

# The 2011 Flood Crisis and the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Community

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## Abstract

Heaving a weary sigh of relief, Warathep Boonyuen, chairperson of the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community committee, could finally put the Great Flood of 2011 behind him. The past few months had been extremely stressful and tiring, as he—having been unexpectedly thrust into a community leadership position—had attempted to help the community cope with the challenges of draining the massive volume of water that had descended on the community two months earlier. The community had been all but unprepared to address the multiple challenges that accompanied the flood, which had been the biggest that Thailand had seen in nearly 50 years. Hence, the past two months had largely been one long series of *ad hoc* decisions and actions on the part of Warathep and a small group of his fellow Committee members, as they tried to stay on top of the situation and minimize the amount of damage to their large-sized community.

The authorities had not been able to predict either the amount of land that would eventually be flooded or the height of the water once the flood waters arrived. Not only had the amount of flood water flowing toward Bangkok been just an estimate, but flood waters from upper central provinces had reached the capital at different points in time.

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Additionally, the land area that flood water could occupy before flowing into the sea had been variable, depending on how well flood barriers held.

However, by the time flooding (that had begun in the upcountry provinces in September 2011) abated in mid-November 2011, the country had incurred economic losses totaling 1.44 million million baht (estimated by The World Bank), 815 deaths, and disruptions in the lives of 3.4 million affected people. Central Bangkok had escaped flooding, but outlying communities such as Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam had not, and thus suffered an array of problems brought by the floods – i.e., a major and prolonged disruption in the supply chain and transport, which had precipitated a severe shortage of food, medical supplies (e.g., anti-fungal medication) and clean drinking water; and, a heightening of the problems of daily work commutes (the government did not issue an order excusing government officials from work during the flood period). For weeks after the flood waters subsided, the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community continued to some, if not all, of these after-affects, as did communities in other areas of the country that had been impacted.

Now that he had finished the distribution of the government-provided flood relief supplies that had belatedly arrived almost two months after the flood waters entered the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community, Warathep could at last stop to review and reflect at length on all that had happened. He felt that it was an important exercise to undertake in order to draw whatever lessons might be extracted for better handling of future community emergencies, floods or otherwise.

**Keywords:** Flood Crisis, Leadership, Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Community

# วิกฤติน้ำท่วมปี พ.ศ. 2554 และชุมชนอมรพันธุ์นคร สวนสยาม

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## บทคัดย่อ

หลังจากน้ำท่วมใหญ่ในเดือนพฤศจิกายน พ.ศ. 2554 วรเทพ บุญยืน ชายวัย 43 ปีซึ่งเป็นประธานคณะกรรมการชุมชนอมรพันธุ์นคร สวนสยามคิดทบทวนประสบการณ์ที่ผ่านมาไม่แนใน การพยายามลดความสูญเสียของชุมชนจากภavnน้ำท่วมและบรรเทาความเดือดร้อนของชาวชุมชน ตลอดจนพยายามสร้างชุมชน “เข้มแข็ง” โดยหวังว่า ชาวชุมชนจะร่วมแรงร่วมใจกันเอาชนะปัญหา ทั้งปวง ในภาพรวม สิ่งที่ผ่านมาทำให้วรเทพรู้สึกหงุดหงิด ผิดหวังกับการตอบสนองของชาวชุมชน ต่อสิ่งที่เขาทำเพื่อแก้ปัญหาหน้าท่วม

วรเทพได้รับแต่งตั้งให้ดำรงตำแหน่งประธานคณะกรรมการชุมชนอมรพันธุ์นคร สวนสยาม วันที่ 26 พฤศจิกายน 2554 และรับหน้าที่ต่อจากคณะกรรมการชุมชนที่รักษาการอยู่ขณะนั้น ปลอ่ยว่าไม่ต้องการทำภารกิจอะไรอีก (เนื่องจากคณะกรรมการชุมชนชุดเดิมหมดวาระและประธาน คณะกรรมการชุมชนคนก่อนไม่ประสงค์จะเป็นกรรมการชุมชนต่ออีกวาระหนึ่ง) การที่วรเทพมาอยู่ ณ จุดนี้ได้เริ่มจากเพื่อนบ้านได้เข้ามาทาบทามเขา ขอให้สร้างทีมงานเพื่อลงสมัครเลือกตั้งเป็นกรรมการ ชุมชน ในตอนแรกเขารู้สึกลังเลใจ แต่ในที่สุดก็ตอบตกลง เพราะเป็นคนมีจิตอาสาและผู้นำชุมชน ตอนนั้นก็ว่างลง การไม่มีทีมอื่นเป็นคู่แข่งและจำนวนผู้สมัครไม่ถึงเกณฑ์สูงสุดที่กฎหมายกำหนดทำให้

\* กรณีศึกษานี้เขียนโดย รองศาสตราจารย์ ดร. ณัฐชา เฉยทรัพย์ คณะภาษาและการสื่อสาร สถาบันบัณฑิต- พัฒนบริหารศาสตร์ (ประเทศไทย) หรือนิด้า ข้อมูลที่ใช้มีทั้งข้อมูลปฐมภูมิและทุติยภูมิ กรณีศึกษาของนิด้า พัฒนาขึ้นเพื่อใช้ในการอภิปรายในชั้นเรียน ไม่ได้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อใช้เป็นแหล่งข้อมูลสำหรับอ้างอิงหรือให้เห็น ประสิทธิภาพหรือการด้อยประสิทธิภาพทางการบริหารงานลิขสิทธิ์ © 2012 โดยสถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนบริหารศาสตร์ และ ดร. ณัฐชา เฉยทรัพย์

คณาจารย์ ผู้บริหาร และสมาชิกในแวดวงวิชาการอื่น ๆ สามารถอัดสำเนาไปใช้ได้โดยไม่เสียค่าใช้จ่ายหากต้องการ ใช้ในการเรียนการสอน กรณีศึกษาที่จัดพิมพ์สามารถเข้าถึงได้จาก

