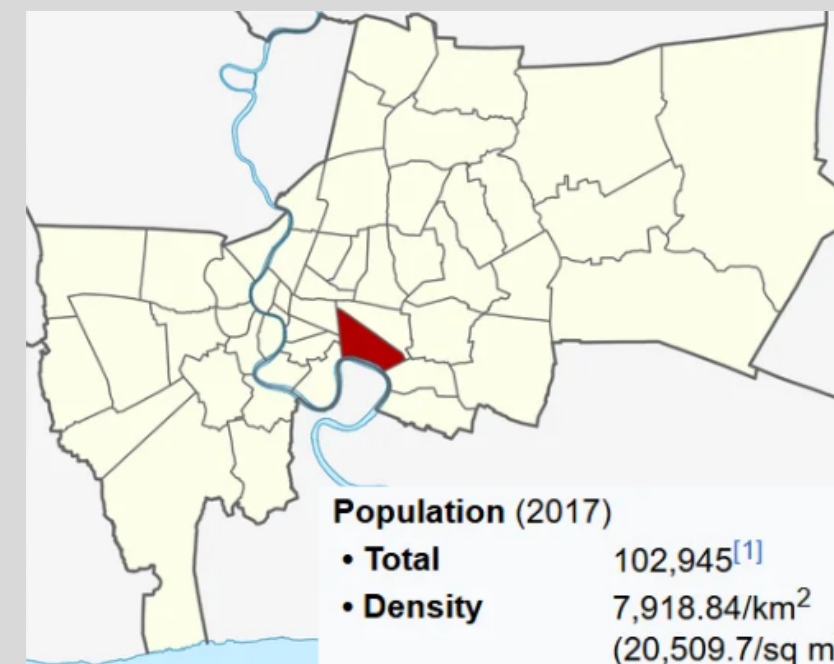


‘SLUM DWELLERS’ OF KHLONG TOEI, BANGKOK.

LOCAL URBAN COMMUNITY SOLIDARISATION IN THE FACE OF VARIOUS TYPES OF CRISES



Hindu shrine in front of the main entrance to popular shopping plaza *centralWorld* in Bangkok. Photo owned by me.



Map of Bangkok with Khlong Toei district highlighted. Source: Wikipedia



Shopping Centre, Silom - COMMERCIAL CENTRE



Bamphakle canal-side settlements, KHLONG TOEI SLUM



Close-up photos taken in Khlong Toei, giving us a glimpse of how a regular dweller's environment could look like everyday. Source: Figure 2 from "WASH, vulnerability, severity, and the response of urban slum dwellers to the COVID-19 pandemic" (Nguyen, Pattanarsi 2022, 606)

"According to a district official, 'it is not easy to manage COVID-19 spread in Khlong Toey Community as people here with very low income live in bad condition and underdeveloped environments'. There is no adequate waste collection system in the community. Waste bags are placed in front of homeowners' homes for the collection of volunteer community organizations. Thus, many different sorts of rubbish, including plastic bags, water bottles, and food scraps, are tossed directly into roadways and canals. The environment of the Khlong Toei slum community is shown in Figure 2." (Nguyen, Pattanarsi 2022, 606)

"(...) tens of thousands living in Bangkok's largest slum, where such daily uncertainties and fears have been amplified by government plans to evict them all and "erase" their community to make way for a riverside mall. (...) The Port Authority owns the land where the community is located, and many consider that fact the end of discussion when it comes to evicting upward of 100,000 people living there." (Coconuts bangkok 2019)



Residents settled in about 320,000 square meters of land owned by the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT), who earlier this year announced plans to clear the land to make room for new luxury commercial and office developments. Photo: IFAD

Source: "In Pictures: Bangkok's Khlong Toei slum to be cleared" (South China Morning Post 2019)

"Informal settlements, such as the Khlong Toei slum in Bangkok, are especially vulnerable to the damaging effects of flooding due to their increased exposure to the environment caused by substandard living conditions. The Khlong Toei slum is susceptible to flooding due to intense rainy seasons, relatively low elevation (The Climate of Thailand, 2012), substandard living conditions, and an inadequate stormwater drainage system. The legal status of the Khlong Toei slum is a particular concern in regards to vulnerability to flooding because there are no clear responsible authorities for addressing the threats from stormwater. The slum is home to about 100,000 people (Wechsler, 2013), whom are considered squatters on land owned by the Port Authority of Thailand (Swift, 2006). This illegal status has made it difficult for the residents to obtain basic conveniences such as waste collection and proper roadways because of the government's refusal to work with illegal residents (Nelson, 2015). The Khlong Toei slum's stormwater drainage system, cannot effectively handle runoff because the Department of Drainage and Sewerage has not sufficiently addressed its inadequacies. In addition, the stormwater drainage system is often clogged with waste, leading to unsanitary stagnant water and floods." (Ajavavarakula 2016)

