

## Episode 4 - Sustainable Cities

This is Radio Australia. I am Barry Clarke and welcome to 'Sustainable Cities' our series exploring challenges in the Asia Pacific.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** And of course that is the proper name for the city we know as Bangkok, but we Thais really call our capital city, Krung Thep, which means city of angels.

**CLARKE:** In this program, we focus on Thailand's capital.

**BHICHIT RATTAKUL:** Bangkok of course is a mega city. The registered people are about five to six million, but actually there are altogether almost 10 million people moving in and out of the city. So all the facilities have to provide to serve these 10 million people every day.

**CLARKE:** Bhichit Rattakul is a former Bangkok Governor.

**BHICHIT RATTAKUL:** For example solid waste accumulated each evening amounts to 9,000 tons. In addition to that, there is transportation. As you may already know, Bangkok has one of the largest automobile fleet in the world - about two million plus automobiles running in and out of the city of Bangkok. [The] average speed of this traffic is about 6.5 kilometres per hour, which is a little bit faster than walking. And the quality of water sources is not as good as it used to be, and the air that we breathe in every day has a poor quality.

**CLARKE:** Bangkok was only established in the late 1700's by the first King of the ruling Chakri dynasty, Rama the 1st. It is situated on the Chao Praya River and close to the Gulf of Thailand.

**DARANEE THAVINPIPATKUL:** Bangkok used to be named Venice of the east, because we have canals all over the city. People use the canals as their route of transportation.

**CLARKE:** Daranee Thavinpipatkul is Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Chulalongkorn University. She believes the western planners who were called in to help in the development of the city in the 1950's did not understand how water-based communities traditionally functioned.

**DARANEE THAVINPIPATKUL:** They planned like some city in the United States, the ideas of building roads came from that. So, two, three ring roads outside the city, and they forgot the canal. And at that time the population increased and the transportation needs were higher, so they tried to expand the roads and fill the canal because we cannot use the boat, the rowing boat anymore.

**CLARKE:** So in your view that was a big mistake?

**DARANEE THAVINPIPATKUL:** Yes, a big mistake.

**CLARKE:** Bhichit Rattakul believes that decentralisation is still the key to halting the growth of Bangkok.

**BHICHIT RATTAKUL:** There were plans about 15 years ago to put up a core city at each of the corners of the country. For example, Chiang Mai, Udon Thani, Khon Kaen and Hat Yai. All these core cities have been aimed to develop into the developed society so the people do not have to move to Bangkok alone. But the growth of those cities is already too large to handle themselves. For example Chiang Mai, they never had the problem of traffic [before], right now Chiang Mai has its own problem of traffic. So, the solution next to this plan is surrounding Chiang Mai, they should have a satellite town. This is yet to be done.

**CLARKE:** In spite of its many challenges Daranee Thavinpipatkul loves the vibrancy of Bangkok.

**DARANEE THAVINPIPATKUL:** We have everything here, economic and social activities at every level. Like the street vendors you do not have in your country anymore, right? We still have it and a meeting place in front of every lane, the soi, soi in Thai means lane. And I think people in every level of living they live in harmony. Actually Thai society is a very stable society because we have the King, the royal family, the beloved one. We are still united as one because we have respect and we have love for the King.

**CLARKE:** Sukhumbhand Paribatra was educated in England. He believes Bangkok is a very liveable city.

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** As big cities go it is a friendly place, friendly not only to Thais but also to foreigners. It is a very tolerant city and it is a relatively safe city. All big cities are not 100 per cent safe, but I think it is a relatively safe city, and I think it is rare in the modern world to find a city, which has grown up so quickly and yet is still liveable.

**CLARKE:** What do you dislike about the city?

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** The dirt, the traffic and the totally unplanned way it was developed in the early days. There was city planning but no one stuck to the planning, so it is a very messy city.

**CLARKE:** The sound of peak hour traffic at a major intersection in Bangkok.

The relative quiet of the Traffic Control Centre ... this centre monitors and controls traffic for the entire metropolitan area. Lieutenant Whaipot Kulachai works at the centre and I asked him if the traffic was getting better or worse.

