people will feel hopeful, their spirits will get a boost, and they will be able to

look up and look forward to other possibilities with a renewed energy. That first-step achievement is extremely important, because it builds the momentum which can lead communities to achieve more and greater things. When planned strategically, with a subject focus, community-driven COVID-19 relief can be a powerful way to help poor communities and their organisations get going and build that momentum: strengthening their organisations, increasing their negotiating power, enlarging their ranks of allies, scaling up their development possibilities and making themselves visible, proactive development partners in their cities.

In Jakarta, for example, all the COVID-19 projects addressed immediate needs in imaginative and specific ways. But at the same time, they were all explicitly designed to boost membership in the *kampung*-based cooperatives and show community members how beneficial joining the cooperatives can be. The 29 *kampungs* in the JRMK Network all have fully registered cooperatives now, as part of the network's long and successful campaign to persuade the Jakarta municipal government to reverse decades of violent forced evictions, recognise these communities, and provide them with collective tenure on the land they occupy now or have negotiated to relocate to nearby. This historic shift in city policy, to legalise and collectively manage informal communities, has been a major breakthrough for the city's urban poor, but is not so easy to operationalise on the ground. The internal politics in these large and long-established *kampungs* is complicated, with layers of overlapping and conflicting vested interests. A lot of local leaders in the *kampungs* see the cooperatives as a threat to their spheres of patronage and resist them. The network's projects to distribute rice, herbal remedies, cooking gas, staple foods and laundry services are all being used to expand membership and promote the cooperatives as a self-managed and multi-sided support system which belongs to the community and exists to help make people's lives in the *kampung* better and more secure in many ways.

In the Philippines, the COVID-19 relief projects in the city of Muntinlupa were likewise designed to bolster the land negotiations of the vulnerable communities on prison-authority land. This is how Ruby Papeleras, one of the national leaders in the Homeless People's Federation, described the strategy:

We use all these various activities during the Covid crisis – like community kitchens, community gardens, savings and livelihood loans – to strengthen these communities on the prison land and increase their pool of allies, so they can negotiate for secure land from a stronger position. Negotiating with the Bureau of Corrections is very difficult. Even the local government doesn't have the authority to negotiate with them, because the land belongs to the national government. But if we can strengthen the communities and get more local supporters, we can negotiate with the national government from a position of more strength.

In Thailand, the community garden that people from 11 railway communities in Khon Kaen developed on the strip of land under the elevated railway line is another example of this strategic thinking. At the same time the garden was providing out-of-work and hungry families with vegetables and fruit, it was acting as a mechanism of diplomacy to help those same railway squatters negotiate for secure land for housing. Here is how Natnicha Akahadpan (known as Pi Oy), a senior community leader in Khon Kaen, described it:

All of the informal communities taking part in the garden project are living on State Railway Authority land, and all of them are under threat of being evicted by the railway authorities, to make way for track expansion projects. Before the garden project started, these communities were isolated, and their attempts to organise themselves had broken down. The gardening acted as a catalyst to bring these vulnerable people together, so they could discuss things and decide together what to do. The project also become a tool to help the communities connect with the railway authorities in a more constructive and less antagonistic way. Sometimes it's too difficult and too emotional for people to talk only about eviction directly. So, they use the garden as a soft, positive, beneficial tool to indirectly get at the land security issue. The railway communities have now begun to negotiate with the railway authorities to find alternative land to move to nearby, as compensation, when the time comes. All these processes of network building and negotiation and dialogue with the State Railway Authorities were catalysed and strengthened by the community garden project.

5.5 Community-driven relief strengthened and broadened the larger community movement

When organised communities and their networks deliver aid in a crisis, instead of professionals or governments, things can still go wrong. There is a need for a strategy, and for a balancing and checking mechanism to make sure the process allows for wide participation and to keep nudging things in the right direction. Community-led processes, like all human systems, can get stuck with centralised leadership structures and dominance by a few leaders who decide everything. So it is important that there be discussion and organisation

before the process starts, to collectively understand the various aspects of the crisis and to develop a strategy for action that is clear to everyone, and that opens up as much space for participation as possible. Constant sharing and collective review and adjustment along the way all make for a better-designed and more effective intervention.

