



Photo: Michelle Hibler

## The staggering statistics of housing

As their jagged skylines intimate, in Hong Kong as in Singapore, low-cost housing equals high-rise buildings. Extensive urban renewal and public housing programs have made both city-states leaders in the field of urban housing. But as reports from the Southeast Asia Low-Cost Housing Study Project reveal, these programs are not readily applicable to other countries more recently engaged in the struggle of housing their expanding populations.

Urbanization appears as the greatest single factor responsible both for the success of Singapore's and Hong Kong's programs and for the dilemma with which Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand are now confronted. Relatively small, both Hong Kong and Singapore were highly urbanized when their housing policies were implemented. Rapidly-growing export-based economies and the absence of vast undeveloped hinterlands allowed massive investments in the housing sector, investments not likely to be duplicated by other Asian countries faced with the formidable task of upgrading their rural regions.

Now complete, the individual country studies that began in 1973 put forth some staggering statistics: between 1972 and 1983 Jakarta will require an additional 1.2 million houses; Sri Lanka's annual housing requirements during the same decade will be 125,000 houses. In the Philippines the combined rural and urban housing need ranges from 266,000 to 447,000 units — 6.4 dwelling units for every 1,000 people — every year until the year 2000. At present less than three units per thousand population are being constructed, 85 percent of which are affordable only by families in the upper 12 percent income range.

High natural population growth combined with a heavy rural to urban migration are resulting in urban population growth rates often double the national one. In the absence of a similar economic growth rate, the consequences of this accelerating urban growth are highly visible — low levels of industrial output, high unemployment and underemployment, poverty and income inequality, an increasingly inadequate infrastructure and transport facilities, mushrooming slums and squatter settlements.

The Thai National Statistics Office estimates at 600,000 the number of squatter and slum dwellers in metropolitan Bangkok, for example. Crowded at a density of 100 per acre, less than 2 percent of the residents of Klong Toey slum have access to piped water; almost 70 percent of the 30,000 inhabitants must buy their water at exorbitant prices from water vendors, a burden on family incomes which are little more than half the average income for Bangkok residents. And the situation is much the same in other large Asian cities.

The urgency of the problem has prompted administrative reorganization and new policy formulation in a number of Southeast Asian governments. Most policies have however failed to reverse the trend to overcrowding, substandard dwellings, expanding slums.

The comparative reports of the study, discussed at a meeting of the Southeast Asia Low-Cost Housing Study Group held in October 1975 in Pattaya, Thailand, point to the difficulty experienced by policy-makers in understanding the causes of the housing problems as the root of this ineffectiveness. Unrealistically high standards set for housing units combined with limited financial resources have

resulted not only in insufficient construction but also in price tags beyond the reach of the poorer 40 percent of the population. The refusal to accept low-standard housing, even as an interim solution, often leads to a cycle of demolition and construction. Resettlement schemes, sometimes pushing the urban poor to ever-distant peripheries, ignore the lifestyles and work places of those relocated.

To be published by the IDRC next year, the comparative studies indicate that public housing programs such as Singapore's are not the only solution to urban squatting and slum expansion. Nor do high-rise buildings necessarily result in saving on spiraling land and materials costs. "In the majority of countries conditions are much worse than they need be," says Stephen Yeh, project coordinator. Buried under cumulative statistics of housing deficits, policy-makers often by-pass alternative approaches that could reduce health and safety hazards while contributing to a positive urbanization strategy.

The reports also point out that effective housing policies cannot exist independently of policies dealing with urban development, population growth, internal migration and the planning of new growth centres.

The usefulness of the low-cost housing studies is already apparent: the Hong Kong study has been recommended as basic reading for the Housing Management course offered by the University of Hong Kong and serves as a background manual for the newly formed Housing Department. The first of their kind in the eight countries studied, these monographs are benchmark studies that go beyond being mere indicators of need to become imperatives for action.

*Michelle Hibler*