CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This is not research that can make and state definite conclusions. It is rather a snapshot of the situation of some urban poor who were living in urban slums in Bangkok, and of the society that sometimes saw them as a problem and a lot of the time ignored them.

Definite conclusions are prevented by the small and particular groups of people I was able to interview. By focusing on the stories of those I was able to hear from, a picture has emerged that may, however, illustrate general issues in Thailand in relation to dependency, economic growth, and Thai culture as it reinforces and is reinforced by the social structure. I was not able to interview people who were living in often desperate situations outside slums. However, the findings, as they relate to the excluded, will most likely also apply to them. The interviews with policy makers include some who are both policy makers and also part of the urban poor. The majority of respondents were women and their stories of survival are impressive. Alongside these interviews are the views of some academics, NGO workers, and government officers and Human Rights Commissioners. Missing from this are the views of politicians. They are, however, represented in the documentary research and in the comments of the latest Prime Minister who appears to be adopting a radical attitude to solving social problems. In order to accurately access what I can say has been found out, I will return to the original objectives and hoped—for outcomes of the research, to access how far these can be said to have been achieved.

1. To develop an understanding of the government’s policy for urban poverty alleviation.

Through the study of secondary sources, supplemented by my own field experience of some end results of the policy, the study shows how the attitudes to the poor have developed over a period of forty years within a framework of urban poverty alleviation policy. What the state has not provided is an efficient safety–net for the poor by means of social security or social assistance. Over time there has been some development of social
insurance, but the study has shown how, for some of the urban poor, this is not and will not be relevant, as they mostly work in the large informal sector. The most recent extension of social insurance to cover unemployment illustrates that the group I have written about in the informal sector will still miss out.

Some consistent themes emerge in relation to urban slums. These centre on successive governments deciding to deal with urban poverty by providing and/or improving housing. From the beginning of the First National Economic Development Plan (1961-1966), the problems of slums in the centre of Bangkok were noticed by government. A programme of housing improvement, public housing and slum clearance policy was initiated. It was a top–down approach in which the poor were rarely seen as partners. Rather, they were viewed as the originators of problems of crime and social disorder in the city and needed to be removed. This has been a constant theme, as slum dwellers were using land belonging to the government or to private landlords and their dwellings were not separate from places where the rest of the urban population enjoyed the benefits of a rapidly expanding economy. As the need for land grew with this economy, spaces on which the urban poor lived became increasingly valuable and eviction and/or relocation was often forced on the poor who were, and often are, long–term city residents. As squatters they were often illegal residents with few rights to live in such places. They were Bangkok Thais whose citizenship did not entitle them to services such as education, health, electricity and water supply in the places in which they resided.

In attitudes to poverty alleviation there has been a belief that the benefits of capitalism would eventually reach all citizens, including the poorest. This is usually known as the trickle–down effect. To assist this, from the 1990s, governments have introduced credit loans in urban and rural areas to encourage the participation of the poor in the benefits of economic growth. The economic development of Thailand has been impressive and absolute poverty can be claimed to have decreased. My poor and poorest respondents told a different story. Although I do not claim that their stories here in the research are representative of all slum dwellers, the stories do provide an indication of the economic, physical and social health, and the future generational costs, to those who have yet to benefit from the Thai governments’ emphasis on economic growth, without a social
policy that has successfully helped the poor to participate in the trickle-down to join the main-stream.

I have placed some emphasis upon the period after the economic crisis in 1997, as the crisis coincided with some social changes in Thailand. Undoubtedly the fact that the crisis affected all Thai citizens changed, to some extent, the attitude of people to the certainty of economic prosperity. The middle-class also faced unemployment and having to rely on their networks to assist them. I traced the responses of Thai leaders to the crisis. There was a general tendency to turn inward to assess the need for changes in Thai society. There was a wish to become more self-sufficient in economic terms, both nationally and internationally. The World Bank joined in the debate from which emerged a belief in the unique elements of Thai cultural capital, centred on the support available to family members in such times. It was explicitly stated that a government social safety-net would be counterproductive to such a situation. The ability of fifty-four governments to rely on traditional caring by the Thai family, despite such events, needs to be understood. This was linked with the second hoped-for objective.

