City Dialogue in Bangkok

In Bangkok, many home-based workers have been relocated from the centre to the outskirts of the city as a result of major infrastructure projects. Before these relocations, which were conducted with little regard to the impacts on the affected people, residents were assured that basic utilities and public transport would be provided. Neither of these promises were realized: some areas remain underdeveloped and lack accessibility to basic utilities such as tap water. The area is also underserviced in terms of public transport—a lack that deprives home-based workers of their livelihoods.

Home-based workers need to commute to central Bangkok to buy materials, take orders, and deliver their finished works, not to mention access basic services such as hospitals, markets, banks, and the district office, none of which are available within walking distance.

The poor public bus service, then, poses two major problems. To travel by public bus is time-consuming: its service is not scheduled and is irregular, especially because it uses an indirect route. For home-based workers, the time spent travelling by public bus is equivalent to the loss of time for their livelihoods. Some of them spend the whole day on commuting alone. Second, in order to shorten time on commuting, workers need to spend much more money on private transportation, such as motorcycle taxi or taxi. Yet, home-based workers cannot afford this choice—their average income is well below 300 baht, which is the minimum daily wage of workers in the formal economy.

What Changed?

HomeNet Thailand (HNT) has been working since 1992 to empower home-based workers through a variety of strategies, including organizing, networking, capacity building, researching, information dissemination, and advocacy for policies that enhance the social protection of informal workers.

As part of the Inclusive Cities project from 2009-2013, HNT aimed to strengthen the capacity of home-based workers with the aim of ensuring urban planning that takes into account the interests of the working poor.

In order to address the transport issues in a way that empowered workers, HNT facilitated a series of city dialogues with the HBWs, residents of the districts, and city officials to achieve the following:

- Unity in all the various districts under a common cause: to increase the residents’ influence through their combined numbers and to demonstrate how cooperation between the districts could be achieved;
- Knowledge of the city’s bureaucratic systems and how to navigate them;
- Introduce officials to the HBWs and community members and acquaint them with their concerns;
- Obtain a commitment from authorities to address the issues presented.

Policy Environment

In theory, Bangkok’s vision and mission is to establish extensive public bus service that is integrated with other modes of public transport in a way that is affordable, convenient, and environmentally and worker friendly.

In practice, however, public transport falls under the jurisdiction of various offices—the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) Ministry of Transportation, Traffic and Transportation Department and the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA)—and their duties often overlap, which means that workers who seek improvements find the system frustrating and difficult to navigate.
Results

• The dialogues empowered HBWs and other community members and enabled them to articulate their realities and problems;
• The dialogues raised HBWs’ visibility to authorities;
• Information sharing and diverse perspectives enhanced understanding of the issues;
• HBWs learned about local administration and the roles of different authorities;
• By recognizing that poor bus service is an issue shared by a majority of different communities, the HBWs and community members have overcome their political divisions in order to address the issue;
• Allowing communities to have a say ensured development that genuinely responds to people’s needs while addressing city problems;
• The BMTA said the dialogue was useful because of the rare opportunity to hear directly from the community;
• The BMTA has approved two more buses for route no.143, significantly improving the regularity of the service.
• A petition for a pedestrian bridge has been forwarded to the BMA’s Traffic and Transportation Department for approval of construction of a pedestrian bridge.

Suggestions for Future Efforts: What Made it Work?

• Participation of engaged, knowledgeable, and sympathetic representatives from concerned authorities. This made it possible for a fruitful dialogue where input—information, limitations and suggestions—from officials can contribute to the most viable and appropriate solution;
• Committed leaders with essential organizing assets. These well-recognized leaders can serve as powerful hubs for effective networking;
• Engaging a wider group of affected people and mobilizing community support in the city dialogues. This united people within and beyond their communities despite internal conflicts;
• Using a bottom-up and democratic process ensured people’s autonomy and participation;
• Keeping the key issues and message focused made it easier to create concrete solutions;
• Thorough research enabled HNT to learn and share with workers the complexity of government agencies’ overlapping mandates and roles;
• Sufficient skill and dialogue preparation allowed community representatives to strategically present arguments.

Bangkok’s informal workers account for 5.1 per cent of the total number of informal workers reported in Thailand, which is 24.8 million people.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.