CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

‘Even if the poverty is still largely rural in many countries as the 1990 World Development Report concludes, urban poverty will become the most significant and politically explosive problem in the next century’ (World Bank, 1991:1).

This chapter introduces the thesis by describing the significance and the extent of the problems of urban poverty in Thailand and how Thai Governments’ have attempted to deal with the problems. The aims of the study, research process, research objectives and hoped–for outcomes are presented. The importance of the author’s own experience of working with the urban poor in slums in Thailand is also detailed.

1.1 Economic change, urbanisation and urban poverty in Thailand

There has been a rapid growth in urbanisation around the world which is set to continue. During 1980-2000, the urban populations in all regions of the world jumped from over 2,000 million persons to more than 3,500 million. The United Nations estimated that by the year 2010 there will be approximately 4,000 million. That is, half of the world’s population will be living in urban areas. Such a development has significant social problems.

The growth of large cities in the developing world is accompanied by an upsurge in urban poverty. It is estimated that between 1/4 and 1/3 of all urban households in the world live in absolute poverty. One billion people live in inadequate housing, mostly in slums and squatter settlements in developing countries (UNCHS, 2001b:18).

In the Asia and Pacific region it is estimated that in the year 2000 the urban population was approximately 1,230 million persons, or 35 per cent of the world’s total urban population. It is expected to be 1,970 million, or 46 per cent, by 2020. ‘Urbanization in Asia and Pacific raises red flags, particularly because an increasing number of poor are living in urban areas’ (UNCHS, 2001b:14).

My concern is with Thailand. It has a population of 62.4 million persons. Over 13 million persons, or 21.6 per cent are living in urban areas. There will be towards 17 million, or 26.2 per cent, by the year 2010 (UNCHS, 2001a:217).
Table 1: Size and growth of urban population and urbanisation trends in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Level of Urbanisation (%)</th>
<th>Urban Population (Thousands)</th>
<th>Annual Growth Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>9,135</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>10,407</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>11,620</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>13,057</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>14,817</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>16,939</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>19,445</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>22,049</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2025</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>24,733</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Urbanisation and urban poverty in Thailand are rapidly expanding, according to UCDO (1997:63). Approximately 3.9 million persons (800,000 households) are living in poverty (UDCO, 2000). The majority of these people are living in slums. ‘Slums represent the worst of urban poverty and inequality’ (Annan, 2003).

The main factor in the rapid growth of urbanisation in Thailand is the changing of the economic structure. The mode of production of the country has dramatically shifted from agriculture to industry, as a result of the expansion of the manufacturing sector. Urban areas have become the base of economic activities such as manufacturing, commerce, service industries, all of which attract the rural poor from their home towns to cities. These increasing numbers of rural migrants, accentuated by natural population growth, enlarge groups of urban poor both in Bangkok and its vicinities, and also urban areas in each region of the country. The World Bank also recognises that ‘Urban poverty is growing in scale and extent, especially at the periurban rim’ (World Bank, 2000e:3).

The rapid population growth not only multiplies the numbers of urban poor but also expands needs for basic services. These go beyond the capacity of the Thai government to provide because of limited budgets and/or motivation. Moreover, the urban poor often have an illegal status as squatters, due to living on land which they
do not own. They are therefore not entitled to government services. The failure of economic development planning and inappropriate infrastructure extension create unlimited problems for them. For example, because of illegal invasion by the poor, there are problems of non-land tenure security. Areas occupied by squatters become due for development by the government and the private sector for building infrastructure. There are problems of deteriorated environment, resulting from high population density, lack of drainage systems and garbage management. Therefore, the urban poor are confronted with problems of health, poor quality of life, lack of human rights protection, and inequality with other groups.

Among these problems, economic insecurity such as unstable career and income is the most important one. This results from the unskilled labour of the poor and the lack of funding resources to self-support. The National Statistical Office (2004) has conducted a ‘Formal and Informal Labor Force Market Survey 1994’ and found that ‘The total employed persons in Thailand in 1994 were about 32.1 million. Of these 23.2 per cent were employed in the formal sector and 76.8 per cent were employed in the informal sector’. It is this informal sector that is not covered by social insurance. During the 1997 economic crisis, 50 per cent of the families of the urban poor had one extra person unemployed, 55 per cent had incomes below their living expenses, four per cent were in debt and 37 per cent had loans from informal resources such as local capitalists, cousins or friends in their community (UCDO, 1999:33).