2. To develop an understanding of the philosophies and attitudes underpinning approaches to urban poverty.

The tradition of providing charity for the poor in Thailand dates from the period prior to the formal introduction of democracy in 1932. Slavery and other forms of bondage, such as serfdom, had only been abolished around the turn of the century under King Rama V. Attitudes do not change quickly. The old reliance on King or patron has continued in modern forms until the 21st Century. This patronage system is an interdependent one with subordinates reliant on the higher status person for their well-being. In return they performed services, originally as slaves or through some form of official obligation, and later as free persons. This relationship originally would include welfare benefits when they were in need. It was supplemented by the monasteries providing welfare, health care and education and other aspects of social protection. If these were not available then it was to the extended family that the Thai citizen would have to turn.
As Thailand experienced industrialisation and urbanisation the family has been increasingly unable to cope with the changes required of an economy that demands workers for factories in urban areas, especially in Bangkok and the area in its expanding vicinity. The other forms of social support available from the temple have, in fact, always been uneven. It was, until very recently, only boys who received their education from the Buddhist system. Individual welfare provision from the temple is very much according to the discretion of the monks. Attitudes to the poor in need will vary between temples, and welfare provision will be available accordingly.

With the development of urban life has come the need for labourers in the service and industrial sectors to enable the better off to enjoy their modern lifestyles. The magnet of an apparently better life in the city has been made more powerful by the stresses experienced in rural life caused by land clearance for dams, for logging, for cash-crop farming. These stresses have been felt by small farmers with resultant debts, as well as the health crisis due to HIV/AIDS, and ‘natural’ disasters causing poverty in the rural areas adding to the pressures. In this the family has continued to play a part in providing welfare for its members, Indeed it can be said that migrating workers to the cities are providing for the welfare of those left at home in rural villages, and in turn, young children may be taken care of there by grandparents.

With this background we can see that throughout the period under study the role of government in providing welfare services could be maintained at only a marginal level outside social insurance and some discretionary social assistance. Traditional reliance on the Thai family could continue, supplemented by the charity provided by temples, joined in later times by NGOs. All this happened against a background of the rising prosperity of the Kingdom. By the time of the economic crisis in 1997 the social consensus that had been assumed by government policy was under some stress. The civil society developments in the 1990s were encouraged by the mass demonstrations in 1994, in which all classes participated. The urban middle-class was also suffering the consequences of unplanned economic growth in terms of pollution, congestion and a general feeling that its quality of life was being bought at a great cost and maybe could
no longer be guaranteed, as the crisis demonstrated. Gaps in the formal safety-net had already been recognised by the provision of credit and loan schemes through community savings groups during the Seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1996). These gaps were magnified by reports from Thai scholars and the World Bank that showed how those better off were able to ride out the crisis by relying on savings, either their own, or their families’, to cope. For the poor, they were unable to turn to such assistance, and apart from returning to poverty in their home towns in rural areas there was little to be done. Here the informal safety-net was shown to have its limitations and to be related to the economic status of the family. The effects of the economic crisis were therefore, like the rewards of industrialisation in Thailand, not distributed equally.

My research has shown that the response to the crisis was an emphasis on self-reliance through strengthening communities by the provision of credit and loans. This does not always reach the poor and especially the poorest. The Thai social structure, with its system of patronage, has continued the exclusion of the poorest, even though it was hoped that providing funding directly to communities would diminish corruption. Still unable to participate in schemes to enable them to become more successful in the urban environment, there are risks of further blaming the excluded poor for their own condition.

Although some changes have occurred then in attitudes to providing welfare in the last two decades, a fundamental belief seems to have remained. This is that the state has only a marginal role in promoting welfare beyond some assistance being available on a discretionary basis. The more recent credit and loan schemes are provided according to the discretion of local communities, and in this there is competition for the funding available. It is assumed that the local community is in the best position to decide what is the best project for funding and who is to be included in the group and is most deserving of welfare.

This conclusion can be criticised, as some universal provision does formally exist. This can be cited by government, especially the current one of Prime Minister Thaksin whose stated aim of economic and social development policy is the inclusion of groups who
were previously outside the benefits of the expanding Thai economy. There was already universal education, extended by the New Constitution 1997 from nine to twelve years, and recently this has been joined by health care. Credit and loan schemes have been expanded to encourage the poor to participate as consumers to drive the domestic economy. This is not intended to provide the safety-net of a welfare state. For my respondents it certainly does not. It is in providing close-ups of the reality of such provisions that my respondents provide another voice to the official government pronouncements. Access to education, health care, secure housing, employment, and even voting rights are not available to many slum dwellers. Recent, apparently universal provision, has done little to change this.

By looking at the lives of the poor and the poorest we can see that the costs for them of relying, not on individual welfare rights, but on discretionary services, can be very large. It is, for many, a silent problem they are expected to manage themselves. The reason for this, and their own attitudes to their needs, have been analysed in the thesis by reference to the concept of the importance of self-reliance. It is to examine this organising concept that we should turn, to find a key to current attitudes to giving and receiving welfare in Thailand.