The COVID-19 projects in all four countries have shown that relief activities can open up opportunities to reform and strengthen community organisation. Concrete activities always open new space for others in a community to take part, to become active, to lead things, to innovate, to bring their skills and ideas into the larger effort. The COVID-19 relief activities created a lot of new space for this kind of participation. And in the process, the relief activities helped to reform and strengthen both the communities and the community networks, making them more active, balanced and open.

Sometimes this balancing mechanism is built into the community movement, as with the regional and national groupings of leaders in the Homeless People's Federation in the Philippines. In Thailand, this balancing and nudging role is partly played by the support organisation, partly by the community networks, and partly by the collaborative structures that have become an integral part of how CODI and the country's community networks work together and develop new programmes together. The design and implementation of the COVID-19 intervention in Thailand is a case in point.

In Thailand, CODI's programme of COVID-19 support to networks and communities was designed and developed in meetings of the Central Team: a structure of community network leaders from constituencies around the country who have met with each other and with CODI staff and other key stakeholders for some time to oversee and adjust the Baan Mankong housing programme. The Central Team structure was developed during a period when the Baan Mankong programme had stagnated in many cities and was in need of revival, but during those meetings, many issues besides housing emerged and many things were organised. When the crisis came, those frequent Central Team meetings – and the innumerable smaller meetings that followed up on various issues – became the principal collaborative structure for discussing COVID-19 issues, comparing notes between cities, deciding what to do and designing CODI's programme of intervention. This is not something that happened only once: the weekly meetings allowed the community networks and their partners in CODI to keep sharing their experiences on the ground, learning from what worked, adjusting the support programme and changing its focus as needed.

The community kitchens in the Bangkok metropolitan area, which were so important during the early stages of the pandemic, make a good example of this collaborative and balancing process. The community kitchens were not spontaneously set up by the networks independently, but became an explicit and common direction of the networks through the sharing of needs and problems which took place during meetings of the Central Team. Every detail of how the CODI support for the community kitchens would work – such as the budget ceilings per network and the per-meal subsidy rate – were thrashed out and constantly assessed and adjusted in the weekly Central Team meetings. These meetings kept a bright spotlight on the projects and the COVID-19 relief process. Every network had to present their proposals and report on the progress in these meetings, which also became an important mechanism for sharing news and refining the programme. Community leaders from around the country looked at everything together, and that transparency made for a great deal of learning, mutual support and balancing – and a more effective relief programme.

5.6 Communities could do more with less

The funding support available to the community networks in the four countries varied widely but in all cases, it was insufficient to resolve all needs or reach everyone. However, that funding allowed communities to think together and to take action immediately. When resources are insufficient, people have to think harder and summon all their thrift and resourcefulness to stretch, leverage, negotiate, seek out partners and to forge collaborations to do more to fill in that insufficiency gap. It is in the nature of poverty that people learn to do more with less in order to survive – to feed, clothe, educate and house their families on incomes that are perpetually insufficient. These hardscrabble skills of thrift and resourcefulness are profound, and they are doubled and tripled when people in communities work together, and when communities work together in networks. This many-times multiplied genius for doing more with less manifested itself in all the COVID-19 projects, in two striking ways: stretching and multiplying resources, and linking with other programmes and resources.

5.6.1 Stretching and multiplying resources

The poor are used to doing things with insufficient funds, so they were very thrifty with whatever COVID-19 resources did come along. They stretched them to do much more: to reach more people or feed two for the price of one. When people do things together, they can always do it cheaper than the government or the private sector. Whether it is making housing or running a COVID-19 relief programme, the same people-driven thrift is brought to bear. Why can the poor deliver so cheaply? Because when people do it, a lot of the mysterious hidden costs in the programme are absorbed by people, by the social process. In their first two months of operation, for example, the 60 community kitchens in Bangkok received funds to cook 110,000 meals, at US$1 per meal. But by using all volunteer community labour, haggling the lowest prices for ingredients in the market, leveraging additional donations and materials locally, and growing some ingredients in their own community gardens, those kitchens were able to cook about 300,000 meals for hungry and out-of-work people. The community kitchen in the Ati community in Iloilo in the Philippines was likewise able to stretch modest donations for a few to feed everyone in the community by adding vegetables from their own garden – as well as lizards, snakes and turtles that were trapped by resourceful younger members of the community – to the daily soup pot.