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** In my opinion I think it is getting worse because people buy a new car every year and the government cannot control the number of cars each year. So that is a problem. Also we cannot expand our road network.

**CLARKE:** What are the worst times of the day?

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** During rush hour, in the morning from six to nine and in the evening, from three up to seven of eight.

**CLARKE:** Can you give me some idea of how long it might take in that peak hour to travel a journey within central Bangkok, let's say five kilometres?

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** In my experience, I live near this control centre, about five to six kilometres. I spent one hour during rush hour.

**CLARKE:** We have got a whole bank of monitors here, closed circuit television monitors that are monitoring all the major intersections.

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** Yes, now we have about 77 intersections.

**CLARKE:** When you see there is a problem at a particular intersection what do you do?

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** We contact with the traffic police at any police station to ask them to go to the intersection rapidly. But we also have a special force to help the people on the road. For example if there is a broken car, we have mechanics to solve that, they are trained to help the people. Also, for example, if some woman was pregnant and then she cannot go to the hospital on time, we also have police to help her.

**CLARKE:** To help deliver the baby?

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** Yes sometimes in the taxi, sometimes in the car, yeah.

**CLARKE:** And does that happen very often?

**WHAIPOT KULACHAI:** Oh yeah quite often, about five to 10 times a year.

**CLARKE:** Traffic contributes to both noise and air pollution but these are made even worse by the number of older cars on the roads.

Former Governor, Bhichit Rattakul, is also Director of the Anti Air Pollution and Environmental Protection Foundation.

**BHICHIT RATTAKUL:** I think almost 20 per cent of those two million private cars are running in a condition of poor quality, and they emit and cause the pollution. No one cares because the local government does not pay much attention or try to create a checkpoint and make sure that if you have the black smoke you cannot use your car.

**CLARKE:** Another significant contributor to air pollution in Bangkok is the large fleet of buses in the city.

**BHICHIT RATTAKUL:** There are altogether 12,000 buses running around the city of Bangkok. About 65 per cent of them are operated privately by people who sub-contract from the state enterprise. We should urge them to withhold the permit of those sub-contractors if each of those buses is found to emit the black smoke. But the bus authority, which is [a] state enterprise, is ignoring this type of thing.

**CLARKE:** Bhichit Rattakul says a solution would be for the government to offer a low interest or no interest loan to the private operators to enable them to upgrade their fleet.

Prapat Chongsanguan is the Governor of the Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand, the MRTA. In July 2004, the first ever underground rail line was opened in the Thai capital. Twenty kilometres long, the line runs north to south through the centre of the city and has 18 stations. I asked Khun Prapat what the opening of the line meant for Bangkok and its people.

**KHUN PRAPAT:** It will put a new face to Bangkok. Bangkok will be known not as the city of traffic jams, but more as something else more convenient. I think that the excuse that Thai people often use [of] being late because of traffic will start to kind of fade away. And I think with the more lines that we are going to put in, we can really change how people travel in the city.

**CLARKE:** If things go according to plan, by the year 2010, an extra 94 kilometres of lines will be added to the MRTA, by extending the existing line to the north and south and installing two new ones. The underground line already links with the sky train network, so what is the relationship between the two?

**KHUN PRAPAT:** Right now no relationship. MRTA is a state enterprise, but the sky train is a private company, but right now, the government has a plan to buy back all the concession and to operate it under a single operation scheme, so we can have common tickets.

**CLARKE:** Yes, it does make sense to have an integrated ticketing system, I guess, that maybe would even work with buses as well?

**KHUN PRAPAT:** That is the plan, that is the policy of the Ministry of Transport.

**CLARKE:** Has there been an appreciable difference in the amount of traffic since the opening of the new underground line?

**KHUN PRAPAT:** Well not yet. This first line is only 20 kilometres long, it is in the middle of Bangkok, right. Most people live on the outskirts, but they still have to travel from the outskirts into the city. So once people get into their cars, they do not want to leave their cars. But once we can get

the extension out to where people live and then they can leave their cars at home, just use the cars on weekends and holidays.