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วรเทพและผู้สมัครอื่น ๆ ได้รับการแต่งตั้งเป็นกรรมการชุมชนโดยไม่ต้องจัดการเลือกตั้งตามระเบียบของกรุงเทพมหานคร (กทม.) ว่าด้วยกรรมการชุมชน

ในเดือนกันยายน พ.ศ. 2554 มวลน้ำได้เริ่มท่วมทางตอนเหนือของประเทศไทยลงมาถึงกรุงเทพฯในเวลาต่อมา และในตอนต้นเดือนพฤศจิกายน น้ำได้เข้าท่วมชุมชนอมรพันธุ์นคร สวนสยาม เมื่อน้ำเข้าท่วมชุมชนเป็นวันที่สอง ระดับน้ำสูงถึง 60 เซนติเมตรและยังคงเพิ่มระดับขึ้นเรื่อย ๆ พอน้ำท่วมถึงหัวเข่า เพื่อนบ้านของวรเทพก็ขอให้เขาทำอะไรสักอย่างที่จะช่วยให้ชุมชนปลอดภัยจากน้ำท่วมหรืออย่างน้อยที่สุดก็บรรเทาความเดือดร้อนลง ถึงแม้ว่าเขาจะยังไม่ได้รับแต่งตั้งเป็นประธานคณะกรรมการชุมชนอย่างเป็นทางการ เขาก็ตอบรับด้วยการตัดสินใจหาทุนมาซื้อทราย ถุงบรรจุทราย เครื่องสูบน้ำขนาดใหญ่และน้ำมันดีเซลเพื่อสูบน้ำออกจากพื้นที่ชุมชน การขอบริจาคเงินจากผู้อาศัยในชุมชนมีทั้งการเห็นด้วยและการปฏิเสธ โดยมีบางครอบครัวเท่านั้นที่บริจาค ขณะที่บางครอบครัวไม่บริจาคและไม่ลงแรงด้วย อย่างไรก็ตาม ด้วยเงินจำนวนพอสมควรที่ได้รับบริจาคมา วรเทพก็สามารถซื้อ ทราย ถุงบรรจุทราย และเครื่องสูบน้ำขนาดใหญ่ได้ 2 เครื่อง

พอเมื่อเขาและอาสาสมัครวัยรุ่นชายในชุมชนเริ่มดำเนินการกักน้ำท่วม โดยวางเรียงถุงบรรจุทรายเพื่อสร้างคันกันน้ำและสูบน้ำออกจากพื้นที่ชุมชนไปยังถนนใหญ่ ทีมของเขาก็ถูกชาวบ้านบางคนลุกขึ้นมาประท้วง ผู้ประท้วงไม่เห็นด้วยกับการสูบน้ำออกไปที่ถนนใหญ่เพราะบ้านของผู้ประท้วงซึ่งอยู่ใกล้กับคลองระบายน้ำจะต้องรองรับระดับน้ำที่เพิ่มสูงขึ้น ผู้นำการประท้วงครั้งนี้เป็นตำรวจนายหนึ่งซึ่งพาเพื่อนบ้านมารื้อคันกันน้ำและถามแกมขู่คนของวรเทพว่า เคย “กินลูกปืนบ้างหรือเปล่า” ชาวชุมชนในซอยย่อยที่เป็นเป้าหมายในการทำให้พื้นที่แห้งจึงยอมให้ถนนซอยหน้าบ้านถูกน้ำท่วมขังเพื่อไม่ให้มีปัญหาความขัดแย้ง

ขณะเดียวกัน ชาวชุมชนมีความต้องการสิ่งของบรรเทาทุกข์แตกต่างกันไป (ส่วนใหญ่ต้องการน้ำดื่ม) สำนักงานเขตไม่สามารถช่วยเหลืออะไรได้มากนักเนื่องจากงบประมาณจำกัดและต้องดูแลหลายชุมชนรวมทั้งเขตพื้นที่อุตสาหกรรมขนาดใหญ่ที่อยู่ในพื้นที่ด้วย ความช่วยเหลือจึงยังมาไม่ถึง ยกเว้นนักการเมืองท้องถิ่นที่ได้รับการเลือกตั้งเป็นสมาชิกสภากรุงเทพมหานคร (สก.) ได้ส่งน้ำดื่มบรรจุขวดมาแจกจ่ายชาวบ้าน และมีรถกระบะจากจังหวัดสระแก้วนำน้ำดื่มมาแจกจ่ายในชุมชน แต่ก็ไม่ใช่ทุกครัวเรือนที่ได้รับแจก

หนึ่งสัปดาห์ผ่านไป ชาวชุมชนได้ขอให้ทางราชการนำ อีเอ็ม บอลมาบำบัดน้ำซึ่งตอนนั้นเน่าเสียและนำน้ำสกปรกชีวภาพมาแจกจ่ายให้ครัวเรือน วรเทพได้ติดต่อสำนักงานเขตซึ่งได้ส่งรถบรรทุกขนาดใหญ่บรรจุน้ำสกปรกชีวภาพมายังชุมชนในตอนเย็น แต่มีน้อยคนที่ออกไปรับแจกเพราะรถบรรทุกจอดอยู่ในที่ที่ไม่สะดวกจะเดินลุยไปรับในตอนพลบค่ำ ส่วนอีเอ็ม บอลนั้นวรเทพได้ยืมรถกระบะจากเพื่อนบ้านขับตระเวนเพื่อโยนลงไปในทุกซอย วันที่ 15 มกราคม 2555 เกือบหนึ่งเดือนหลังจาก

ที่น้ำลด สำนักงานเขตจึงส่งถุงยังชีพมาแจกประชาชนในชุมชนซึ่งถึงตอนนั้นไม่ได้ต้องการอีกต่อไปแล้ว แต่วรเทพก็แจกจ่ายชาวบ้านจนหมด