5.6.2 Linking with other programmes and resources

Each locality had its own collection of government programmes, civil society initiatives and individual efforts trying to address needs during the pandemic, but they were very scattered. Instead of working only by themselves in isolation, the community networks in all four countries were able to do much more by linking their own efforts with these other projects and resources in order to reach more people in need. In the process, besides being able to leverage much greater resources, they were able to bring these scattered programmes and resources together into a more unified, holistic and community-driven virus-support process, in which the organised poor became leaders.

Once the community networks took action, and their virus response systems were functioning well, others in their cities wanted to help and joined the process. Again and again, we see community-driven COVID-19 initiatives becoming magnets for additional local support and resources. When the communities in the Philippines used their very small resources to distribute food packages or set up community kitchens, others in their cities – convents, temples, local health departments, politicians, businesses, universities, middle-class families – saw what they were doing and contributed enthusiastically to their efforts. In Quezon City, once the communities began cultivating vegetables on the first few vacant lots, other landowners saw this idle land being turned into food for hungry families and began offering more lots of vacant land for community gardens.

5.7 Networks built on the collective force in communities

Poverty is itself a type of calamity – a continuous and multidimensional calamity which the poor deal with every day of their lives. There is no question that daily practice at surviving the calamity of poverty makes people more resourceful and more resilient. But when they face those hardships alone, as individuals, they have very little power to get the things they need, and their options for something better are bleak. Surviving during the calamity of the pandemic has been very difficult for all the urban poor, but especially for those who are isolated and have had to struggle on their own. What little formal aid and government assistance has reached the poor during the pandemic was mostly given individually, following the usual charity or welfare approach: some lucky ones got it but most did not.

A striking element in all the COVID-19 projects in the study was their emphasis on collective action and collective solutions, as opposed to the individual mode, which has become the default setting for just about every aspect of our modern lives. Individuality has never worked very well for the poor. But while people may be poor and powerless as individuals, they become richer and stronger when they pool their resources and do things together as a group – richer in knowledge, in social support, in protection, in financial capacity and in negotiating clout.

The same holds true for the COVID-19 crisis. For the poor, access to help in all the multiple and overlapping needs during the pandemic has gone with a collective process, because the collective is the real wealth of the people. ACHR's director, Somsook Boonyabancha uses the analogy of a boat to describe how communities and networks work as a collective mechanism for meeting needs which poor people cannot meet as individuals. A low-income community is like a boat which carries a large group of people, all of whom have widely different means and aspirations and abilities. In ordinary times, that community provides a rough system of informal linkages and relationships of mutual help which can

provide some protections and bolster the capacity of individual members of that community to get by. When you strengthen the collective system in that community, by supporting it, making it more participatory, equitable and responsive, you are strengthening the mechanism which can address all kinds of needs and take care of everyone – even the poorest and most vulnerable members. You are making that boat watertight and seaworthy. Community networks add another layer of collective protection and collective power to those individual communities, and function, in a way, as an even bigger boat.

In many cases, the COVID-19 projects in the four countries were consciously crafted to activate and strengthen those two collective mechanisms – the community and the network – at the same time they delivered much-needed COVID-19 assistance. In Indonesia, for example, all the COVID-19 projects of the JRMK Network in Jakarta were explicitly designed to strengthen the capacity of the *kampung*-based cooperatives, as a self-managed and multi-sided collective support system which belongs to the community and exists to help make people's lives in the *kampung* better on many fronts. Besides facilitating collective secure land tenure, the cooperatives offer a mechanism for boosting economic empowerment and providing services for its members, and creating a platform for discussing community problems such as land conflicts and land legalisation. As a legal entity, cooperatives also allow members of the *kampung* to be represented in the city's formal governance and planning structures and to engage with various partners and perform legal activities. The COVID-19 projects showed people that being part of this larger support system has many tangible benefits: they can get rice at half price, they can get herbal remedies at half price, they can get land tenure, they can get help upgrading their houses. This is how Gugun Muhammad, a leader in the JRMK Network, described the strategy:

We want to try to build a togetherness which includes every single person in each kampung *within the cooperatives. This is important because in Jakarta now, everything is individual. Most people in this city are doing everything by themselves. They live by themselves and survive by themselves. People here are alone. For some people who can afford things, that individual system may be OK. But for people who cannot afford things, we want to make the cooperative, which can guarantee that people who are members can have a secure house and can afford their basic needs – not individually, but together.*

