

IDENTIFYING CHANGES ARISING FROM GENTRIFICATION TOWARDS LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES IN THE INNER ZONE OF BANGKOK, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Gentrification has happened as a part of globalization process. In Bangkok, the urbanization induced gentrification has led to transformation of the neighbourhoods, causing the rising of economic pressure, changes and impacts on social class, particularly residents in low-income communities. This article explores 1) the extent to which how urbanization along Rama IV road in Bangkok has been evolved since 2014, leading to gentrification, and 2) what changes are the consequences towards slum communities, located in inner Bangkok, e.g. Phra Chen, and Pattana Bonkai communities. The gentrification and urbanization framework based on Davidson and Lees (2005) is applied in identifying changes in the communities regarding three dimensions, i.e. economic, social, and physical dimension. Data collection was conducted by semi-structured interviews with 80 households representing both communities. Findings indicated that changes in community are perceived differently among the residents. It was suggested that significant changes shade light on, capital reinvestment, social upgrading, indirect displacement of low-income people, and landscape changes. The community members are experiencing changes and uncertainties in various aspects, including land lease agreement, cost of living, sense of place, and the anxiety of being displaced. Despite the challenges, most of the respondents in this study are long-term residents, and there is a sense of hope as they believe they can adapt and coexist with the changes affecting their neighborhoods.

Keywords: Change, Urbanization, Gentrification, Low-Income Community

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INTRODUCTION

Urbanization in Thailand was highly influenced by modernization. Since the first National Economic Development Plan, the basic infrastructure was built to accommodate the expansion of economy and industrial development. Bangkok has been agglomerated in economic, social and political aspects. At the same time, the uncontrolled developments caused the unbalanced redistribution of access to social services, and environmental degradations (Ross & Pongsomlee, 1995). The informal settlements were formed to shelter for low-income migrants who came to work as a labour, informal workers in the city. However, the increasing market values, the lack of legal entity on land caused them being vulnerable for evictions.

Nowadays, the urban development trends in Bangkok are navigating to achieve a regional megacity. The increasing number of high-rise buildings and economic agglomerations is driving land values, and putting high pressure on low-income people due to the higher rental price (King, 2020; Sheng & Leeruttanawisut, 2016). Hence, the capital accumulations inevitably affect people with low income who live, and work in informal sector of the city as the part of their livelihood is significantly associated with job opportunities in the city.

This study examines the effects of urbanization on two slum communities, Phra Chen and Pattana Bon Kai, located in the inner of Bangkok. Although both communities have been situated for decades, with the rising of economic pressure, the slum dwellers are experiencing changes and uncertainties in various aspects, including land lease agreement, cost of living, sense of place or sense of community, and the anxiety of being displaced. However, most of the respondents in this study are long-term residents of these communities. Despite the challenges, there is a sense of hope among the residents, as they believe they can adapt and coexist with the changes affecting their neighborhoods.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Urbanization in Thailand and the settlement of slum in Bangkok

Urbanization in Thailand was highly influenced by modernization. Regarding the first National Economic Development Plan, the Thai government was heavily invested in fundamental infrastructure to accommodate the further economic and industrial expansion, leading to physical developments, transitioning from an agricultural-based economy to a more industrialized economy, and rural-urban migration.

The formation of slums is a complex combination of several factors, such as population growth, lacking of a comprehensive urban and management plan. Nevertheless, as people believed that they can find better jobs, and opportunities in the city, so they decided to migrate (El-Haggar & Samaha, 2019). In some sense, the slums have been accidentally formed in Bangkok (Pornchokchai, 2003). The concentration of slums is primarily from its nature of primate city, where social, political, and economic activities are highly agglomerated. Furthermore, the expansion of slums was accelerated by migration to Bangkok during the 1960s and 1970s.