จากประสบการณ์ในครั้งนั้น วรเทพตระหนักดีว่า ยากมากที่จะเปลี่ยนชุมชนของเขาให้กลายเป็นชุมชน “เข้มแข็ง” เพราะแม้ในยามคับขันก็ยังยากที่จะได้รับความร่วมมือจากชาวชุมชน คนมีฐานะดีอ้างว่าไม่มีเวลาจึงไม่ต้องการเป็นกรรมการชุมชน และเช่นเดียวกับชุมชนเมืองอื่น ๆ คนในชุมชนอมรพันธุ์นคร สวนสยาม ต่างคนต่างอยู่ ตัวใครตัวมัน และน้อยคนที่จะสนใจว่าเกิดอะไรขึ้นกับชุมชนไม่ว่าจะในอดีตที่ผ่านมา ปัจจุบัน หรืออนาคต วรเทพสงสัยว่า จะเกิดอะไรขึ้นกับชุมชนในปีหน้าที่มีบางคนคาดว่า น้ำจะกลับมาท่วมอีก เขาจะหาเงินมาจากไหนที่จะจัดซื้อวัสดุ อุปกรณ์หรือเครื่องมือบรรเทาสาธารณภัย ถึงแม้สำนักงานเขตจะจัดสรรเงินให้คณะ กรรมการชุมชนจำนวน 5,000 บาทต่อเดือนเพื่อจัดกิจกรรมชุมชน แต่ระเบียบกรุงเทพมหานครว่าด้วยกรรมการชุมชนกำหนดให้คณะกรรมการชุมชนจ่ายเงินไปก่อนแล้วนำไปเสร็จมาเบิกคืนในภายหลัง เพราะต้องการให้ชุมชนพึ่งตนเองได้ถ้าทำได้ โดยรัฐสนับสนุนในวงเงินจำกัด

ขณะที่วรเทพทวนนึกย้อนถึงประสบการณ์เหล่านี้ เขาก็ทบทวนการตัดสินใจและการกระทำของเขาในเรื่องต่าง ๆ ที่ผ่านมา เพื่อว่าจะมีกลยุทธ์ และเทคนิคที่ต่างออกไปซึ่งจะให้ผลดีกว่าที่เป็นอยู่เขานั่งนึกว่า ประสบการณ์ต่าง ๆ ให้บทเรียนอะไรแก่เขาบ้างในการที่จะบรรลุเป้าหมายของการสร้างชุมชน “เข้มแข็ง (พึ่งพาตนเองได้)” ซึ่งจะทำให้บังเกิดผลดีหากมีน้ำท่วมอีกในอนาคต

**คำสำคัญ:** วิกฤติน้ำท่วม ภาวะผู้นำ ชุมชนอมรพันธุ์นครสวนสยาม

## **Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Community**

Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Community was a land development project that had been established by Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Company some 33 years earlier. Situated around 26 kilometers northeast of the center of Bangkok, the capital, it was located in a low-lying area on Suan Siam Road, which linked Serithai Road and Raminthra Road. The community was bordered by Suan Siam Road in the west, Serithai Road in the north, and Ramintra Road in the south. The eastern side of the community was a drainage canal with a water gate separating the community from Siam Park City, the most well-known amusement park in Bangkok. Four main sois (the Thai designation for “blocks”) — sois 2, 4, 6 and 8 — were the principle thoroughfares, but the community was also transversed by several sub-sois.<sup>1</sup>

The community contained 236 structures—detached houses, town houses and commercial buildings. There was a total of 894 residents (405 males and 489 females), comprising the 245 households encompassed by the community.<sup>2</sup> While households ranged in size from 1 to 5 persons per unit, more than half of the houses were inhabited by only three people. The majority of households were deemed to be middle-income ones, although some townhouse owners were low-income individuals, as were those who rented houses, especially the renters living in Soi 8. Community residents were engaged in varied occupations, ranging from small- and medium-sized enterprise (“SME”) business owners to university faculty and school teachers, to government officials and policemen, to restaurant and food shop owners and grocery owners, to construction workers and street vendors, etc.

In terms of demographics, by far the largest segment of the community’s residents was of middle and old age. In the main, they were those who had bought their houses directly from the land development project around the time that the community had been developed. Their children, now grown-ups, had mostly moved to other locales, returning once in a while to visit their elderly parents. For the most part, many people in the community, like their counterparts in other urban communities, did not know even the names of their neighbors. They sometimes chatted with each other when they went out of their houses to buy fruits, vegetables and other items from pick-up vendors. Otherwise, they rarely got together for any social activities. In brief, it was the classic urban

situation in which residents living in close proximity to each other interacted only intermittently and in a perfunctory manner (e.g., greetings), with little more than a rudimentary sense of being a “community.”

## **Background on the Community Committee of Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam**

The Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Community Committee was elected in accordance with the Regulation on Community Committees as set forth by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (“BMA”). The regulation stipulated that each community *shall* have such a body and that it had to be comprised of at least seven community committee members. If the community had more than 140 households, one representative could be added for each additional 20 households. The total number, however, was to be not more than 25. With 245 households, Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam was a big community under the provisions of the regulation and thus could have the maximum of 25 community committee members. The required committee positions were chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, registrar officer, and public relations officer. Other positions could be added as the committee itself considered appropriate.<sup>3</sup>

The qualifications of those who were eligible to serve in the community committee were as follows:

- (1) Be a Thai national;
- (2) Be fully 20 years by the application day;
- (3) Have his or her name in a household in the community for at least 180 days by the application day;
- (4) Be loyal to the country, the religion, and the king; and,
- (5) Have legal work and decent behavior.

Minimal education levels and administrative experience were not imposed as a requirement. The term of a community committee was two years and terminated upon the occurrence of any one of the following:

- (1) termination of the term
- (2) death
- (3) resignation
- (4) moving out of the community
- (5) lack of qualifications or having prohibited characteristics
- (6) vacancy of more than half of the committee members

- (7) one-third of the household heads filing a complaint against a committee member and submitting it to the chairperson to have him or her dismissed with half of the committee members' giving approval
- (8) three-fourths of the household heads filing a complaint against the community committee by submitting the complaint to the district head to dissolve it and the district head giving approval
- (9) being sentenced to imprisonment for a criminal case except a misdemeanor or guilty of negligence.