In Yangon, the overlapping crises of the pandemic and the military coup led to an almost total breakdown of systems. Besides being unable to work, earn, buy food, get oxygen and medical supplies for their sick, or even move safely around the city, people in Yangon's sprawling informal settlements found themselves facing a massive wave of forced evictions by the military, which was bent on seizing land in the city. In this extreme context, the situation in informal communities – which have no organisation or collective process – has been much more dire than in communities that are part of the Women's Savings and Development Network, especially those communities which have collectively built their own housing projects. This is how Van Lizar Aung, the director of WfW, described it:

During the Covid and political upheavals, individual communities are more vulnerable than communities that have built their housing or are part of the savings network. In the housing communities there is a system: an information system, a communication system, a savings and finance system, and a network system. That network is really helpful and enables people to support each other. In one community, for example, two families badly needed food, so the community leader contacted us directly and the network could share some resources with them immediately. In the informal areas, or individual communities, they don't have that kind of system and network of support, so those people are much more vulnerable and much less safe.

In the Philippines, the members of the women's savings group in the SAJUSSA community in Davao had withdrawn most of their savings to feed their families in the early stages of the pandemic, when the lockdowns prevented the women from doing their small vending businesses selling fish, flowers, vegetables and sweets. Then later on, when things started opening up again, they had no savings left to withdraw to buy stock and resume their selling. Instead, they put their very small resources together, in small clusters of 15 or 20 women, to set up their own collective livelihoods loan funds. In this way, the thing these women could not do by themselves they could do together. Edna Sernada, a community leader in SAJUSSA, adds:

During the pandemic, when we had so much less income and so many more needs, the small cluster loan system was very helpful to people. When others in the community observed how the women were able to earn and feed their families, there was a lot of interest in joining the loan groups and the numbers grew.

5.8 Communities used the crisis to revive and expand their networks

In all of the cities in the study, the grassroots community networks or federations were already in place, and they linked many of the city's poor communities. Most of them already had years of experience dealing with housing, community finance, disasters and other issues. But community processes all need time to grow, and all of them go through their ups and downs. When a crisis like COVID-19 comes along, the urgency of the situation can push community networks to accelerate the process, and there can be a lot of learning and growth in a community process.

In Thailand, we see this quite dramatically, where the national pandemic-support process was consciously designed to revive and expand the community networks. In Bangkok especially, where the COVID-19 effects were felt most acutely, many of the district-based community networks had become stagnant, and the housing development process had stalled. Many of these community networks linked together only four or five communities. More often than not, those communities were the really strong ones that had organised themselves and redeveloped their housing with support from CODI's Baan Mankong Programme and were now secure and better off. There were still lots of squatter communities, slums and scattered room renters in those cities and urban districts that were not part of the networks. When the COVID-19 crisis hit and these networks were keen to do something to help right away, they worked with CODI to design a support programme which would allow them to reach out to all those other poor communities. The COVID-19 projects that the networks developed and initiated – especially the community kitchens in the early stages of the pandemic – were all designed to bring these scattered, unorganised and unimproved communities into the network process, so that the networks could truly be citywide community networks. The strategy worked and after two years of the pandemic, many of those stagnant networks are waking up and becoming active again, with huge numbers of communities joining the network process and a new generation of communities are beginning to search for land and plan their own Baan Mankong housing projects.

In the Philippines, most of the people taking part in urban gardening in Quezon City are very poor and live in informal settlements in different parts of the city. For the Homeless People's Federation, the project has provided a big opportunity to identify vulnerable families and communities and bring them into their savings and housing process. As Ruby Papeleras, a national leader and one of the community gardeners described it,

When the others doing the urban farming hear about the federation and what we are doing, lots of them are asking us to come to their communities and help them start savings groups. The urban gardening can be a good starting point for vulnerable communities to organise themselves. Then we introduce the savings scheme, and later maybe they can form housing cooperatives or develop land and housing projects, with help from various government programmes. For all that, the federation has a lot of experience and we are ready to share our experience.

In Jakarta, during the pandemic, the JRMK Network has experienced a phenomenal expansion, growing from 16 to 29 *kampungs* in just two years. Many of these *kampungs* are quite large, with 250–900 households, and all of them have now gone through the complicated process of registering as cooperatives with the government. For *kampung* residents who were used to living individually and informally, this was all something new and unfamiliar, and many were wary. The network's various COVID-19 projects have helped to show *kampung* residents the tangible benefits of joining the cooperative, which allows communities to develop their own projects to address many important aspects of *kampung* life.