By the mid-1970s, settlements concentrated on vacant land, in parks, along railways, and within the inner city. Since 1970, the nature of these settlements in central areas has evolved. The number of informal settlements located within a kilometer from the city center has significantly decreased from 1974 to 1988, and again by 2000 (Khan, 1994; Pornchokchai, 2003)

Gentrification and its processes

Gentrification is a term that first coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 referring to the process in which original residents was replaced by a middle class in the inner London. The process was gradually happening until local people moved out as they could not afford the cost of living, and the housing contract was ended. Consequently, the process has caused changes, and altered the image and atmosphere of the neighbourhoods. (Glass, 1964, as cited in Smith, 2002)

Moreover, gentrification is a part of globalization process, linked to the neoliberalism concept. This phenomenon can be viewed as a moving target, evolving and contextualized by various social and economic factors ingrained in society (Knieriem, 2023; Smith & Holt, 2007) Davidson and Lees (2005) elaborated on the changes in the gentrification process through the concept of "new-build gentrification." This type of gentrification is characterized differently from classical gentrification where the process happened when local people was replaced by people with higher social and economic status. The concept defines the characteristics of contemporary gentrification should be defined with widest sense, and includes the following processes; 1) the capital reinvestment, 2) social upgrading, 3) landscape changes, and 4) direct and indirect displacement of low-income residents.

In accordance with Anderson (2013), Gentrification process can be identified by several changes; firstly, social changes can be seen through people displacement. Secondly, Changes in culture, ways of living, and consumption patterns. Thirdly, the increasing in rental, housing prices, or the decreasing in ownership. Lastly, the physical changes occur which can lead to both physical improvement and declining conditions.

Likewise, Marcuse (2015) conceptualized gentrification process under similar characteristics. Gentrification process can be identified from three changes including; 1) Economic upgrading or Uppricing, which refers to the increased economic value of a district due to capital investment; 2) Physical upgrading or Redevelopment, mostly undertaken by private developers and related to gentrification, and 3) Social upgrading or Upscaling. Marcuse (2015) indicated that gentrification occurs when any form of the upgrading led to displacement.

Urbanization linked to gentrification

In the central business district, where the economy agglomerates, the land values will rise as the willingness to pay is higher to access facilities and benefits provided in the city center. Urbanization creates the rise of economics, which is tied to the development of capitalism (King, 2020). Hence, the central business district will have more businesses than residential and agricultural. On the other hand, the people with low income will likely pay to stay in the central locations, while the rich will stay further away as they can gain more space land and a greater degree of value when there are changes in the land prices (Alonso, 1960). Through industrialization, many cities in the global south have transformed in terms of landscape, social, and economic aspects. The agglomerations of the economy through land speculations and capital accumulation drove the economic machine of the city, which increased land values and rental prices (King, 2020). From the rising of investment, the physical upgrading is potentially gentrifying the areas into a new landscape, and putting economic pressure people with low income who dwell in the city (Jonas et al., 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and data analysis

Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were adopted to capture significant changes in terms of landscape changes, and urban policies over on the Rama IV road. To identify changes from urbanization and gentrification in slum communities, the qualitative data was derived from the interview results, analyzed by thematic analysis (Research methodology is presented in Table 1).

Interview respondents

Selection criteria: The household representatives must be the residents who have been living in the targeted communities for at least 7 years, and able to identify changes in the communities. The study areas are two populated communities in Bangkok, Phra Chen community, and Pattana Bonkai community. The total number of the respondents is 80 persons, from Phra Chen community 40 persons, and Pattana Bonkai 40 persons.

Instruments

This study used a semi-structured interview questions developed from a literature review, document analysis to collect data.

The interview was done by the researcher with respectful approach to all participants.

Conceptual Framework

This study analyzed changes in three dimensions: economic, social, and physical dimensions, which were conceptualized by gentrification and urbanization theory. The conceptual framework adapted based on Davidson and Lees (2005), defining the gentrification process in contemporary context which reflected how urbanization cause changes in slum communities by four main characteristics, including 1) the capital reinvestment, 2) social upgrading, 3) landscape changes, and 4) direct and indirect displacement of low-income residents. To demonstrate economic, social, and physical changes, bid-rent theory, central place theory, and related literatures are used to support findings.