Those who were interested in serving on the community committee had to make an application in person at the district office. If the number of applicants was not larger than the required number for the community, no election was held; instead, all the applicants would automatically become community committee members. Within 30 days after that, the district office would preside over the first meeting in which the chairperson of the community committee, and sometimes other positions, would be elected by the members.

There had almost always been no election for the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community committee, as rarely had there been enough candidates contending for committee service. This was the case when Warathep and others had applied to be community committee members in September and were officially appointed on November 8, 2011. That is, with only 23 people having made an application, all of them automatically became committee members. The majority of the members on the committee of which Warathep was elected chairman were women (16 out of the total membership of 23). They were mainly housewives or women engaged in some type of menial work at home or engaged in a small trade or general employment. A few worked for private companies.

### **Mission**

Community committees were required to carry out mission as stipulated in the BMA's regulations for community committees. The overall mission was as follows:

- (1) promote democracy with the king as the head of the kingdom;
- (2) coordinate and work with public and private organizations in any activity that benefits community people;



- (3) develop the community in terms of physical environment, social and economic aspects by mobilizing and utilizing community resources for the highest benefit of the community;
- (4) promote unity and discipline among community people;
- (5) foster moral, Thai customs and culture;
- (6) look after community and public property;
- (7) report the performance of organizations working in the community to the district head; and,
- (8) appoint, as appropriate, qualified people as consultants or operating groups for different activities.

The community committee was allocated a monthly budget of 5,000 baht to arrange community activities, but it had to advance the payment of expenses and then apply for later reimbursement. Two additional sources of income for the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community committee were the donations of a medium-sized logistics business located in the community (the VC Plus Logistics Partnership Limited) and a street vendor. The logistics company parked their trucks along the roads in the community, so it felt obliged to donate 1,000 baht a month for the parking space. A noodle vendor who used the space at the playground to temporarily set up tables for the customers donated 500 baht a month. The community committee had no right to collect money from businesses in the community. It could get only donations.

## **Prelude to the Great Flood**

The Great Flood of 2011 had its origins in a cascading confluence of events. Along with the seasonal monsoon that was already well underway and significant rainfalls that had begun in May 2011, Thailand's major flooding started as tropical storm "Nock-ten" made landfall in Northern Vietnam. Its arrival over the upper provinces of Thailand in late July had caused heavy precipitation in the North and the Northeast of the country, resulting in flash flooding in many upper-central provinces, as flooding spread along the routes of the overflowing Yom and Nan rivers. By late August, flooding was still ongoing, and expected to continue further than usual due to the effect of La Niña.

As the Bhumibol dam in Tak province and the Sirikit dam in Uttaradit province had been increasing the discharge rates to compensate for incoming flow, large areas in the downstream provinces, especially

Nakhon Sawan province, were increasingly affected. By September 19, almost all lower central provinces had been affected by flood, i.e., Uthaithani, Chainat, Singhburi, Angthong, Lopburi, Suphanburi, Ayuthaya, Pathumthani and Nonthaburi, the last two of which sat on the northern border of Bangkok. Broken floodgates resulted in water from the Chao Phraya River flowing through irrigation canals and inundating large areas of paddy fields in the aforementioned provinces, thus lessening the severe impact on Bangkok as the fields served as water retention areas.<sup>4</sup>

By early October, most dams had been nearing a state of over-capacity and were being forced to increase their discharge rates, consequently worsening downstream flooding. In Ayutthaya province, for instance, flood water entered the city proper, inundating not only the Ayutthaya historic park but also industrial estates, the protection barriers of which failed. This resulted in country-wide disruption of manufacturing supply chains.

By mid-October, as flood water drained southwards from Ayutthaya, Bangkok became seriously threatened. Several districts on the eastern flank of the city which lay outside Bangkok's flood wall—as well as parts of the surrounding Nonthaburi, Pathumthani, Chachoengsao and Nakhonpathom provinces—were flooded as water was diverted from the Chao Phraya River to other rivers and outlying canals.

As flood barriers in Pathumthani failed, more industrial estates as well as suburban residential areas on the eastern outskirts of Bangkok were threatened. Finally, parts of Phahon Yothin Highway leading out of Bangkok became paralyzed, causing severe traffic jams on alternative routes. Even worse, a disruption of a barrier protecting the Khlong Prapa water supply canal allowed flood water to enter the canal and rapidly flow down Viphavadi Road to Sam Sen in central Bangkok, overflowing and flooding several areas along the banks. Until the water flowed out to sea, it could only pool in the unprotected low lands. When the government decided to use the eastern part of Bangkok as a water catchment area, more than 20% of six districts in the eastern part of Bangkok (namely, Praves, Kannayao, Minburi, Nongchoke, Klong Samwa, Lad Krabang) had to contend with rising flood waters. Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community in Kannayao district was no exception.

## **The Coming of the Flood to the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Community**

As the situation continued, several floodgates controlling the Rangsit/Raphipat canal system had been overwhelmed and were forced to release water towards more residential areas. Residents of several districts of Bangkok, especially those bordering Pathumthani province, had been told to be ready for flooding and for evacuation if necessary.<sup>5</sup>

On November 4, 2011 the flood water had appeared on Suan Siam Road and soon in the community itself. The water came from Raminthra and Serithai Roads, the underground drainage along the road, and the drainage canal in the east. By the second day of the arrival of the flood in the community, the water had reached almost 30 centimeters, prompting many residents who had earlier decided to stay in the community to relocate to stay with relatives or at hotels and resorts in other provinces.

Because the community area was about 50 centimeters higher than Suan Siam Road, the water level in sub-soils was only about 40-50 centimeters. After three days the water level was still and increasingly contaminated, as it had already passed through many areas and was polluted before reaching the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community.

### **Household Preventive Activities**

Like people in all communities in Bangkok, Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam residents had closely followed the daily flood news, especially when the flood water was approaching Bangkok after inundating the nearby provinces of Pathumthani and Nonthaburi. Despite this determination to remain current on the flood situation, some residents had initially assumed a lackadaisical attitude because they did not think that the community would be flooded because of its close proximity (only two kilometers away) to the Bangchan Industrial Estate. They reasoned that the government and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration would do their utmost to prevent flooding in this crucial economic zone, thus protecting the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community in the process.