In Yangon, expansion of the women's savings network was not possible under the chaos and violence of martial law, as much as the women in the network wanted to reach out to vulnerable people in other parts of the city. But the women in the community savings groups have used the double crises to strengthen the existing savings groups at a time they are most urgently needed, and to find as many ways as possible to expand and bolster their community support structures – which are now the only protection people have against the troubles that engulf the country.

5.9 Women held everything together

It is impossible to talk seriously about community-driven COVID-19 relief without reference to the role women played in all the activities: the grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters and nieces. This is a point that did not come up, though, in almost any of the Zoom discussions, and it was not highlighted – or even mentioned – in any of the case studies. Nor was it alluded to explicitly by any of the male or female community leaders who presented their COVID-19 projects in the online exchanges. When questions were ventured about this point, they were usually waved away with a show of mock impatience, as though the question was a silly one, like asking what role oxygen plays in their breathing.

All the same, it is also impossible not to notice that most of the COVID-19 projects in the study were designed and implemented by women, and that the role of women was prominent in all of them. It is no exaggeration to say that most of the community COVID-19 projects in the study were held up by women, and that women enabled the projects to elicit broad participation and to remain grounded in the real needs of the communities. We can only conclude that this omission from the spoken and written record indicates that to these grassroots organisations, the central role of women is something so obvious, so natural, so implicit and so expected that it hardly bears mentioning.

This harmonises with ACHR's long experience in Asia, in which women invariably play a central and active role in anything to do with housing, living conditions, health, food, welfare, community finance, savings or the life of the community. The pandemic also showed how important the care economy became when the cash economy floundered. The care economy in poor and informal settlements, which involves activities such as washing clothes and stretching meagre budgets to feed the family, is invariably propped up almost invisibly, and without pay, within the home by women. The COVID-19 projects have brought this out in the open, recognising the value of this work by women and showing that collective action by many women – like the community kitchens and the laundry project – makes for better and more equitable solutions. So perhaps a brief survey of women's involvement for this COVID-19 study is in order.

5.9.1 The role of women in COVID-19 projects in Thailand

Without exception, all the community kitchens in Thailand that were visited and documented in the case studies were run by substantial, talkative and capable women, and it was almost entirely community women who made up the cheerful ranks of volunteer choppers and fryers and ladlers and deliverers of cooked meals to hungry families. The community-level and network-level quarantine facilities were also managed mostly by teams of women, and almost all the community health volunteers are women. There were certainly many men among the urban gardeners, but in all the photos and all the stories from the hundreds of community gardens around the country, the beaming, proud women gardeners, posing with armfuls of leafy greens, predominate. The urban community networks are not all led by women either, but most are, and women far outnumber men in community-level leadership, as they do in stewardship of Baan Mankong housing projects. In weekly meetings of the Central Team and various community forums that oversaw the CODI COVID-19 project, women invariably outnumber men, invariably do most of the talking – and have the most to say.

5.9.2 The role of women in COVID-19 projects in the Philippines

The community kitchens in the Philippines were likewise run by mothers in the community, who did all the cooking in the snatches of time they could get away from helping their children with their online schoolwork (although a few bewildered-looking men were spotted in photos helping deliver ingredients). Almost all of the local and national leaders in the Homeless People's Federation are women, as are the savings group members and the organisers and recipients of the rice loan schemes and community-based COVID-19 mitigation projects.

5.9.3 The role of women in COVID-19 projects in Indonesia

The JRMK Network in Jakarta has been headed by women since it was formed, and many of the 29 *kampung* cooperatives in the network are led by close-knit groups of community women. In the JRMK Network's rice distribution project, the farmers and drivers who delivered the 50-kilogramme sacks of rice to the *kampungs* were all men, but it was usually women in the *kampungs* who took it from there, weighing and delivering the rice, managing all the money, taking orders for the next batch and picking up and dispersing community news along the way. The cooperative laundry services, herbal drinks enterprise and staple-food distribution programmes were all designed mostly by women and are staffed entirely by women.

5.9.4 The role of women in COVID-19 projects in Myanmar

The Women's Savings and Development Network is an all-women network of community-based savings groups, and they are supported by the all-women NGO WfW. The community gardens in the larger housing projects are planted and tended by both men and women, but it is women mostly who have stretched those vegetables and fruits to feed their own families and others during the crisis, and who organise and sell things in the community markets.