Table 1 Research methodology

Objectives	Conceptualized framework elements	Relevant Literature	Data Collection & data analysis
To explore urbanization on the Rama IV road and its relations to changes on slum communities	Community context, and urbanized neighbourhood	Urbanization, Gentrification characteristic adapted from (Davidson & Lees, 2005)	Document analysis, Semi-structured interview with key informants
To identify changes on the aspects of	Urbanization linked to gentrification		Literature review, Structured interview, Thematic scheme
Economic dimensions	1.The capital reinvestment	(Davidson & Lees, 2005)	
	Shorten land lease term	(Thanakunwutthiroj, 2011)	
	Increasing rental price	Bid-rent theory (Alonso, 1960), Central place theory (King, 2020)	
	Change in consumption pattern	(Usavagovitwong et al., 2012)	
Social dimensions	2. Social Upgrading	(Davidson & Lees, 2005)	
	3. Direct and Indirect displacement of low-income people		
Physical dimensions	4. Landscape change		
	Environmental changes :		
	Exposure of air pollution		
	Exposure to sound and vibration		
	Changes in Wind		
	Direction and Sunlight		
	Reflected sunlight from building facades		

Map of the communities

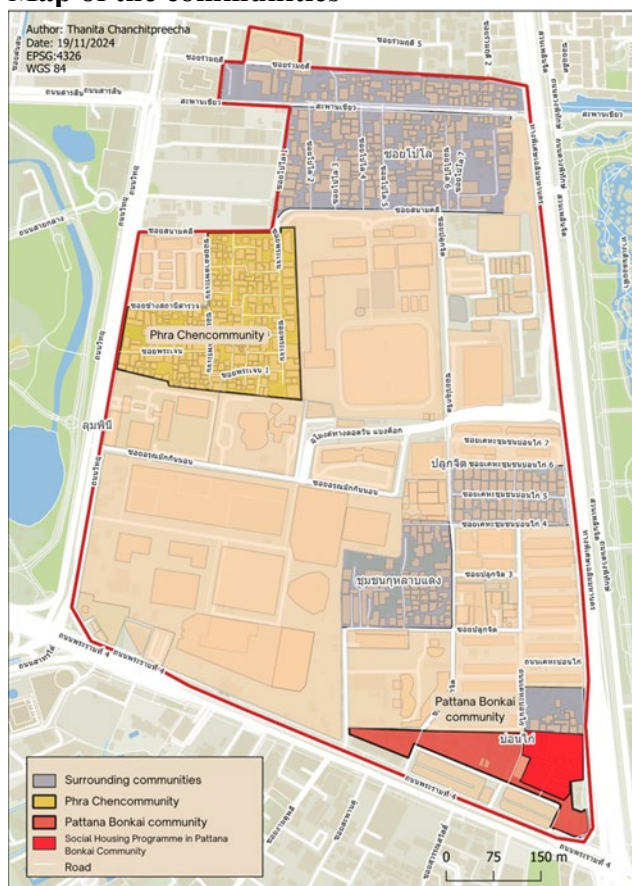


Figure 1 Location of Phra Chen & Bonkai community

RESEARCH RESULTS

Urbanization on Rama IV road

1) Communities context and urbanized neighbourhood

The findings were collected from the respondents living in areas located on the inner Bangkok, Rama IV road. These communities are believed to have been settled in the area for a long period of time. Historically, the location where communities were formed was a fringe of Bangkok's old business district centered around Sampeng and Yaowarat. The development of Rama IV Road opened lands for settlements, and agricultural area, contributing to Bangkok's eastward expansion (Chantavanich, 2016). During this time, investment in infrastructure, such as roads and railways, along with rapid economic growth, was concentrated in Bangkok. This created pull factors that led to rural-urban migration (Wisetpatsa, 2018). With abundant vacant land and minimal regulations, low-income migrants had greater freedom to establish informal settlements as they sought jobs and opportunities in the growing city.

These communities are managed by the Crown Property Bureau in which residents of both communities are tenants required to pay monthly for their housing. The communities are situated in a large land block known as the "Super-block," which is located between two well-known parks in Bangkok: Lumpini Park and Benchakitti Park.

The first community is the Phra Chen community. Interviews with local residents, who have lived in the community for 70 years, indicate that informal housing began during their parents' generation, which is believed to be over 100 years ago. Whereas a large proportion of the informants from Phra Chen Community are people who were born in and still live in the community, most of the dwellers in Pattana Bonkai came from cities outside Bangkok, primarily from the northeastern region of Thailand, indicating the age of settlement is believed

to be younger than Phra Chen Community. Since the fire accident in 2002, a large part of Pattana Bonkai was damaged, had been redeveloped from informal settlements to a social housing as a pilot project from the government.