The response of government and international organisations has been to focus poverty alleviation on the funding of community rather than individual assistance, as has been usual in the west. Government credit programmes for the urban poor, through saving and credit schemes, are one of the strategies used by government for urban poverty alleviation.

These schemes are examples of programmes implemented by governments faced with large areas of urban poverty without successful economic solutions. Therefore the aim has been to strengthen community-based organisations in slums. ‘Savings and loan activities are not simply an end in themselves, rather they are a means to strengthen community processes so that people can work together to achieve their multiple and diverse needs’ (Boonyabancha, 2001:11). The World Bank introduced similar kinds
of programmes through the Social Investment Fund after the economic crisis in 1997 and continued these until the end of October 2002.

A number of questions arise from this policy which directly relate to the question of whether the existing large numbers of urban poor can be effectively helped by encouraging community loans and credit schemes. This has to be seen against a background of underdeveloped programmes of social welfare. In Thailand, social protection and/or assistance are not widely available for the unemployed in the informal sector, and social and health services are limited. It is very uncertain that governments will effectively change this situation.

The World Bank has enthusiastically written about the ‘distinctive Thai approach’ to dealing with the economic crisis of 1997:

Thailand had not developed a comprehensive and dedicated set of social protection and anti-poverty programs before the crisis. There are several possible explanations: the many years of rapid economic growth lifted millions of Thai people out of poverty and eased the urgency of developing such programs; Thai traditions and values emphasize self-reliance and family responsibility; and such programs would have involved a substantial burden on public expenditures and on government capacities (World Bank, 1999b:3).

I investigate the implications of this apparent belief about Thai self-reliance and family responsibility and the way this may be expressed in community development projects. To do this I looked at the history of government social policy for the urban poor and in doing this analysed the philosophy from which such practice emanates. This means looking at government documents from the past four decades, and interviewing the key stakeholders. These include bureaucrats, politicians, non-government organisations, Buddhist leaders, scholars, community leaders, and the urban poor themselves.

In trying to understand the development of this policy it is perhaps very important to acknowledge the apparent ideological support of HM The King, as he occupies such a unique role in the formation of the views of Thai people. He has said that self-help and reliance are the essentials in achieving development. He tries to stimulate farmers in thinking about how to find ways to help themselves. Help should only be looked for outside the community or country after your own resources have been examined.
Even though this relates directly to rural development, its influence permeates throughout The Kingdom (Office of The Prime Minister, 1997a:253-254).

My aim is to understand the model of poverty alleviation which underpins the practice as it is demonstrated in the programme currently provided. Again the World Bank is clear in its approach,

Much of debate in Thailand on social protection centers on how far Government should go in developing publicly-funded or mandated social programs and on whether the spontaneous, unofficial mechanisms can be effective instruments in cushioning the blows of the crisis, particularly on the poorest (World Bank, 1999b:3).

‘As researchers, one facet of our research capability must be to exhibit a sense of care and concern to understand the “other’s possibility”...’ (Tierney, 1994:105).

I visited a slum for the first time after graduating from the School of Economics at Chiang Mai University in the North of Thailand in 1985. In my childhood in rural northern Thailand I was used to meeting people who had very little in terms of possessions. However, they all had food regularly from growing it themselves. They had support from relatives, the neighbourhood, monks or the head of the village when they needed assistance. Extended families had key roles in supporting each other when they were needed. They all had a warming home and land for cultivating which was their own. They were committed to this environment. However, in the urban slum it was very different. People were strangers to city life and they were isolated. Nuclear families were more usual in urban slum communities. Many slum dwellers invaded the land which the land owner had left behind to build their shelters. They had to find sufficient work and work hard to enable them to buy food. In the daily life of urban slums, many of them could only afford to buy a cup of rice each day, not a small sack. Many children suffered from hunger when their parents had no job. Parents could not support them to attend school. These people lacked urban environmental services, clean water, electricity, sewage and medicine. The slum dwellers were also very aware of their illegal status as squatters and contact with government officials was to be avoided. Most of them were living under pressure, in poverty and inequality with other groups. However, the urban poor tried to increase their informal safety−net by establishing social groups, neighbourhoods and networks among themselves. For example, a savings group, housewives group, Northeast people’s group. My job at
that time was with a non–government organisation (NGO) so it was easy for me to be accepted. I began working with the urban poor with the People’s Organisation for Participation (POP), which was a local NGO. Before I started, I spent six months staying in a slum with poor families as part of my training to be a community organiser. I learnt a lot from seeing, listening, meeting and discussing with the poor. I understood more about their problems and way of life. After I finished the training I decided to continue working with this organisation. My major responsibilities were, together with the poor, to assess and prioritise their problems and identify resources available for them, to promote the people’s organisations for solving their own problems, monitor their performance and provide feedback and technical support to them. What I found useful was learning about the resources available for people living in those conditions because I felt more confident about providing, or showing them, how to access what they needed. These services were basic, such as the electricity and water supply. I noticed that this increased their sense of power.