5.10 The COVID-19 projects offered new ideas for a different urban future

For the past half century, urbanisation has meant building up every square inch of land in a city, packing in as much as possible and maximising the profit on every inch of that land. What that concept has left us with is cities that are awful, unhealthy, ugly and dangerous to live in, with traffic jams, pollution and misery overall. Nobody questioned that concept or thought of any other way. And cities just keep getting bigger, more densely packed and more inhospitable. This has been the trajectory for most cities in Asia.

Then suddenly, when the COVID-19 crisis hit, everything came to a halt. During the lockdowns, traffic eased. People were startled by the unusually clean air and by the songs of never-before seen birds in never-before noticed trees. Little spots of green started appearing in this bleak landscape, as hungry communities began planting vegetables and fruit on whatever patches of vacant land they could find. These community gardens were motivated by hard times and dire necessity, but besides producing much-needed food, they also made people pause, think and wonder: why not something else? Why not a different kind of urbanisation? In this way, the COVID-19 initiatives of urban poor communities and their networks have helped to give us a new way to think about the city, and helped us to imagine a quite different urban future – a more human, green, healthy, sustaining and more environmentally friendly urban future. The pandemic made this opportunity possible.

When communities cultivate vegetable gardens and plant trees, they are increasing the green area in the city – and this has climate change and public health implications. In Yangon, the community housing projects of the Women's Savings and Development Network are all located in the industrial townships in the northern part of the city. This is where the jobs are, but large swathes of these townships are treeless and blighted by pollution and have become heat islands, where temperatures are typically much higher than in shadier parts of the city. Besides providing badly needed food during the overlapping crises in Myanmar, the gardens the communities are cultivating are helping make these parts of the city cooler, greener and healthier places to live.

In Thailand, more than half of the country's low-income urban communities have now become greener: growing their own organic vegetables, improving their community environments with vegetable gardens and fruit trees, reducing their expenditure on food and empowering community members (especially children and youth) to learn how to garden, nourish themselves and take greater control over the food they eat. A process which began with a few projects has mushroomed into a national green community movement which is now a major part of the Thai urban community network agenda. The pandemic added a new layer of urgency and relevance to these community gardens, and provided an unexpected opportunity for an enormous scaling up of the movement. Communities are very creative and start their gardens in many ways. If there is enough space inside the community, they garden there. But if there is not much land, families grow vegetables in the small spaces in front of their houses, or even in pots. Many communities have negotiated permission to cultivate vacant pieces of public or private land nearby. In many cities, the community networks have helped with these negotiations and partnered with landowners who allow communities to cultivate vacant plots and raise food.

Somsook Boonyabancha, ACHR's chairperson, describes another aspect of the community gardens:

One of the most interesting outcomes of the pandemic is the use of public land for community gardens, and the use of specific needs of the Covid crisis to forge new relationships of collaboration between different actors in the city. The city recognises the needs and wants to do something, but that's not so easy. The people who are suffering also want a solution, and that's not so easy either. But the city is full of vacant land. Why not use it and start planting vegetables and fruit and raising fish? And then give everyone an active role in the process – the local authority, the poor communities, the civic groups, students, universities – so everyone moves together. In this kind of moving together solution, the food needs are met and the environment is improved, but the process also allows new relationships to emerge between the different actors in the city.

The Thai government's agriculture ministry has been watching the growth of the community garden movement, which expanded enormously during the pandemic, and announced in 2021 a new national Green City programme, which includes an initiative to promote community gardens around the country. Among other things, the programme will promote the use of any vacant public land in cities for community gardens and greening projects. The ministry will help community networks negotiate with the various land-owning agencies to use that land, and those negotiations will have some power because they will now be part of an official government policy.

In the Philippines, Quezon City is another city that is getting greener. As part of the municipal government's pandemic relief activities, the city's progressive mayor is working with urban poor communities and with private and public-sector landowners to turn the city's enormous stock of idle land into productive community gardens. Some of the city's poorest community

members have become the pioneers of this urban greening movement. Ruby Papeleras described it this way:

There is plenty of idle land in the city that hasn't been used for a long time. The urban gardens are a great way to use that idle land, because the gardens don't have to be permanent. And people can benefit in very important ways from that land, even if they only use it temporarily. If the land for gardening is used for only one or two years, the community will still be able to feed so many families, help so many growing children get good nutrition, and improve the quality of life for so many poor and vulnerable communities. So many benefits come from land that would otherwise benefit nobody.