Bangkok has been growing as a center of development for a long time, and navigating towards a vision in which picturing urban lifestyles. According to The Thirteenth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023-2027) and The 20-year Bangkok Development Plan (2018-2037), the government and Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) envision to make Bangkok a leading regional City. According to this strategies and policies are navigating to achieve smart city concepts, mixed-use development and transit-oriented development (NESDC, 2022). Inevitably, the development is approaching to the communities which are now surrounded by the high density of buildings, populated inner part of Bangkok.

Currently, both slum communities are facing invisible tensions related to housing security due to the increasing rents, the shorter lease agreements, leading to uncertainty about their housing security. However, there are arrays of conditions among tenants, some have alternative housing options or vacant land outside the communities, while others lack the financial ability to move out.

The majority of interviewed respondents have their workplaces in inner Bangkok as merchants, vendors, and freelancers, where the locations are in the proximity of the communities. In terms of education, the majority of them have attained their highest level of education at the elementary school level. In general, at least one family member living together in each household is over 60 years old. The respondents primarily work in informal sector occupations, including vending, freelancing, and retirement. Additionally, most of the households also have their workplace, schools, healthcare services in the proximity of their residence.

2) The capital reinvestment on the Rama IV road

Since 2019, the Patumwan district has seen the highest accumulation of housing in the district cluster level, with a total of 14,001 units. Additionally, the number of condominiums has remarkably increased since 2008, contributing to an overall total of 562,983 units accumulated between 1999 and 2019. The average annual percentage change rate during this period is 14.21% (City Planning and Urban Development Department, 2020).

Several factors have contributed to the expansion of condominiums in this area. One major factor is the district's location as a central business district, which provides ample job opportunities. The well-developed transportation infrastructure also attracts investments and housing developments along railway lines (King, 2020).

Since 2016, the number of mixed-use development projects have notably increased along Rama IV Road, enhancing the potential of the area to serve as a central business district connected to other districts of Bangkok. The development plans promote large mixed-use projects, sustainable living, and green buildings, in accordance with the 20-Year Bangkok Development Plan, which aims for the city to become one of Asia's leading global cities.

In the vicinity of these communities, one notable project is the largest mixed-use building in Thailand, which combines malls, office spaces, hotels, and green areas, serving multiple purposes for users. Although the communities located in the inner Bangkok where it is agglomerated with office buildings, and tourist places, the recent changes in landscape currently cause fears of displacement among slum dwellers. The respondents from both communities mentioned that the rising of large building next to them catalyzed uncertainty regarding their housing situation.

Identification of changes in the communities

Regarding to the characteristics of new-build gentrification, Davidson and Lees (2005) defines the characteristics of contemporary gentrification includes several key elements; 1) the capital reinvestment, 2) social upgrading, 3) Direct, and in-direct low-income people displacement, and 4) Landscape change

1) The capital reinvestment

1.1) Consumption pattern

The change in economic patterns can be seen from changing consumption behaviours. The owners of the local convenience shops in the communities said that fewer people are coming to buy goods. Many people now choose to go to convenience stores or chain supermarkets instead. However, some a local shop owner in Phra Chen Community said that they got benefits from the newcomers who are migrant workers as their shop are bigger than other local shop, and they are able to lower prices of goods and products.

1.2) Increasing rental price

Due to the increasing land values of Patumwan district, the residents in Phra Chen Community experience higher rental prices, which are calculated and charged based on the land size and utilities. Additionally, since 2023, the land and building tax is charged at a higher rate to each household. However, residents at Pattana Bonkai do not experience the increasing rental price as they are a part of social housing program.

1.3) Shorten land lease terms

As the land ownership belongs to the Crown Property Bureau (CPB), the CPB collected the rental prices. According to the respondents from Phra Chen community, the terms of the land lease agreement for households were adjusted from 10 years, then reduced to 5 and 3 years, in the present, the terms were changed to annually, and some households were given a two-year land lease agreement. However, this process has been slowly happened over time, and was adjusted for more than 10 years. Moreover, they also experienced the increasing housing expenses from the land and building tax. The respondents from Pattana Bonkai informed that after the 15-year lease contract was terminated when social housing mortgages are paid off, they were transitioned to annual contracts as well.