My next job was a community worker with the Foster Parents Plan International. This organisation was a non–profit development organisation, and worked with children, their needy families and communities in Bangkok’s slums. My responsibilities were providing training and moral and technical support to individual families and communities to improve their living conditions and quality of life, such as training to increase their life skills, health care and education. I also participated in the collection and analysis of information on families and their community for the planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of activities for their development. Along with these activities, I prepared case histories, photographs, and annual progress reports on assigned poorest families in slum communities for sponsors who were in the developed countries and supported those families.

I have now spent over eighteen years working with slum dwellers. It has been a continuous struggle. The needs are so great and the resources of NGOs never enough. For those families I worked with who I saw had improved their life, I was also aware that other families never came to the attention of NGOs. What is more, they were apparently invisible to the government. Their illegal status as squatters meant that
they did not exist in terms of education, health care and social services. The State only wanted to know about them when they had to get rid of them from their land.

In 1991 I completed the Master of Social Work (Community Development) at Thammasat University. I wanted to more effectively help the people who had trusted me to work with them in slums. I also wanted to know what to do with all the people who did not come to the attention of community workers. I am not sure I found the answer in my study.

I realised that there are many models of working with the urban poor and perhaps the Thai state would do more as economic development occurred. I then joined the U.S. ‘Orderly Departure Program’ at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. This project aimed to recruit the Vietnamese who could meet their criteria and wished to resettle in the United States of America. During the three years I worked for this agency, I still kept regular contact and gave my advice to the urban poor. When Ecoles Sans Frontieres in Thailand—a French humanitarian agency involved with education programmes—offered me a job as programme officer to implement and monitor the education and development projects for Indo–Chinese refugees along the Thai border and also with poor people in Thai rural villages and urban slums in the Northeast of Thailand, I happily accepted. A few years later, I was appointed to be a country director of the organisation and was responsible for defining the policy of the agency, assuming financial management, managing the staff, evaluating the projects and also liaising with ministries, national and international NGOs, GOs and funders.

Through my research activities and advocacy for the urban poor I have since realised that the problems remain. This is despite Thailand’s economic progress and government programme initiatives to assist them. I am also aware of some progress. For example, in 2002, I was appointed to the Advisory Committee of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to advise on the problems of conflict between the urban poor who lived in the Mahakan Fort community and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). The BMA attempted to evict a community to make way for development of the area into a public park which is planned by the Committee for the Development and Conservation of Rattanakosin and the Old Town.
This would be done as soon as the land had been cleared. If the residents fail to move out, the authorities will have to take charge and tear down their houses. This eviction attempt has been ongoing for a decade. Some residents have moved with a small compensation, but about 75 households remain. The residents had decided they would not move out by the deadline of 24 February, 2003. They had been living in the community for generations. They had proposed a land–sharing concept by which the authorities would provide a small patch of land within the Fort for the residents to build their own homes. But the BMA disagreed with their proposal. The residents brought this conflict to the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. The Advisory Committee called on the city hall to allow them to remain where they were, and withhold any action against them until the Government cabinet considered a land–sharing request by the National Human Rights Commission.

The Human Rights Commission of Thailand had been established in 1999 after the development of the New Constitution in 1997. This body is therefore relatively new for the Thai people and their leaders. This case is the first case brought by the urban poor themselves in conflict with the local authority. The possibilities of this body, funded by the government, have yet to be realised in Thailand. In theory its independence exists.

The aim of this study is to find out how effective the programmes have been for all those in need in urban poverty. Through my own social and cultural capital I can do this in just one part of Bangkok. To understand what is provided I have to appreciate the attitudes of the policy makers and the abilities of the urban poor to benefit from intended help. My question to all of the participants in the research will be basically the same: ‘What are the attitudes of the Thai people to the needs of the poor and how do all of those in need access the available services for poverty alleviation?’ I will ask this question to those who have influence on social policy and to those who are, or are supposed to be, the recipients.

My research therefore accesses those of the poor who have been successful and those who have been unsuccessful in using the services provided, based on community self–reliance. Implied in these findings will be the question of whether an element of
existing social capital is necessary, or can be created, for urban slum dwellers to access help which would lead to self-reliance.