5.11 Everything led to housing

The COVID-19 crisis has been a wake-up call for cities with large portions of their population still living in squalid, insecure and substandard housing. When the crisis began and local authorities instituted lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus, people were told to stay home. But what is 'home' for the urban poor? For many, it is a very insecure place, in shabby, crowded, unhygienic and under-serviced conditions. Any epidemiologist will tell you that a city's defences against a pandemic are only as strong as its weakest point. If so many people in a city are living in that kind of virus-breeding squalor, the whole city will remain vulnerable.

The pandemic has shown that solving these housing problems in a big way, at city-wide scale, is not just a noble idea but an urgent necessity. Housing is a structural solution to problems of poverty and a more holistic and systemic way of solving those problems. We need to build the kind of housing that gives people secure, safe and healthy housing but also builds the community at the same time. This is important because for the poor, the community is the welfare unit, the social support system, the safety net, the organisation that can ensure that everyone – even the poorest and most vulnerable members – is taken care of, and not only during this virus crisis, but in the future, when more crises will come. In their pandemic relief projects, the four community networks in the study have all kept their focus firmly on the long-term goal of secure, decent housing, and we can see this working in several ways.

5.11.1 COVID-19 and housing in Thailand

In Thailand, all the pandemic relief activities – such as surveys, food distribution, community kitchens and community gardens – were designed explicitly as tools to help the community networks reach out to vulnerable and unorganised communities, and scattered and invisible squatters and room renters in their constituencies to bring them into the network process and ultimately help them develop their own collective housing solutions, with support from CODI's Baan Mankong programme. In a way, the entire COVID-19 intervention could be described as an intensive Baan Mankong housing preparation exercise for insufficiently housed communities across the country.

5.11.2 COVID-19 and housing in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the sprawling informal communities on the prison authority land in Muntinlupa used their COVID-19 projects – distributing rice, setting up community kitchens and cultivating vegetables – to organise themselves and bolster their negotiations for secure land and housing. The seaside community at SAJUSSA in Davao also used their vegetable gardens, mangrove planting and weekly shoreline clean-ups to show the coastal authorities that communities like theirs can help protect fragile coastlines and to strengthen their campaign to get land titles. Even the community gardens in Quezon City were used by the Homeless People's Federation to bring more vulnerable and insecure communities into the federation's savings process and put them on track to form homeowners' associations, acquire land and link with the various government housing finance schemes to develop their own housing.

5.11.3 COVID-19 and housing in Myanmar

In Myanmar, the coup d'état in February 2021 was followed by a huge wave of forced evictions of informal settlements by the military government in Yangon. That has made the communities in the large housing projects built by the Women's Savings and Development Network very worried about their houses, since the projects were built on land provided free by the pre-coup government. These communities have used their COVID-19 projects to protect their land and houses while at the same time addressing their immediate needs. Here is how Van Lizar Aung described their strategy:

We still have some vacant land in those large housing projects on government land, and every day we worry that the government will take it back. So we have been doing everything we can to occupy that land somehow. We built 20 new houses on some of the land, using donor funds, and we also used the Covid projects to make big community gardens and plant trees on some of it. We built a fence around one part of the land and put up a signboard that says 'Playground for Children'. On other parts, we've put up cooperative markets and

renovated the community centres. We even asked the old people in the communities to perform a kind of religious rite on that land. We do all these kinds of activities on that land so we can keep it.

5.11.4 COVID-19 and housing in Indonesia

In Jakarta, all the COVID-19 projects by the JRMK Network were strategically planned to strengthen and enlarge the *kampung*-based cooperatives and to build their capacity to become a collective, legal and multi-purpose support system for the hundreds of poor families in these large urban communities. This is all part of the network's long campaign to work with the municipal government to win secure collective land tenure for these communities and to use the cooperative model to collectively improve housing, living conditions and livelihoods. This campaign towards secure land and housing has made some big steps forward during the pandemic. All 29 *kampungs* in the network are now fully registered with the government as cooperatives; 7,000 houses in 15 of the *kampungs* have been granted temporary building rights, which essentially legalises their existing structures; 18 of the *kampungs* have been made legal residential areas on the city's master zoning plan (spatial plan), which strengthens their tenure and prevents them from being evicted for encroaching on zones designated for other purposes in the city's plan.[6]

[6] For more information, see the three Indonesia case studies.