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Kinga Gurgul | Institute Of Comparative Studies Of Civilisations
Jagiellonian University
email address: kinga.gurgul@student.uj.edu.pl

Welcome to Krung Thep Maha Nakhon, or Bangkok, capital of Thailand, and city of contrasts. Ancient temples stand next to shiny office towers, classy condominium complexes alternate slums, and construction workers eat at roadside stalls next to suited businessmen and -women.
(Wissink, Hazelzet 2016)



Figure 1. Bangkok (photos: upper by Ross King; lower by Kim Dovey).

This work

aims to show how people living in Khlong Toei, a Bangkok's district which is considered a slum, support each other by solidarisation in moments of crises such as floodings, arsons, epidemics, access to education, etc. Beside those major struggles, dwellers support each other mutually on daily basis with food distribution and space for living (which includes relaxing, parking, doing laundry). Many customs are deeply rooted in Thai culture and religion; acknowledging that would help and complete the understanding of possible reasons driving those behaviours. This work could also open discussions on:

- slum travelling, risk of romanticising poverty and *western gaze*;
- the importance of uniting people living in Khlong Toei in the face of relocation threat from Port Authority of Thailand (PAT);
- lack of accountability from any official authority in times of various types of crises such as floodings, or COVID-19 pandemic;
- risk of dehumanising slum dwellers by not treating them equally as other Bangkokians.

The last topic is tightly connected to Khlong Toei's history: many families were brought to modern city of Bangkok as cheap labourers from different villages around Southeast Asia region - thus many ethnicities, culture and languages were introduced to a small unit of land belonging to the monarchy. This signals us that slum dwellers are considered to be a minority group created out of other minority groups.

Source: 2016 report 'Mapping the Khlong Toei Slum's Drainage System to Develop Strategies to Reduce the Impact of Flooding' from The Bachelor of Science in Applied Chemistry (Chulalongkorn University)



"Today, slum dwellers **worldwide** include one out of every three city dwellers, adding up to a **billion people**. Over 90 % of slum dwellers today are in the developing world. South Asia has the largest share, **followed by Eastern Asia**, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (UNFPA 2008)." (Tveit, Larsen 2009, 10)

Notorious struggles in Khlong Toei

- >legalising land and properties in the face of constant threat of enforced relocation
- >drainage system and access to clean water
- >children's problems with pinworm epidemic
- >poverty and children's access to education
- >increasing extreme heat

Typically these illegal squatters live in small, unstable homes along the Chao Phraya river on rickety stilts. These makeshift homes are particularly at risk for damage during monsoon season when treacherous waters threaten the foundation of the main residential area.

Source: "Bangkok. The Story of Thailand's Largest Slum and Most Powerful City" (Canales, et.al. 2020)

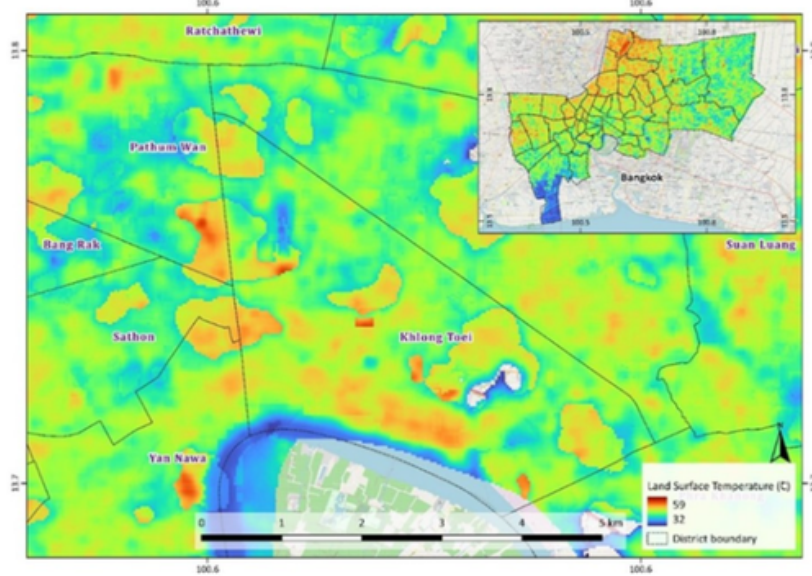


Figure 6: Map showing the Land Surface Temperature of Khlong Toei district, Bangkok for the month of April 2024 (Land Surface Temperature derivation from Landsat-8 dataset in Google Earth Engine (GEE) platform).