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** The area around here used to be a cabbage garden, this is why the palace is called Suan Pakkad - Suan means garden and Pakkad means cabbage.

**CLARKE:** Sukhumbhand Paribatra is Chairman of the Chumbhot-Pantip Foundation, which runs Suan Pakkad palace. This museum, a cluster of traditional Thai wooden houses contains a fabulous collection of Asian antiquities. Set in beautiful gardens Suan Pakkad is a small oasis in a sea of high-rise.

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** It is not an old palace as palaces go, its origin can be traced back only to the Second World War. The former owners, Prince Chumbhot of Nagor Svarga and his consort, came to live here during the war because the city centre was being bombed by the allies. We were on the side of Japan, and believe it or not this place was out of town. And they liked it so much that after the Second World War they came to live here permanently. So this became a very formal residence only after 1952. The Prince passed away 1959, after that the Princess opened her home to the public to allow them to see the artefacts that her husband and she had collected or had inherited, and also to allow the public to see the beauty of traditional Thai houses. I believe this was the first instance where the owners of a house allowed people to come and see their home while they were still living in the place.

**CLARKE:** You said believe it or not that this was located far from the centre of Bangkok. Yet it is very much a part of greater Bangkok today, and I suppose it suggests something about the growth of this city?

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** Well I was born in the same year that the traditional Thai houses were assembled here, 1952, so we are exact contemporaries the palace and I. And during the last 52 years there have been tremendous changes in Bangkok. In 1952, Bangkok was only a small city of a few hundred thousand, but in the last 50 years there has been tremendous growth of population and obviously the enormous physical changes have taken place. This place used to be very rural area, paddy fields all around, but now of course only skyscrapers.

**CLARKE:** Yes, how far are we from what we would call the centre of Bangkok?

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** Well the centre of Bangkok is probably around the grand palace area, the Chinatown area, so this is only four or five kilometres, not even that, from the grand palace, I don't think.

**CLARKE:** What was it that made this tremendous growth in the population of Bangkok?

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** Accelerated and unplanned economic growth, I think that is the only answer.

(singing)

**CLARKE:** What are the things that you really, really like about this place?

**FEMALE TALENT:** The people, I like the people. It is a collective society, so you know you are not alone. Whatever you do, everybody is there for you, you have your family, you have your friends and Thai people are really friendly, so they tend to support you in everything, even though they butt in to your own business, maybe that's a bad thing sometimes, but you always have backup for everything you do.

**CLARKE:** And what about you?

**FEMALE TALENT:** I would love to see changes in the housing for poor people. I think even though a lot of people say Bangkok is quite messy, the planning for the city, everything it is just out of place, but I like it very much.

**CLARKE:** You are listening to 'Sustainable Cities' on Radio Australia and this feature on Bangkok.

**SOMSOOK BOONYABANCHA:** We call the program, Baan Mankong. Baan means houses or housing, mankong means security, so when we put it together it means housing security program.

**CLARKE:** Somsook Boonyabancha is Director of CODI - Community Organisations Development Institute - a government organisation that works with community and civic groups throughout the country to co-ordinate the provision of better housing for the poor.

While accurate figures are not available, Somsook believes about one quarter of Bangkok's population live in sub-standard housing or slums. This accounts for around 2.5 million people.

CODI helps build partnerships with all stakeholders, including the poor themselves, in identifying slum areas for upgrading, working through the issues, to designing and building better housing.

**SOMSOOK BOONYABANCHA:** This government has some clear commitment to deal with the poverty issue in the large scale. The idea is to find a way that every city, every district in Bangkok also, all the key actors, especially the poor, the municipality, the district authority whatever, and other development agencies, come together and look in your constituency, how many slums and squatters exist, and look at it as a target, a communal target.

How we would find a process to solve the insecurity of all this area as the urban team and plan it together. Good information, good plan and all actors as equal partners participate in the implementation. So we propose to the government of this possibility and the government agree to support a program.