Other households, however, had been considerably more precautions. Most of this group took proactive steps to prevent flood water from entering their houses in advance of its arrival in the community. They variously purchased construction materials to block the entry of water in

their homes; moved their home electricity meters higher on the wall to prevent their shutdown in the event of the submerging of their houses; began parking their cars at their office parking lots or on higher-elevation areas on the roads or expressways (because the level of many people's house compounds was lower than the road); moved personal property to the higher floors of multi-story houses; and/or, relocated the especially vulnerable (e.g., the elderly, children and pets) to safer locales.

Further, most community residents had hoarded food, especially instant noodles, bottled water, and other necessities (e.g., batteries, cooking gas, medicines, boots, boats, etc.) that would suffice for a month-long flood period. This resulted in a scarcity of food, especially ready-to-eat food. Price gouging, e.g., for bottled water, had added its own measure of stress. Some visited department stores twice or thrice a day—to buy and buy. Depending on their expectations and financial resources, residents spent a large amount of money on such things, even as their skeptical neighbors laughingly mocked them for “panicking.” Although he did not personally engage in such mocking conduct, Warathep, the community committee chairperson, was one of those skeptical about the possibility of the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community being inundated and, accordingly, had not prepared any protection plan for the community, or even for his own house.

### **The Impacts**

The seriousness of the impacts of flooding on community residents had depended on their economic status, although the overall impact was not as great for Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam residents as it had been for residents of other communities along the eastern border of Bangkok. An impact as great as any was the impact of the anticipation, uncertainty, and worry on residents' peace of mind. Not knowing exactly what the eventual impact would be, residents had to struggle to avoid panicking, as they speculated about whether the flood would hit the community or not, and if so, how high the waters would rise before subsiding. Some had made multiple visits to nearby canals many times every day to observe the change of the water level. *“The waiting was painful, indeed,”* said Urai, a resident in Soi 2.<sup>6</sup> Other residents had the same feeling.

Those households that had taken a proactive stance and purchased construction material that could help alleviate somewhat the effects of the

flood were thought to have handled the stress better than others. However, the scarcity of construction materials, as demand exceeded the supply; the escalating prices (some had risen to the point at which they were three times higher than normal); the dearth of shop-to-home delivery and transport, as well as construction labor. To cope, some of the proactive residents had to resort to carrying the materials back home themselves, filling bags with sand by themselves if they wanted to buy sandbags, and/or turning themselves into amateur construction workers.

On the positive side, as residents had waited in fearful anticipation of the arrival of the flood water, they began talking with each other. Neighbors who had rarely chatted with each other, and indeed who barely knew each other, began gathering together more often to exchange and discuss news and views concerning the flood. More people began to get to know their neighbors. Hospitality was everywhere. For example, those with a high-load pick-up (truck) began offering to take anyone who wanted to go the same route. A case in point: Thassani, a recently retired government official living in Soi 6/2, related to her neighbors with appreciation that while waiting for a free-service police or army truck at the entrance at the intersection of Suan Siam and Serithai Roads,<sup>7</sup> she was picked up by a pick-up driver who dropped her at the place nearest to her house.

Ironically, the arrival of the flood and its inundation of property had, to a large extent, brought a release of the residents' tension. That which they had awaited, in fear and dread, had finally come, meaning that it was now time to learn to live with the flood water. Now Warathep also realized that his community could not escape destiny. Even the water level in his house in a sub-soi of Soi 6 near Serithai Road was rising. It was at this juncture that most residents began to know and interact with him, as chairperson of the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community committee, as he and the Committee members attempted to swing into action to help relieve the suffering of the residents.

### **Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam Committee's Attempts to Rise to the Occasion**

At the time that the 2-year term of the previous community committee—an *interim* committee—had concluded, and the erstwhile chairperson announced his disinterest in a second term, some neighbors

approached Warathep Boonyuen, a C-5 government official from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and asked him to form a team to compete in the election of the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community committee. His initial response had been a hesitant one because, first, like other people, he did not have much time to devote to the activity; second, he had heard of some alleged misbehavior of some committee members. Overall, he was just not quite sure if he could run the organization smoothly. But, because of his high community spirit, he finally accepted to do so. Besides, the committee and its role were nothing new to Warathep, as he had formerly served a two-year as an ordinary committee member from 2010-2011.

Largely because he was the only one among the newly appointed committee members who worked for the government, Warathep was nominated to chair the committee. Although as some averred he was neither well known in the community nor truly admired by other members, it was felt that he was the best among the committee members at the time. So, he was elected chairperson.

Prior to the selection of Warathep and his compatriots as the new community committee in September there had been the feeling that the erstwhile interim community committee no longer wanted to do anything serious with respect to the espoused mission of community committees. In fact, the community was said to be devoid of any community leader whatsoever. As he and his committee members took office, Warathep aspired to change that. He had a vision to make his community a “strong (self-reliant)” community characterized by orderliness, especially with regard to the issue of parking around the community. He also wanted the work of his team to be transparent, an attribute that he believed was necessary to win the confidence and trust of the community at large, which in turn would engender greater participation in the committee’s community activities.

Alas, as he mentally revisited the rapid succession of events that accompanied his renewed involvement in the community committee, Warathep recalled that things did not get off to a smooth start. First, the plea of his neighbors to “do something to save the community or at least alleviate the sufferings” had come only when the water in the community had reached ankle height and some residents had to wade out of their

houses to the main road. When the flood water level reached 30 centimeters on the second day of flooding, Warathep recalled that his foremost thought was that he and the others on the newly appointed committee had to do something quickly to alleviate the difficulty before even more damage occurred. However, community responses and reactions to his first initiatives proved not to be anything like what Warathep had expected.