Source: "Extreme heat is worse for low-income communities: a visit to Khlong Toei in Bangkok" (EEI 2024)

Other example of micro solidarity by food distribution among closest dwellers of Khlong Toei:



Figure 9: Making dinner together, fish are chopped (left) and then fried (right). After completion, they were distributed to neighborhood residents and passers-by. Source: Author



Figure 10: Dinner in one day. Each dish is shared from various dwellings (Colors correspond in the left and right pictures. Pink is from a dwelling a short distance from this location).

Source: Social constructions through everyday activities in external spaces: a case Study of Khlong Toei community, informal settlements in Bangkok (Shoji 2023, 333-334).

Arjahn Ya, a Sak Yant Master and a Khlong Toei dweller

met during field trip to Thailand on February-March 2025 while researching commodification of sacred tattoos - *Sak Yant*. His *samnak* (Sak Yant tattoo studio) is located on the port side of Khlong Toei right under Chalerm Maha Nakhon Toll Road. Raised by his grandparents, he admits to have experienced various hardships, mostly when it comes to access to many opportunities as a child. Right now, he stands out from most of Khlong Toei's community - stable job and income, healthy family, house with electricity and air-con built in accordance with requirements. Nevertheless, **this didn't influence his worldview learnt from grandparents** - he often highlights the **must of sharing** (if one has means to share with others). This of course doesn't mean he is aware of every unlivable condition that may happen in some parts of Khlong Toei. He did not mention any official organisation helping in Khlong Toei, claiming he **helps alone or within the closest community**. On his videos we can see him **encouraging others** (e.g. his daughter, or foreigners who came for Sak Yant) **to help by his side with food distribution** (sometimes even small pocket money for children and teens). At the same time he is not creating a content for views by showing his actions (in span of one year he published only 4 videos like this so far; most of his content is about tattoos and shamanic blessings). Beside those 4 videos, our responder is tattooing those in poverty crisis completely for free, as Sak Yants are sacred tattoos meant to protect and bring health, prosperity, etc.



Arjahn Ya's profile picture on Instagram



Location of Arjahn Ya's house and *samnak* - we can clearly see it's in the heart of Khlong Toei



Video from July 28th 2025 via Instagram profile

Video from October 24th 2025 via Instagram profile

Video from August 12th 2025 via Instagram profile

Instagram post from May 8th 2025

Conclusions

Solidarity in Khlong Toei district can be seen in many forms - from **Duang Prateep Foundation focusing specifically on Khlong Toei and funding or helping many projects** (e.g. Shoji, et.al. 2023, 323; Atitruangsi, et.al. 2017; Ajavavarakula, et.al. 2016), Khlong Toei Dee Jung to variety of **informal volunteer groups** (see: Sukyooyot, et.al. 2026) and **mutual support among dwellers**.

Beside official help focusing on solutions for multidimensional problems such as drainage system and water pollution, Khlong Toei community is solidarising in 'micro ways' by sharing spaces among each other's informal housing when it comes to parking, dining, laundry, etc. (see: Shoji, et.al. 2023). A case study of Ajarn Ya is showing how individuals, hypothetically more privileged than usual Khlong Toei's dwellers, are using their means to help each other, especially children. At the same time, there's an **ongoing case of land distribution problem which may influence the dwellers' will to engage in any helping project, especially if it requires them to temporarily relocate** (see: Nguyen, Pattanarsi 2022). To maintain trust, chances for unity and connections within Khlong Toei's community, one of the solutions could be cworking with the dwellers, constant exposure to education suited to various age groups and education level (to not overwhelm and discourage), and working with people from district to engage in funded, well-planned projects **where we can see the results and feel the changes** (see: Ajavavarakula et.al. 2016). Taking into account all of the above, micro ways of solidarity should be complemented by constant cworking with dwellers and official authority, so that they will be treated with respect and felt as equal dwellers to other Bangkokians. Also, micro support among dwellers should be common and treated as fundamental but helping foundations should take care of unionising whole district to stand against e.g. relocation ideas.

A case study of Arjahn Ya can also point out **the risk of romanticising Khlong Toei** - foreigners, many of them popular "backpackers" travelling on budget while coming from privileged backgrounds, meeting Arjahn can view his actions and people around as "happy despite having nothing" slum dwellers that needs "nothing and still be kind to others". As Kim Dovey and Ross King write in their paper titled *Informal Urbanism and the Taste for Slums*: "The more recent revival in the use of the term 'slum' in turn reflects an imperative to not shy away from poverty, indeed to look harder at urban informality and the representations of 'slums', even their **attractions**." (Dovey, King 2012, 276). This could support the thesis on how important it is to engage actual Khlong Toei dweller in their district's community, helping projects, authorities discussions, etc.

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