**CLARKE:** Well we are going to see one of the squatter upgrading settlements funded by CODI at Bonkai, in central Bangkok. Now, a few years ago a fire destroyed much of this settlement, and this was the opportunity to redevelop and negotiate a more secure future for themselves under the Baan Mankong project. And with me is Pissinee Chanpreechaya from CODI. Pissinee, originally how many people were in this settlement, which was established I understand 26 years ago?

**PISSINEE:** The population is around 12,000 persons and it was 1,500 families in total.

**CLARKE:** These people settled on or squatted really on what was state-owned land?

**PISSINEE:** Yes.

**CLARKE:** So they have been able to negotiate with the state now for a fairly long-term lease?

**PISSINEE:** Yes, for 30 years and renewable.

**PISSINEE:** He is the chairman of the cooperative of Bonkai community.

**CLARKE:** I understand that this is being developed in three stages here and the first stage is almost 100 per cent complete. We are standing outside one of the row of houses here that stands in stark contrast to the houses that we see on the other side, which are the original squatter settlements. It must be a wonderful feeling for the community?

**CHAIRMAN (through an interpreter):** ... under [the] Baan Mankong project, he feels more secure, they are legal and can live here with the support of the government.

**CLARKE:** What will other communities around here, as they see this new development taking place, will it give them the impetus to change their situation as well?

**CHAIRMAN (through an interpreter):** He says that frankly speaking the people outside, they envy this community because at first they looked down upon them and then they said that it's unbelievable that these people, the urban poor can have legal right to live here. But then it proves that with the support from the government and then the strong sense of community living together.

**CLARKE:** And tell me what has it done for the community here, their own sense of pride, their own sense of fulfilment?

**CHAIRMAN (through an interpreter):** He says that the community here they have long history... background, together, they are not Bangkokians, they are from the provinces in the northeast, so coming here to hunt for jobs, they group together, so they have the sense that we have to be united otherwise we will not survive. But then he accepted here the community has the strong sense of community, so they are like brothers and sisters. And then he would like to add that people participation is the main theme making this successful.

**SOMSOOK BOONYABANCHA:** The urban poor community have something people in general don't have – they have community, some kind of community, because they do not have much, so they have to help each other. While the general or middleclass urban people do not have community, you see a lot of real estate housing developments here and there, people who live in the same condominium here and there, nice setting, good materialistic setting, but they do not know each other.

So, when we build a city, you need a community of people, and this urban poor community, they have community to offer for the middleclass to learn from. Then between the middleclass and the poor we share on how we are going to build a city together, so the city will belong to everybody. We have been driven by economic development and material development too much in the past, now we have to correct it, it is time to correct it.

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** As Bangkok becomes bigger, it must also become smaller in the sense that there must be greater focus on community, level development to promote participation on the part of communities, on the part of housing estates and so on. People living there should be encouraged to participate in communal activities. This is I think the best way to go to make sure that each community gets what it wants from the state, and also to ensure that the community can look after itself better. So community building, community development I think should be a very important aspect of the development of Bangkok in the future. As I said, as it becomes bigger, Bangkok must also become smaller.

**CLARKE:** Sukhumbhand Paribatra remains quietly optimistic for the city.

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** I am convinced that over the long term, if we can develop personality embodying pride and also demonstrating concerns with the future of the city, we can resolve or at least alleviate most of the problems. I remember very clearly I went to school in England from the age of 10 and when I first went to London the Thames [River] was really, really dirty. After 15 years the people were able to fish in the Thames once more, yes, 15 years is a long time, but not all that long. So things can change much more quickly than people have thought.

**CLARKE:** What about your own river, the Chao Praya?

**SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA:** In the last five years in particular there have been really great efforts to address the problems of pollution in the river. I do not think we are even halfway towards succeeding yet, but the most important step in resolving a problem is to recognise that the problem exists. And before them, there was no widespread public recognition as such. Now we are aware, and I think that in a few years time we will be able to make it clean.

**SUE SLAMEN:** Our thanks to colleagues at Radio Chula in Bangkok for their help in compiling this program.

This series is produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke, from Radio Australia.

