



A member of Rop Muang 1 community shows the pump she uses to obtain groundwater

Khon Kaen slum communities suffer from state's failure to provide water

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Section 72 of Thailand's new constitution states that "the state shall provide quality water resources adequately for the consumption by people." But within the city of Khon Kaen, the state is failing to

adhere to Section 72. Many residents still do not have access to tap water and consequently, must use groundwater for their daily needs.

There are two low-income communities on the outskirts of the city, along the railway tracks, where the vast majority of residents lack access to tap water. In both communities, most of the residents work as day laborers, cleaners, construction workers, security guards, and other jobs that pay minimum wage or barely above.

Some of these people do not have constant sources of employment. Their average monthly income is around 8,000 Baht (\$230) or less. Many are in debt as well. Even though their housing situation is precarious, the reason most continue to live there is that they have nowhere else to go. They cannot afford to live in the city, where many of them work, and the state does not provide subsidized housing for them.

One of these two communities is Rop Muang 1. While geographically located on the edge of the city, legally it lies within Muang Kao Municipality, a neighboring municipality which is half urban and half rural, according to a Muang Kao municipal officer. The community members have yet to negotiate a lease to rent the land upon which they reside so consequently, they do not have the legal right to live there. According to the same officer, one reason these people don't have water is that the municipality doesn't have a large enough budget and secondly, according to another official, the community leadership of Muang Kao doesn't care much about the poor.

The second community is named Lao Na Dee 12. It is situated next to Rop Muang 1, within the boundaries of Khon Kaen municipality. The community successfully negotiated a lease with the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) and a few months ago gained a main water pipe which runs through the community. It was financed by the government agency Community Organisation Development Institute (CODI).

However, the vast majority (over 80%) of the residents still do not have access to tap water. Since most of these residents work at or

below minimum wage and many are already in debt, they cannot afford to pay the one-time fee of around 5,000 Baht to the Provincial Water Authority (PWA) to install a water meter required to have tap water.

As a result, residents of both of these communities must buy jugs of drinking water from trucks that pass by and obtain their non-drinking water by pumping groundwater. On average, these people have to pay two or three times more for water than what they would pay if they had access to tap water. Moreover, the groundwater is inconsistent, of poor quality, and, according to residents, “sticky.” Consequently, they have to shower multiple times just to clean themselves, store water for times when the groundwater is inconsistent and, in general, suffer from lack of sufficient water.

In particular, these residents were badly affected by the droughts of 2015 and 2016 because groundwater dried up. They had to buy water from other places or reduce their water usage.

“Some days I couldn’t shower. There was not enough water,” one resident complained. Another stated, “We had to save water. Water we used for washing clothes we had to save it for other purposes.”

Another household, which earned about 8,000 Baht per month, had to spend over 2,000 Baht per month to buy water during the drought. Consequently, “we had less money for other expenses.” Droughts, such as those in 2015 and 2016, are expected to become worse and more frequent as the effects of climate change worsen.

Most of these residents felt it was unfair that others in Khon Kaen had access to tap water yet they did not. As one elderly woman asserted, “It is not fair. Tap water should be provided to each household. Everybody should access water equally.”

The Provincial Water Authority, however, deflected blame for not providing these houses their constitutional right to water. For Rop Muang 1, there is a regulation that unless these residents have a tem-

porary housing registration, state agencies cannot provide them utilities.

Additionally, PWA claims that it costs a significant amount of money to lay water pipes and, as a state-owned enterprise, the organization needs to make sure it can make money back from the investment. Similarly, for Lao Na Dee 12, PWA states installing a water meter requires a significant investment and therefore it cannot install them for free. Unfortunately, it seems that the agency is inflexible and its priorities are focused more on breaking even than providing water to the poor.

Similarly, the SRT blames poor people for encroaching upon its land. A senior officer said he would like all of these slum communities removed from SRT's land and the residents to live elsewhere. However, both PWA and SRT are overlooking a number of problems these residents face, which forces them to remain in these communities without having access to water.

First, the Thai state has marginalized the poor through its policies. Since 1960, in the manufacturing sector, business owners have accrued higher profit margins primarily from increases in labor productivity, meaning that workers have been squeezed out of their share of the income gained from their productivity.

Moreover, the country's minimum wage declined in real terms between 2000 and 2008, although it did increase under the Yingluck government. One reason for this is that labor unions have been repressed by the state and remain weak thereby enabling employers to dominate the setting of the minimum wage. The country's taxation policies, in particular a regressive rice tax, low property and income taxes, and exemptions that benefit the wealthy (many of whom evade taxes) have been redistributive from the poor to the rich.

In addition, state and commercial banks have often provided limited access to credit for members of the informal sector and small enterprises. Thus, as political economist Kevin Hewison writes, "in urban

areas, where workers have made significant contributions to economic growth, few have gained adequate rewards for their labors.

Indeed, worker's lives have been characterized by relatively low wages and poor conditions." Further, many of these residents are former farmers who abandoned agriculture due to land problems and the stagnation of rice prices. Thus, the urban poor's limited assets not only reduce their ability to access water and to cope with droughts, but leave them too little income to move.

Second, land prices have recently skyrocketed, pricing out the poor from rents outside these communities. According to the Khon Kaen mayor, land prices have increased threefold in the past few years.

Third, during the past few years, the National Housing Authority (NHA) has constructed a limited number of housing units for the poor in the city. NHA has faced the problem of securing sufficient land on which to house the poor.

As a state-owned enterprise, NHA must comply with long and tedious procedures to obtain land for public housing. These procedures are in place to prevent corruption, but make it difficult for the NHA to compete with private developers to buy land. Consequently, NHA has only been able to purchase land in remote locations which are unsuitable for low-income communities.

Overall, residents of slum communities in Khon Kaen are doubly marginalized. They've been marginalized not only by the national government whose policies have favored the wealthy, but also by municipal governments who have failed to provide them adequate access to water.

Based on what other countries have done, solutions do exist to help these communities improve their access to water and ability to cope with drought. NGOs and community-based organizations could initiate a microfinance program which carries zero or low interest to enable the very poor to pay the meter installation fees.

Alternatively, PWA could create a program which would connect meters for free and then charge small extra amounts per month to pay for the installation costs. Other beneficial programs are community-based plans to help resident plan ahead for drought and to find ways to better recycle and store water.

At a higher level, the national government should provide more livelihood support to these communities to raise their coping capacity to face droughts and other disasters. Such support would entail better education, improved social safety nets, and better public housing for the poor.

Finally, it is hoped that the national government should find ways to increase revenues and capacities of local government units to enable local governments to better support the poor in their jurisdictions. Policies such as these would enable the state to actually abide by Section 72 of the new constitution and provide water to all.

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