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Abstract

This research aims to study the meanings and processes of identity construction of slum dwellers. The methodology employed in this study is qualitative methodology. A slum community in Khon Kaen city named Chum Chon Rak Rot Fai (pseudonym) was selected as a study site. Required data was obtained through participant observations and a series of in-depth interviews.

It is found out that the meanings and identity constructed by those slum dwellers were centered on their rights to exist with dignity as equally as other human beings rather than those meanings emphasizing physical structures given by outsiders. In this light, the meanings and identity constructed by the slum dwellers were completely contradicting to those given by outsiders. The constructed meanings and identities of slum dwellers were clearly manifested in the space of their social movements. This was especially in the situation related to their struggles for basic rights in various issues that appeared to be their common problems including housing and basic infrastructure. Within the context of defending their rights, their slum community identities were deployed to respond, negotiate, and resist against any attempts to demolish their community. Most slum dwellers perceived such action of the state as violating their basic rights.

With respect to the processes of identity construction, this study found that the slum community identities were not solely constructed within the boundary of their community. Rather, they involved with different layers of related actors starting from the macro to micro levels. At the macro level, they collaborated with other slum communities to establish a network of slum people in four regions of Thailand. They also allied with other organizational partners to monitor the processes of problem solving for slum dwellers, particularly the problem related to slum community demolition by the authorities. This was a mechanism to gain public support. Relating to policy advocacy, they participated in a campaign for a decree of slum communities drafted by the majority of slum dwellers. At the community level, they cooperated with each other to improve their physical environment in order to create a livable

place in accordance with the healthy city policy endorsed by the government. This was a way to negotiate with the Railway Authority of Thailand to lease them the land along the railway lines for housing. All of these actions reflected the processes of their identity construction that enabled them to negotiate with and resist against any attempts to violate their basic rights.

At the group and individual levels, there were a variety of meanings and identity construction of the slum dwellers depending on how they interacted and accepted by others, as well as their occupational and economic differentiation. Their individual identities were rather different. However, when they interacted with outsiders and have shared a common community problem of land and housing, they would create their shared identity as belonging to the same group. Thus, their identities were multiple, dynamic, diversifying and overlapping. With which identities they chose to identify were depending on the contexts, which were based on with whom they interacted and the conditions they encountered. Their identities were presented to convince others to perceive them the way they wanted to. Therefore, the identity construction of the slum dwellers was rather fluid depending on the contexts and power relations between them and other different related groups in the society.