3. To develop an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the implementation of government and other programmes for urban poverty alleviation.

The question of how effective the current policy of credit and loan schemes is for the poor in my groups emphasised the way that the policy both reinforces and creates inclusion and exclusion of the urban poor. For those in a savings group, the benefits have improved their lives, not only by the provision of loans but also in the way in which such loans helped them achieve social capital. It was most often women in the slums who were able to achieve access to education for the next generation. This has been achieved sometimes with the assistance of NGO workers, but they are projects owned by the poor themselves. People have been able to assert their rights in a developing civil society and to resist the kinds of evictions from their dwellings that were a regular prior experience.
The strengths of this approach, by building social capital in communities, are evidenced by the abilities of some of the poor to access the limited government services and resources. This is certainly making lives better when living in what the government prefers to call ‘crowded communities’.

This certainly helped the group I was able to interview but with this came further exclusion of the poorest. This was because of the way in which savings groups reinforced the exclusion of those who cannot, or do not wish, to qualify. This was either because the poorest do not have the ability to repay loans and do not want to increase their debts or do not have the time–capital to invest in such schemes. There is also the finding that, for my respondents, there is a belief that savings groups are corrupt in that they use money to support their close circle of friends and relatives.

This leads to a need to consider the positives and negatives of social capital, especially when applied to a semi–democratic society. When the savings groups were working well, social and economic capital was created. The limitations of relying on such provision were illustrated for me by the discussions the included poor had about the ways in which savings groups failed, and the exclusionary process for those who were not able to benefit from savings group activities to increase self–reliance. The social structure of Thai society still involves a reliance on patronage and this may work to emphasise exclusion and inclusion, and corrupt practices.

What the thesis found was that, especially since 1997, the apparently agreed upon theme of national development was self–reliance. This has been used to speak about the aims of government programmes for both economic and for social development. At all levels of Thai society, and including international organisations, self–reliance appeared to be the agreed solution to dependency–whether that meant Thailand being dependent on global economic changes, or people in poverty relying on government to provide for their welfare.

My research confirmed that reliance on apparently community–driven processes has limitations in the way it can help the poorest. They do not have sufficient social capital to
be included in the schemes. The process of relying on one main method of delivering welfare leaves many people outside the provisions. Further, contrary to some expert views, they do not have family to rely upon. Self–reliance for them means exactly that, without outside help from government, community, or family.

In their intention to limit corruption, Thai governments have turned to communities rather than bureaucrats to provide for welfare. When the communities have the skills, or can access the skills, to use the provisions then this is obviously an empowering method of welfare provision. This reliance on community has not, however, removed the power of patronage and corruption. Those who can access such discretionary provisions have ensured that they remain included. Even when the government provides for the excluded, as in Menu 5, relying on the already included to provide the services may ensure that the excluded continue to be outside both community and government welfare. The need is for more inclusive community participation in decision–making about the administration of discretionary benefits and this will only happen if the poor and especially the excluded are targeted by education and training programmes. This is an area where it is in the interests of government and non–government workers to co–operate to help ensure that available resources reach those whose social capital has not so far enabled them to participate.

4. To draw possible conclusions on government policy approaches to urban poverty alleviation and make these available to others concerned with social policy.

The policy towards the urban poor, as far as this is represented by my small study group, has to be understood with reference to one of my major findings that, I suggest, may apply to all of the poor in Thailand. This is the need for self–sufficiency, which can only be achieved by self–reliance. This concept appears to be central to government attempts to alleviate, and most recently, even to cure poverty. I have examined this concept from the perspective of the stakeholders I was able to interview and I found that for them there was apparent agreement that this concept was necessary for both policy and practice. However, beyond the apparent agreement, a number of different meanings and views were held, according to the power held by the stakeholder. These ranged from the
writings of HM The King, through leading thinkers, to the poorest person I interviewed. The results, from these responses, would imply that different policies are needed to deal with the problems of all the urban poor.

Change to a well-established and apparently well supported government policy is easier to suggest than to implement. At a fiscal level, the level of taxation benefits to provide a social safety-net are unlikely to vary. The strength of civil society institutions in Thailand is not yet sufficiently established to ensure that advocates of the poor will enable such voices to be heard. However, the achievements of some of my respondents who have moved from being born in the slums or poor rural areas to become national advocates for the poor, give evidence that the voices of the poorest can be heard.