There have already been case studies, which have looked at the success of individual slum communities. My study reviews this research and places the success of programmes in the context of general attitudes to poverty and looks at what creates ‘a community’ that can conform to the expectations of funding bodies, but can also fail to meet such criteria.

The answers to these questions should have direct practice implications. From the perspective of social policy, the effectiveness of programmes is obviously important to know. From my professional perspective as an action researcher these questions are important for my practice. The research process is informed by this perspective. In trying to access, for the purposes of my research, the poor who do not benefit from the programmes and services, it will be my responsibility to inform them of what is available and how others manage to access the services.

Given this knowledge, I want to look at the implications of the policy for the practice of social/community development education. For example, are the academic institutions producing practitioners who can help communities develop the social capital which is necessary to take advantage of the current ways of alleviating urban poverty? Central to these practice implications is the question of whether such programmes and practitioners can hope to deal with the extent of urban poverty that I am very aware continues to exist in my country.

1.2 Research Objectives:

1. To develop a knowledge base about the development of Thai governments’ policies for the urban poor in Bangkok during the period 1960 until 2004, emphasising particularly the period following the economic crisis in 1997.
2. To gain knowledge about the attitudes of stakeholders to the urban poor.
3. To find out about the impact of current policies and provision on the urban poor.
4. To explore the attitudes and understandings of academic teachers in social and community work to urban poverty.
5. To draw some possible conclusions, from this data, on the effects of government policy approaches to urban poverty.
6. To improve my abilities as a researcher in Thailand through ongoing reflection on my research experience in a western environment.

1.3 Hoped-for Outcomes:
1. To develop an understanding of the government policy for urban poverty alleviation.
2. To develop an understanding of the philosophies and attitudes underpinning approaches to urban poverty.
3. To develop an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the implementation of government and other programmes for urban poverty alleviation.
4. To develop an understanding of the implications of these policies for the education and training of social and community workers.
5. To draw conclusions on government policy approaches to urban poverty alleviation and make these available to others concerned with social policy.
6. To improve my abilities as a researcher in Thailand.

1.4 Thesis Structure:
Chapter Two reviews the available literature on urban poverty and on social development as a response to needs. It includes a discussion of the centrality of attitudes to poverty in Thailand and an analysis of the approaches to poverty that have been dominant in Thailand. This analysis demonstrates that the concept ‘self-reliance’ is crucial to understanding social policy and practice in Thailand. In addition, the possibilities of government intervention to deal with urban poverty are reviewed in the context of Thai social structure. From this review, questions are developed about inclusion and exclusion of the poor in poverty alleviation programmes. This leads to the research objectives, which are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three reviews the objectives of the thesis and the research methods utilised. The choices of research methodology and the different sources of data are detailed. The processes of accessing and analysing a range of key policy documents related to urban poverty alleviation are described. The groups targeted by the survey research are also described, and explanation is given as to why these groups were chosen and how they were accessed. The target groups are seen as overlapping, but can be
categorised as policy makers and those at the receiving end of the policy—the poor and the poorest. The issues associated with producing research in and for two cultural contexts are highlighted in this chapter.

**Chapter Four** provides an account and analysis of how Thai government urban poverty alleviation policy developed from the 1960s until 2004. This is made through a review of the policy documents in the form of five year National Economic and Social Development Plans and the fifty four Government statements on their policies to the National Assembly covering this period. Also noted are some major political events that interacted with economic forces during the period. I comment from personal experience, on the implementation of poverty alleviation policies.

**Chapter Five** presents the study’s findings derived from the questionnaires and interviews with the stakeholders. Some indicative stories from the respondents are provided as a basis for elucidating major topics and issues emerging from the survey. The data from those at the receiving end of the policy are divided into responses from ‘the included poor’ and then ‘the excluded poor’. The presentation of this material is followed by a discussion of the data from the policy makers, and the academics involved with teaching about ways of helping poor people in Thailand.

**Chapter Six** deals with each aspect of the research findings in the context of discussing the research methods. The findings are discussed as they relate to the development of Thai governments’ urban poverty alleviation policy and the results of that policy from the perspectives of the stakeholders. In addition, the curricula relating to the training of social/community workers are reviewed in the context of the findings.

**Chapter Seven** presents the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the research. Specifically it discusses the limitations and the strategic uses of the findings in the light of the original objectives and hoped-for outcomes of the research. Suggestions are made about possible practical steps toward enhancing urban poverty alleviation policy and practice, taking into consideration the current political environment in Thailand.