### **Soliciting Funds with which to Build Barricades**

Warathep's initial inclination had been to call a meeting of all household residents and ask for their opinions about what to do. But he decided that procedure would take time that could be better spent taking more immediate action to ameliorate the problem. He did not want to waste time. He decided, instead, to consult with just a few neighbors. In so doing, he found that they agreed that he should collect money from the residents to build sandbag barricades and pump the water out of the main sois to the main roads (Serithai Road and Suan Siam Road) so that people did not have to wade out. They further decided that every detached house would be asked to donate 1,000 baht and every townhouse, 500 baht. They decided not to solicit donations from commercial buildings because all of them were on the main roads and hence were unavoidably impacted by the flood waters anyhow.

With these decisions made, Warathep and two of his neighbors went to knock on the door of every house in the community, soliciting the earlier-recommended donation from each household and conveying in very general terms what the community committee proposed to do. To his dismay, however, only some residents in some sois—mainly sub-sois 6/1 and 6/2—heeded his plea and donated money for use in buying sand, sand bags and two large water pumps. Most people in Soi 8 and its sub-sois, convinced that building sand walls and pumping water out to the main would not improve the situation, declined to donate.

Some households wanted to know the detailed action plan of the flood relief strategy. When Warathep could not provide such details, some residents passed up the opportunity to donate. The attitude of Sanit, a 70-year-old retired government employee in Soi 8, was typical of this subset of residents. *"I asked him about his detailed plan,"* she explained. *"He could not give it. So I didn't make any donation."* Sanit went on to explain that she and her husband lived on the money given by their two



married daughters, who had moved out of the community. The daughters provided only a 6,000 baht monthly allowance and paid for water and electricity bills for them. So Sanit did not have much money to spare. If not necessary, she preferred saving money for future use.

These declinations to contribute had left Warathep a little disappointed. But, he did receive sufficient donations to enable him to buy two large water pumping machines, some sand and sandbags, and some fuel to run the machines.

### **Calling for Volunteers to Help Build the Barricades**

The building of the barricades was an arduous task requiring, minimally, a small squad of able-bodied persons. Here again, in the interest of time, Warathep—whom one resident described as always doing “everything in a hurry” —had opted to forego calling a meeting to solicit residents as a whole to become involved in this task. Warathep admitted that he preferred working with a few people. “To him, the more the people, the more the problems,” explained Teacher Rabieb, a committee member who was a well-to-do retired school teacher. “He [Warathep] just wanted cash and then he would manage everything.” Hence, in lieu of having a meeting to solicit volunteers from the entire community, Warathep had found it expedient to ask some male teenagers living in and near his soi (Soi 6) to help with the task of building the barricades.

But, no sooner had the barricades-building task finished the task than the effort hit a snag in the form of protestations from some residents living close to the canal toward which the flood water was to be pumped. They did not want the pumping because their houses would end up bearing a higher level of flood water. Their *de facto* leader, a police sergeant resident in Soi 8, swung swiftly into action and took a band of his followers to demolish the sand barricades. Anong, a former committee member, sought to forbid him doing so. The two quarreled to the point at which the exasperated sergeant angrily asked, “*Have you ever eaten bullets?*” At that point Anong desisted, stepped aside, and let the angry policeman and his demolition crew tear down the barricades. (Warathep was not at the scene at the time.) Soon, however, the initial strategy was resurrected when residents in the two targeted sois (subsois 6/1 and 6/2), not wanting to quarrel with anyone, relented and told Warathep’s team to let the flood water inundate the road in front of their houses.



From these inauspicious events, Warathep had gained a preview of the difficulty he would face in trying to turn the community into a “strong” one. Even at a time of acute distress, he had thought to himself, cooperation from the residents could be an elusive quest. Indeed, apart from the cooperation extended by the several households in sub-sois 6/1 and 6/2, his initial attempts to help alleviate the community’s suffering had met with far more indifference than he had ever imagined when he set out to request donations for the relief effort. Not only had many households declined to contribute funds to help with the relief effort, there had been no shortage of criticisms of one sort or another.

### **Residents’ Criticisms of Warathep and/or the Community Committee**

Both among households who did and did not donate to the flood alleviation effort, criticisms of the way in which Warathep dealt with the situation were widespread. Some of the residents’ criticisms are embedded in the comments below.

- *“He should [have held] a meeting and ask[ed] everyone’s opinions about what to do. He should [have informed] all residents through the broadcasting tower, or go through the community and use a megaphone to tell them to come to the meeting, but he did not. Instead he went to knock at the door of each house and asked for donation. I gave him 1,000 baht any way.”* [Source: Boonta, a housewife]
- *“I asked him about his plan, but he could not tell it clearly, so I did not give the money.”* [Source: Sanit, a retired government employee in Soi 8]
- *“I did not know who he was, so I did not give any money.”* [Source: Sompong, a housewife. Her husband was the owner of a construction company]
- *“He called the meeting of residents after he bought the two water pumps. Not all households knew that there was such a meeting. I was one of around ten people in the meeting. He did not have any plan to deal with water in my soi [soi 2] so I did not donate any money. If he had [had one], I would [donate].”* [Source: Udorn, a 69-year-old charwoman]

- *“I was not a house owner; I was just a tenant, so I did not make any donation.”* [Source: Maew, a single woman who rented a one-story house]

Adding to chorus of criticisms and complaints had been the community's poor —those whose limited financial resources had not enabled them to stock up on food and drinking water, as most of their more fortunate fellow residents had done. By the end of the first week of the flood, they had completely run out food and drinking water. They demanded that if the community committee wanted to help them, it should contact the appropriate authorities and have them distribute some food and drinking water to those in dire need.

Those who still had food to eat suffered other problems that they felt the committee should address without further delay. For example, the garbage-laden water that blanketed the community had barely begun to drain and thus had become contaminated by the beginning of the second week of the flood. It smelled awful, residents had complained. Moreover, there were already small snakes and leeches, and some feared that crocodiles might show up next. Residents opined that if the community committee truly wanted to do something for them, then it should address these particular problems forthwith.

