

CAMBODIA FEDERATION REPORT

More than 180,000 people live in informal settlements in Phnom Penh - on rooftops, along rivers and roadsides, on government and private land. These are thriving communities, but they are not easy places to live in. Most have no water supply, electricity or toilets, and many are harassed by evictions, fires and flooding.

In absence of entitlements or government assistance, Phnom Penh's first-generation poor have had to devise survival systems of their own - to get land, build houses, get water and electricity, obtain credit, find jobs. These people's systems have helped more Cambodians than any government scheme or foreign aid could ever hope to do, because they offer options for everybody, right down to the poorest. But that doesn't mean they are perfect. There is a lot of room for improvement.

That's where the Squatter and Urban Poor Federation comes in. SUPF is run entirely by women and men who live in Phnom Penh's poor settlements. Since it was formed in 1994, SUPF has worked to get communities to come together and work out their own solutions to problems they all face - problems of land, evictions, houses, toilets, basic services, credit. Behind their work are a few important ideas:

- The poor are a legitimate part of the city. They contribute to its growth, and deserve a share of the benefits of that growth.
- Poor communities understand their own problems best. They contain enormous creative energy which can be channelled to solve those problems.
- If cities and community organisations can work together, good things happen not only for the poor, but for the city as a whole.

This is how Raleen at SUPF describes their work:

"To make improvements in our lives, we need three things:

- Organisation - Because we are poor, we have no power by ourselves. When we work together, in small savings groups and big federations, we learn to make decisions that are good for all of us. Then we become unified force, and can make our voices heard.
- Money - Nobody is going to give us what we need. If we want to build good houses, start businesses, construct toilets or do anything, we need money. Money means saving. Our savings might be small individually, they can be enormous collectively, and can give our communities the bargaining power of 'money in the bank.'
- Solutions of our own - There are a lot of bad ideas about how to solve the 'squatter problem' in Phnom Penh. Nobody is going to ask the poor what we want, so we have to learn to develop good solutions of our own. Otherwise, we will be left out of the big decisions which affect our lives."
- For the past year, SUPF has been involved in a collaboration with the Phnom Penh Municipality and the UNCHS to explore resettlement options for several of Phnom Penh's roadside settlements under threat of eviction. People from these communities have combed the city looking for open land which is close to jobs and schools. Some possible sites for resettlement have been identified, and now discussions are going on about plot sizes, infrastructure, and affordable housing design. The poor are saving money to pay for their new houses.

Perhaps the most important part of these preparations is savings. SUPF runs community based savings and credit schemes in 57 communities. Members save small amounts daily, and can take loans in an emergency or to help start a small business. But the most important reason people save is to make better houses some day.