2) Social upgrading

Although the respondents from both communities did not explicitly mention the occurrence of social upgrading within the communities as the construction of the large development project has not been finished during the time of data collection, there is evidence explaining that new-build developments could lead to the upgrading of society or socioeconomic changes in the area (Davidson & Lees, 2005: 1178-1180). In the community's proximity, large and luxurious projects on vacant land have been built, potentially attracting visitors who are more highly educated and have more willingness to pay into the area. The developments in the neighbourhood include several projects, ranging from the opening of a newly renovated national convention hall, a renovation of a forest park, and the emerging of several mixed-use development projects on the Rama IV road. From this urbanized trend, there will potentially be an increase in the daytime population, short-term residents, middle-class workers, and tourists.

3) Direct, and in-direct low-income people displacement

According to both communities, the fears of displacement are provoked by the changes in terms of short-term lease agreement, increasing rental prices. Even though Pattana Bonkai has not experienced increased rents, the respondents expressed that they do not know how the future development plan will be implemented in the area.

3.1) Sense of Community

Most of the people who once were the locals or first settlers have now moved out of the community. This has led to slight changes in the sense of community. However, those who have lived in the area for a long time still maintain connections and have daily conversations when they encounter each other.

3.2) The newcomers

On average, the atmosphere in the community has changed over time. Many traditional residents have moved away, and this loss has been significant, especially since the spread of

COVID-19. Residents who own shops in the community market noted that when a large development project nearby was initially constructed, many people—including office workers, project workers, migrants, and construction workers—came to buy food, which generated income for the sellers and shop owners at the community's market.

The newcomers in the communities are migrant workers, construction workers, and housekeepers. However, the relationships between the newcomers and the local people are relatively thin. The local respondents indicated that there are not many social interactions among them, and they are just living their own lives. Only minor disturbing incidents are mentioned, such as the gathering of workers after working hours, which only happens in certain corners of the community.

However, the local community shops and vendors in the community market gain benefits from migrant workers and newcomers. Nevertheless, most of the vendors in the local community market reflected that the number of their customers is obviously fewer than in the past when the customers came from within community, nearby residents, and office workers.

3.3) Fears of displacement

According to the interviews, most of the respondents feel more insecure about their future and whether they could stay in the community. As the future of the development plan is not well communicated, the residents are afraid that they will be displaced in the future (Sheng & Leeruttanawisut, 2016). Many respondents, especially aged people who have limited income sources, indicated that they wanted to find another house outside the community, but their financial conditions did not allow them to. Moreover, many slum dwellers are informal workers, which their ability to access formal financing to buy a house is limited.

4) Change in landscape

Although there were no notable changes in the landscape within the communities, several large mixed-use redevelopment projects are emerging in the surrounding area and along Rama IV Road. Near the community, there is a significant mixed-use development project that incorporates sustainability and smart city concepts, which is set to officially open in 2024. Most respondents from both communities reported that the construction is causing considerable dust and air pollution, leading them to stay indoors to avoid exposure. One respondent from Phra Chen noted that they could smell dust on clothes hanging outside their house, which faces the construction site. The dust and air pollution poses potential health risks, particularly to individuals with existing health problems, the elderly, and vulnerable groups. It is important to note that the high levels of PM2.5 in Bangkok over the past few years may also contribute to the pollution. However, there is a representative from the construction project responsible for monitoring environmental impacts and handling complaints during the construction period.

Regarding sound and vibration, as well as the effects of wind direction and sunlight, residents' perceptions vary based on their proximity to the construction site. Those living closest to the site reported damages to their homes, including wall cracks and collapsed floors. However, there are few respondents experience the damages in their accommodation, and the environment impacts from the change in landscape should be further investigated.

The study found that changes in wind direction and sunlight are difficult for residents to perceive through their senses. Most respondents reported little to no noticeable change regarding these factors. However, the change in reflected sunlight from building facades was mentioned primarily by respondents from the Pattana Bonkai community. Certain areas within the community are affected by reflected sunlight from the new buildings, although these effects are not unfolded into residential zones.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

1) The capital reinvestment.

According to new-build developments, the capital is usually reinvested to build a large development project. The displacement does not directly happen in the area, but residents or low-income people are likely to be priced out (Davidson & Lees, 2005). Findings indicate that former residents in Phra Chen and Pattana Bonkai are not directly displaced but face several challenges.

In both communities, there was a declining traffic in local economy from the reducing number consumers in local businesses, community's market, hitherto the mom-and-pop shops. Instead, residents increasingly rely on more urbanized economy of chain supermarkets, or convenient stores (Zuk et al., 2017). However, these patterns gradually changed over a long period of time, and was accelerated by economic recession from the spreading of Covid-19.