In response, Waratthep and some members of his committee had done their utmost to enlist the resources needed to provide relief. Help was not always forthcoming at the level of timeliness and sufficiency that the committee members desired, because government resources were proving inadequate to cope with a flood disaster that had impacted a nearly unprecedented swath of the country. Further, because the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community has suffered less than most of the other 32 communities in Kannayao district, the district office's woefully inadequate personnel and funds had to be directed toward the worse-case localities. Thus, Waratthep's request for money to buy fuels for the water pumping machines could not be accommodated, although he did receive the usual 5,000 baht that the committee got monthly if it held some activity and had receipts to reimburse the money.

Likewise, although the scarcity of district personnel and vehicles had prevented the district office from honoring Waratthep's request to bring EM balls and toss them around the community, as well as distribute bio-extract

water to rid the community of the bad smells, the district did manage to send a big truck loaded with bio-extract water late one evening. Because its large size made it impossible to negotiate the individual sois of the community, one resident used his trash bin to fetch the water to give to a couple of his requesting neighbors the following day. Then, Warathep himself borrowed a neighbor's pick-up and drove around and tossed the balls in every soi and road.

Warathep did not, however, put through the request of the community's poor for the district office to send food. He reasoned that the district office was as aware as he that most people in his community were well-to-do, and therefore district officials would opt to send emergency food rations to communities who were not nearly as well off. Additionally, there were those who rented houses in the community who wanted relief packages, but did not know how to get them. Not having contributed to the community relief fund, they were reluctant to ask Warathep to help contact the relevant authorities. Nevertheless in January 2012, a month after the flood subsided, they received relief packages anyhow, when Warathep distributed the belatedly received relief aid to anyone who asked, whether he felt they needed it or not.

Another action for which Warathep later received criticism was a decision that he had taken to repaint the community committee office building located on a side of the central playground. This was undertaken so that it could serve as concrete and visible evidence that the Baht 60,000 in relief funds that had been raised internationally at the behest of the local Nazarene Christian Church (soi 6/1) had been put to good use. As Warathep explained:

*"The international Christian donors wanted to see the money being used and in a way that could show some evidence to the donors. So I and my committee members thought this was the best thing to do. I knew some construction workers, so I hired them to do renovate the office building. It was difficult to find construction workers after the flood. They were very busy. Of course these construction workers wanted to drink after work, so I treated them in order to get the work to run smooth[ly]."*

A related criticism arose from Warathep and his committee's failure to publicize the local Nazarene Christian Church's sponsorship of a nightly community party that they organized for the many foreign youths whom they brought in to help clean the community after the flood. The Church had requested that the committee disseminate invitations to the community at large, especially the youth. However, Warathep's response had been to put up a sign at the playground where the events were held. Thus, only those local people who happened to pass by the central playground came to know of the invitation. Consequently, hardly anyone outside of Warathep's group and the church's attended.

## **Looking to the Future**

By the end of November, the flood waters had receded, and life in the community had begun to return to normal. It had been a good time for current and past community committee members, as well as residents, to review their own experiences and feelings concerning the work of the committee, including the leadership style and decisions of Warathep, the chairman.

### **The Outlook of a Random Sample of Current Committee Members**

Upon taking office, Warathep had had a total of 23 community committee members (counting himself), including a few whom he and some other members did not want but could not prevent because all residents were eligible to apply, and all would automatically become members when the number of candidates did not reach the target of 25. Slightly more than a month later, eight committee members had resigned, with their resignations effective on January 25, 2012. While the main reason given was a lack of time to serve, other reasons included dislike of the administrative style and concern about the possibility of becoming embroiled in an illegality that had been perpetrated by a certain committee member.

Siriporn, or Aew (her nickname), the committee member at issue had cheated the relatives of several deceased elderly residents out of monies due to them from the cremation fund, over which she had direct supervision.<sup>8</sup> After withholding the funds for two years, she finally released them after Warathep threatened to inform the police of her possible

fraud. Hence, with respect to the 8 resignations, Warathep was inclined to believe that “Aew must have said something against [him],” thus prompting those committee members to resign. With the departure of the 8, the committee was left with just 15 members – including the person who had illegally withheld the cremation monies from the relatives of the three deceased elderly residents.

As for preparations for flood prevention for the 2012 rainy season, Namwan a 64-year-old community committee member was of the view that in the future residents would need to look out for themselves. She stated:

*“We don’t have any plan. I don’t think it will happen again. But if it happened, I think the community committee could not do anything much. People in our community now had flood experience, so they could stay with flood water now. In the past flooding, we attempted to help save our community, but we did not get cooperation. It’s better for individuals to help themselves. We may use the water pumps we had bought to drain water out as it happened last year. Perhaps that’s what we can do. We don’t have money and we do not think of collecting money from residents. I don’t think they will make a donation this time, especially those Soi 6/1 and 6/2 who gained nothing from their donation last year.”*

Other committee members weighed in on the issue of Warathep’s leadership and decision-making styles. For example, committee member Rabieb allowed that she did not like the way Warathep managed the community committee. She elaborated: *“He was not an efficient leader. He was arrogant and not friendly, and he practiced the bureaucratic leadership style. He did not know how to spend money cleverly; he did not listen to others’ opinions.”* For example, pointed out Laem, another current member, all the 60,000 baht donated by the members of the Nazarine Christian Center was spent on painting the office building. *“I considered that a trivial activity, . . . a waste of money,”* he averred.

### **The Outlook of a Random Sample of Former Committee Members**

Past community committee members were overwhelmingly of the feeling that they did not want to get involved in activities held by the

community committee. They also voiced a strong disinterest in future service on the committee, although during their earlier years of service, they had had a good old time. According to Anong and Udorn, at that time the committee members had worked together happily. There were no quarrels—no conflict. All had wanted to be self-reliant, rather than dependent on the district office for money or any other material assistance. The committee funded its activities by having each of its members donate two hundred baht each month for the work of the organization. They also collected money among themselves—200 baht, 500 baht, or sometimes 1,000 baht—to pay in advance for needed material or equipment, or supplied, and awaited later reimbursement. This tactic had enabled them to put off soliciting donations from households and shops in the community, except under the most pressing circumstances.