6 Conclusion

What do experienced and networked organisations of the urban poor do with the opportunity to address their COVID-19 needs in a more organised, comprehensive and strategic way? All these interventions designed by community networks and their supporters were explicitly created to do several things at the same time as they were addressing immediate COVID-19 needs. And this is where the study really gets interesting, for we find two profound things happening simultaneously:

The COVID-19 interventions strengthened community-managed systems. All the community-driven COVID-19 relief projects addressed immediate needs effectively, cheaply, quickly, equitably and with a lot of creativity, reaching those most in need, including those who might normally fall through the cracks of more formal aid efforts. In doing so, the projects strengthened the community as the primary unit of organisation and primary support system (the 'boat') for the urban poor. The projects were also used more strategically to strengthen the network process: to bring more people into the network, to reach out to more vulnerable communities, and to expand the network of support and care to include more and make the network stronger in the process. In these ways, the networks made the people-driven support system bigger and stronger and improved its status. The COVID-19 projects also strengthened the relationships between the communities and the local government, with local support groups and civil society organisations, and with national and provincial government, through collaborations and partnerships. This has boosted the status of these communities, so people's organisations are more recognised as crucial development partners that can do things government cannot and can reach people the formal systems cannot. By strengthening all these three levels – the community, network and city-wide relationships – we see the crisis being used to strengthen the overall people's system, in different contexts and in different ways.

The COVID-19 projects led to more structural solutions to poverty. No matter what communities and networks do to address the COVID-19 crisis, if people are still poor and living in illegality and squalor and insecurity, they will still face many problems. The problems of poverty can never be solved by treating only the symptoms. The solutions have to be bigger than that and have to touch the structures which cause poverty and exclusion and homelessness in the first place. That is a very tall order and not something that can be accomplished overnight. But we see glimpses of this direction in the community COVID-19 projects which kept their focus squarely on getting secure land for housing, on using public land for public purposes like housing and food production, on building stronger and more inclusive citywide networks which multiply people's capacities and power, and on creating new collective structures that belong to the poor and help them meet basic needs they cannot meet as individuals.

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Case studies prepared for this COVID-19 study

All of the cases studies were prepared by the local teams, with support from ACHR, but all are unpublished.

Indonesia case studies

1. Cooperative herbal drinks production project in Kampung Marlina in Jakarta.
2. Cooperative rice distribution project in JRMK communities in Jakarta.
3. Cooperative laundry enterprise in Kampung Akuarium in Jakarta.

Myanmar case studies

4. Community gardens and greening in Mae Myit Thar housing projects in Yangon.
5. Community centre renovations in three housing projects in Yangon.
6. Livelihood generation, cooperative markets and savings during COVID-19 times in Yangon.
7. 'How we survived': community women in COVID-19 and coup d'état times documentation project.

Philippines case studies

8. Community gardens in Quezon City.
9. Community kitchens in three cities: Davao, Iloilo and Muntinlupa.
10. Community-managed COVID-19 mitigation in four cities: Muntinlupa, Davao, Mandaue and Valenzuela.
11. Community-managed livelihood initiatives in three cities: Valenzuela, Davao and Muntinlupa.

Thailand case studies

12. Community gardens in four cities: Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Bangkok and Surin.
13. Community kitchens in five districts in Bangkok: Bang Bon, Phasi Charoen, Sathorn, Ratchathewi and Taling Chan.
14. Community-led home isolation and community isolation initiatives in the Bangkok Metro Region.
15. Collective rice farm and rice distribution project in Chum Phae.
16. Community-designed and managed COVID-19 relief at nationwide scale: CODI's COVID-19 relief programme 2020–2021.
17. How the CODI COVID-19 support worked in one constituency: Nonthaburi City.

This paper describes an action-research study in which experienced community networks in four Southeast Asian countries collectively reflected on, compared and documented the innovative work they were doing on the ground during the COVID-19 crisis. The study showed how these networks planned their COVID-19 interventions strategically and used the urgency of the crisis to strengthen and expand their people-driven support systems, tackle the structural causes of poverty, and show elements of a more humane, equitable and environmentally sustainable city development model while addressing immediate COVID-19 needs in the communities.

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