The economic pressure from increasing land tax is weighed more among residents in Phra Chen community. Additionally, due to low homeownership rates, many respondents expressed greater concern over the transition from long-term land leases to annual agreements than the rising rental costs. The increase in land values from the agglomeration of economy inextricably cause the increase in rental prices, and land taxes for slum dwellers (Alonso, 1960; King, 2020). Meanwhile, the insecurity of housing is tied to several factors related to social and economic capital of households. Housing insecurity is closely linked to various factors tied to the social and economic capital of households. Many slum dwellers choose to remain in their communities because their workplaces are nearby, which compels them to pay higher rents to stay in the city (Isiani et al., 2021; Rigon, 2022). Moreover, those who lacked of economic capital to move out experienced constant anxiety as the affordable housings with job opportunities were immensely limited (Morris et al., 2017).

2) Social upgrading.

Although the socioeconomic status of residents has not improved within the communities, studies show that new commercial amenities often attract younger, more educated individuals, or those with higher economic and occupational profiles into the neighborhood. Consequently, the image of the neighborhood may exclude certain groups who do not fit in (Davidson & Lees, 2005; Zuk et al., 2017).

3) Direct, and in-direct displacement of low-income people.

Respondents from both communities noted that the sense of place has gradually changed over time due to internal migration occurring over an extended period (Marcuse, 2015; Zuk et al., 2017). Residents acknowledged their lack of housing security initially; some moved out as their families expanded or as they gained the financial means to relocate. However, many indicated that despite considering moving, they could not do so due to a lack of money or savings to afford a new place.

Most newcomers in these communities are migrants, primarily from third countries, while a smaller percentage are Thai. They coexist with former residents, and the in-migrants contribute to the local economy by purchasing food and essential goods from vendors and shop owners. Respondents reported that disturbances from in-migrants are infrequent and generally acceptable.

Residents from both communities expressed fears of displacement, although some felt indifferent, having lived with the threat of eviction since their early days in the area (Khan, 1994). A few respondents expressed anxiety about displacement even if they had housing options outside the community. Notably, there are variations in accommodation choices and affordability among slum dwellers; some have purchased apartments while others own vacant land far from the city center. Many residents remain in these communities because their jobs and income rely on proximity to the urban center. While both communities have not faced direct displacement, the lack of legal protections means that tenants may still be forced to move.

4) Change in landscape.

Changes in the landscape of both communities are evident in the emergence of new mixed-use developments. One of the largest projects, located closest to these communities, displays a luxurious urban lifestyle. However, the communities have been surrounded by high-rise buildings for decades, so the physical upgrading seem to be blend-in with the environment and surrounding high-rises in the district.

The most significant environmental change resulting from these constructions has been the increase in dust and worsening air pollution. Vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly and individuals with respiratory issues, have been severely affected by exposure to air pollutants. However, most of the respondents perceived small amount or no change in terms of exposure to sound and vibration, changes in wind direction and sunlight, and reflected sunlight from building facades. It is crucial to monitor these environmental issues and investigate their long-term impacts further (Zuk et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the transformations brought about by urbanization can be framed within the context of gentrification, as adapted from Davidson and Lees (2005). The findings indicate significant changes in capital reinvestment, the emergence of new landscapes from mixed-use projects, anxieties about displacement, and potential social upgrades in the future. Although some changes are physically evident, shifts in social dimensions, such as the sense of place, indirect displacement of low-income residents, and social upgrading, are more subtle and tend to occur gradually over time. The impacts of the aforementioned changes should be addressed with a comprehensive plan to prevent undesirable displacement. Additionally, the varying social and economic backgrounds of slum dwellers should be taken into account, promoting procedural justice in the urban development process (Marcuse, 2015; Rigon, 2022).

Although both communities have been situated for decades, with the rising of economic pressure, the slum dwellers are experiencing changes and uncertainties in various aspects, including economic pressure on housing, changes on sense of place, the anxiety of being displaced, and environmental consequences. However, most of the respondents in this study are long-term residents of these communities. Despite the challenges, there is a sense of hope among the residents, as they believe they can adapt and coexist with the changes affecting their neighborhoods.

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