Not all previous experiences had been rosy, but some former committee members preferred not to talk about those times. Anong was an exception. With fatigue and a tone of voice indicative of discouragement, she recalled that oftentimes it seemed that people did not appreciate their sacrifice, as was evident in the residents' poor participation and unhelpful attitudes. *"One day we went to ask for donation," she said, "and we were refused in a bad manner."* Added Noi, another former committee member, *"Many of these people were low-income people who [had] not lived in the community since its establishment and did not have much money to generously donate to the committee work."* Chimed in Anong, also another former committee member, *"They looked at us as if we were beggars when we [approached them to] raise a fund to carry out community activities. That was one reason why I was bored, and other committee members too, and several of us did not want to serve in the committee after [our] terms ended."*

Udorn, a charwoman who had been a committee member for two or three terms, talked about her feelings toward Waratthep, whom she viewed as arrogant. She stated:

*He did not greet me if we met in the street. He acted as if he had not known me, even though we were in the same committee in the past. This has happened very often, but I don't care. I like volunteer work. I said I am willing to help and to join activities, but I don't want to be a committee member again. Two terms were enough.*

Although not necessarily directing his comments toward Udorn, Warathep had allowed that:

*“Some people wanted to be committee members to gain something, like being a canvasser of a political party who wants to use us. I don’t want to serve any political party, to be a tool for any political party. If anyone wanted to have the community committee to do something that has certain impact on the residents, he or she must submit the request directly to me or to authorized committee members; otherwise, I will not consider it as the community committee’s task. I prefer using the bureaucratic system. To save myself.”*

### **The Outlook of a Random Sample of Community Residents**

Community people had not seemed to give importance to the community committee. Many did not know that it even existed, not to mention their knowing the community committee members and even the chairperson himself. Some who knew Warathep offered that he did not have “charisma.” Others viewed him as lacking in human relations skills, as he had not ventured forth to make himself known to community people in general. One resident put it this way:

*“I did not personally know him, but he knocked on my door to collect money—1,000 baht—for pumping out the flood water. He introduced himself as the chairperson of the community committee. But he did not tell me in details about his plan. I asked my neighbor who used to serve in the committee; and, [because] she knew him, I donated money because I didn’t want the flood.”*

Other residents were critical of Warathep’s decisions to reserve many important decisions to himself and his small circle of close friends on the committee. Boonta, a housewife, disliked that style and thought it inappropriate as well as ineffective. *“In my opinion, he should have called a meeting of all the households and sought opinions from them about how to handle the situation,”* she declared. *“He should not have made a decision alone, or with only a few committee members.”*

Many residents did not know who served in the committee and what the committee was required by law to do on behalf of the community. Many



did not participate in any events. Several household heads let it be known that they did not want to associate with other people in the community. They said they could live without “dependence” on the community committee.

Going forward, Warathep confessed that he had not thought of any activity by which he might raise a fund to use for the community committee activities. He explained, “I don’t want to ask for money. [Donating money] depended on a person’s conscience.” Cases in point: A noodle-selling vendor who purveyed his good from corner space in the community playground gave the committee 500 baht each month. The VC Logistics Plus Company gave 1,000 baht because they parked their 10-wheel trucks (around 10 trucks) and pick-ups along the playground and in Soi 6/1 where the company was located. Warathep was inclined to continue to rely on such acts of good will and neighborliness, as opposed to going forward to ask residents for funds with which to carry on the committee’s activities.

With respect to the question of whether there would be another major flood in 2012, community residents were divided into two groups. One group believed that there would be no flood in 2012, while the other group expressing a lack of faith in the government’s water management capability, believed there would be. Warathep himself shared the outlook of the former group of doubters. He confidently predicted.:

*“I don’t think it will flood again in Bangkok, especially [not] in our community, because we are near the Bang Chan industrial estate, which must be very well protected from flooding next time. So I haven’t had any plans for handling a flood in this coming rainy season.”*

Indeed, so convinced was he that there would be no repeat of the 2011 floods in 2012 that he had even proposed to the committee that the two water pumps that he had bought for use in flood water removal be given to the district office for safekeeping and maintenance. After deliberation, the committee demurred. Hence, for the time being, the pumps remained in the committee’s custody in the Amornphannakhorn Suan Siam community.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The soi numbers as used here were the old names, but now the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has used a new system to call these sois. For example, Soi 8 was changed to Soi 9; Soi 6 became Soi 11; Soi 4 became Soi 13; and Soi 2 became Soi 15. As the new system was quite complicated, it is better to use the past names or numbers.
- <sup>2</sup> From <http://office.bangkok.go.th/aids/pcm/document/community.xls>
- <sup>3</sup> From <http://office.bangkok.go.th/aids/pcm/document/community.xls>
- <sup>4</sup> From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011\\_Thailand\\_floods](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Thailand_floods)
- <sup>5</sup> Incredible, but not surprising, that in people's most dire need there were those who were taking unscrupulous advantage of their neighbors. A relief agency reported such action by a landlord who turned off the electricity in his building so that tap water could not reach the tenants and they had to buy water from him. Similarly, greedy boat operators were charging ridiculously high fees to transport people, or they faced the perilous option of wading in bacteria-laden waters, or in some areas, crocodiles.  
Among other things, anger in several suburban communities persisted regarding the Thai government's decisions about maintaining water behind levees, with protestors' threats to damage levees or open water gates, providing relief from flooding by draining polluted and foul-smelling water. However, in the late November, downtown Bangkok appeared to have been successfully defended from flooding.
- <sup>6</sup> Thais go by first name and most people prefer to call others by nickname, even at workplace. Several key informants of this case except the chairperson himself wanted to remain anonymous, so some names in the case were invented ("Urai" was an example) and the last names omitted.
- <sup>7</sup> During the flood crisis in Bangkok, most buses and automobiles could not be used, so the army sent trucks to transport people, and in some places only like Suan Siam Road, there were police trucks to help carry people from Serithai Road to Raminthra Road.
- <sup>8</sup> The district office had set up the cremation fund the purpose of which was to enable the relatives to have money for arranging a cremation for the elder in the family. The fund member paid a premium of 60 baht a year. An amount of 3,000 baht was given for cremation of an individual member.