My findings can be used by them to reinforce the necessity of the government’s providing more social assistance. There is a lack of data relating to their target groups available to NGOs. The study can be used by such advocates to analyse government policy and articulate the unmet needs resulting from this. With the present tax rates unlikely to change, it would seem that more money will not become available. The only practical answer, at least in the medium term, may be in advocates for the poor giving their target group the skills to access what is available in government programmes. This does not discount the need for advocates to challenge the limitations of available provision but it recognises that more recent developments, such as the Thaksin government’s Village and Urban Community Fund, are meant to provide for such needs. It is therefore in the achieving of access and the removal of barriers to such provisions that development should and can occur. This emphasises the importance of my fifth objective.

5. To develop an understanding of the implications of these policies for the education and training of social and community workers.

One of the beliefs in the western literature, which is repeated in the words and attitudes of Thai stakeholders, is the need for social development to be driven by the poor themselves rather than by external interest groups. The question that arises from my study is: just
how possible is this for the poor and the poorest? Some answers were provided by the data I gathered. Why do the poorest remain excluded? The need for, not necessarily professional, but skilled external help to access what is available is illustrated by evidence from the practice of NGO and government workers. This seems to have been very important in the setting up of savings groups. Equally, the absence of reliable helping persons seems to further exclude the poorest.

The professional training of such workers is of much interest and my previous knowledge and my research for this study are helpful here. Firstly there is my experience, and the evidence of my respondents in professional education, that working with the poor is not a popular role for people in Thailand. Charity work is valued, however, professional social and community work is not. Mottos about “helping the poor to help themselves” show awareness of such attitudes. The reasons for these attitudes are important to summarise as they can lead to recommendations for improving the help provided to the poor.

The general cultural belief in self-reliance must imply that those who help them must do this in the context of helping them to help themselves. This implies not making the poor dependent on welfare. The discretionary nature of welfare provision sets up a successful included group and a group that cannot make this category. Negative associations may result; the poor who cannot achieve may be blamed for laziness. There is the perception that slum dwellers are qualifying for more benefits than others who may be struggling. For young middle-class Thais who become welfare workers, they must be careful to ensure they are not seen as encouraging the poor to be reliant, either on the state, or them.

Any social work profession needs an infrastructure to support its development and thereby power. Thailand does not have this, or a culture of professional help, to support the profession. Large numbers (at least 40 per cent) of graduates of such courses are not actually working within the profession. Of those who do, only a small number work with the poor outside the government sector. Even those who work in the government welfare department apparently do not stay long doing such a difficult job. This may be related to what those who do work with the poor actually manage to do. It appears that they can only provide relief for extreme poverty through hand-outs of food or clothing or
occasionally cash. They do not have enough resources to help them to become self–
reliant.

Thai culture downgrades the job of professional social and community worker. How then
do the curricula of the schools of social and community work help young students to see
the possibilities of doing creative work with people in the slums? What appears is that
these curricula are based on western theories of social development. These may not take
into account the non–existence of a safety–net for large numbers of the poor and the lack
of a commitment to working for the poor from those who have apparently been trained to
do this. The lack of an effective safety–net comprising social assistance or social
insurance with its needs for departments providing institutional and community care, and
thereby career structures, with policy making opportunities, means that a career in
working with the poor is not the first choice for large numbers of graduates. The qualities
that are needed in this situation are spelled out by my academic informants. These are
essentially moral qualities such as empathy for the poor and a lack of concern about
financial rewards. I should, in my recommendations, turn to this situation that is unlikely
to change in the near future. How do we encourage more people to work with the poor,
and, further, how can they have the necessary skills that will enable the poor and the
poorest to live within a policy that emphasises self–help?

The curricula do not seem to emphasise ways of working within the government’s social
policy for the poor. No doubt some individual teachers do introduce students to theories
of poverty and its cure and alleviation, but this is within a very crowded curriculum
where students are expected to have knowledge of every kind of social problem and
social/community work method. In the fieldwork situation, one placement with poor
communities may not provide enough time for developing practice skills. Motivation is
very important. The problem for later deciding on a career in working with the poor is
that the community development option is the least popular of the options available.
Community work is not limited by normal office hours, the clients are often hard to
access except at weekends and at night. It is not seen as being easy to work with the poor.
The need is both to make the teaching about poverty alleviation more successful, and to
encourage students at the undergraduate and graduate level to choose community development as a career.

The key here may be in my findings that point to how some community leaders do seem to be aware of Thai culture and have skills to practise that use this knowledge to improve the situation of the poor. These people also seem to have come from the poor themselves. They have developed into both policy makers and practitioners. As such they can hope to influence policy for the poor through advocacy of their needs and rights and help the poor to be more powerful themselves to achieve this. They are motivated to help through their own experience of poverty and of ways to improve their own lives. The question is how to enable undergraduate and graduate students to experience a similar commitment.

This could begin by theoretical teaching in all social work courses about Thai society and the extent of poverty. There is also a need to examine attitudes to dependency, including the students’ own attitudes. Following this should be knowledge about what is available from the government, and successful ways of accessing such help. From this could develop skills teaching in the creation of strong communities through social capital. A major requirement is in teaching about democratic leadership that is responsive to the needs for group participation. This aims to teach the poor to become skilled in the ways in which some of my respondents have become skilled.

All of this cannot be developed by the teaching institutions alone. University courses could do more to encourage perhaps the less well off students, as these are the people who may be better at working with the poor. This could be through a partnership between the Departments of Public Welfare and Community Development where students are given some financial incentives to work in the sector by the Departments, and through ongoing support from the academy during their course through to their first year of employment. In my own University, at present, work with the urban poor who live very close to the campus is not prioritised. Community development appears as something both geographically and emotionally outside their knowledge. There are many reasons for trying to change this situation. Placements nearer to the campus could be much more effectively supervised and sustainable links made with the community. Such an emphasis
on local needs might increase the motivations of students to consider a career in community development, if this was supported by staff commitment.

Such graduates are also needed to develop social policy in Thailand which recognises that no one way of helping the poor—with housing improvements or credit—is likely to be effective for the most disadvantaged. From my study, what is needed is help in many areas, such as housing rights as well as rights to residence, access to education and other ways to ensure the citizen rights of the poorest. There is a general concern with the problems of the environment in which all urban Thais live, although the poorest may suffer the most from pollution and lack of government services. At the policy level there are signs that a growing civil society is giving power to those who have not been able previously to demand their human rights under the constitution. Many groups can join together with the poor to advocate for more government concern with environmental protection. Such developments will themselves give hope to new professionals in social and community work who are seeking to contribute to social change in Thailand.

I am advocating changes in academic education in order to develop advocates for the poor. However, they will never by themselves achieve the empowerment of the large numbers of urban and rural Thai citizens who have been excluded from the same level of economic development enjoyed by a minority of Thais. This is only likely to come from direct education of the poor themselves. I am suggesting that the training institutions can play a major role here in educating the poor to become their own community leaders. At the level of the institution there are many difficulties. Public universities are also having to cope with the government policy of becoming self-sufficient. This is being achieved by offering a large number of ‘special’ courses to full-fee-paying students during the evenings and weekends. The finance generated from these courses is considerable. The challenge for the social work/community work profession is to ensure that such profits are used in a way that returns service to those in need who provide the reasons for the courses’ very existence. One way of doing this would be to provide more training courses directly for the poor in urban communities. I hope my study will extend the discussion among my academic colleagues about the ways to ensure that social/community work education provides answers for students on how to understand and respond to
government policy as they work with the poor. I come now to reflect on my own need for self-reliance on returning to my country.

6. To improve my abilities as a researcher in Thailand.

I am left, at the conclusion of this thesis, asking what I have learnt about social research methods that I can practise in the future in my country. Firstly, I am more aware of the limitations of findings that may be presented as facts. Secondly, I will attempt in the future to be more inclusive of the participants in research. I think this is a central finding for me, in that I realise the meeting with the subject and the researcher affects the data that is obtained. Research can also provide an opportunity for the poor to educate themselves about their own conditions and ways in which it may be alleviated. Thai social structure is composed of hierarchies and such a structure expressed as patronage creates dependencies. The informal education potentially provided by involvement in research projects could balance such dependencies by helping the poor analyse their position in the social structure. Thirdly, there is a central problem with a critical approach to findings, including my own. Obtaining responses from participants that may imply some criticism of their society is sometimes difficult. I remain uneasy about this situation. There are, of course, good reasons why people are afraid to voice their opinions in a society that is developing a democracy and where people cannot be assured that their rights to expose injustices will be respected.

The cure for poverty is beyond the recommendations of this thesis, just as it may also prove to be beyond the ability of governments, either in the west or in the rest of the world. What I have learnt is that Thai solutions are not unique in that similar demands for self-reliance are also heard and practised in the west. However, the history of Thai social structure has resulted in such beliefs being central to any discussion of welfare needs. There cannot be an assumption that the state should provide. This is the situation facing helping professionals like myself. There is great unmet need, and at the same time a strong, ongoing, and current belief that people should not criticise the society that has allowed such needs to be created. I am clearer now, both on how to confront, and how to work within this contradiction.