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## **The Urban Forum for the Near East and North Africa**

### **Issues In Network Development**

Housing and Urban Programs: Design, Planning, and Delivery of the  
RHUDO/NENA Policy Workshop on Building a Sustainable Regional Forum for  
Urban Development Professionals  
Sponsored by USAID/Rabat

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# **THE URBAN FORUM FOR THE NEAR EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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# The Urban Forum for the Near East and North Africa

## Issues in Network Development

### Objective

As funding for USAID's Regional Housing and Urban Development Office (RHUDO) and for the Urban Management Program (UMP) for the Arab States declines, new institutional and funding arrangements must be established to continue many of their regional activities. Many of the collaborative regional activities of these programs have focused on bringing emerging issues and innovative approaches for discussion among a core group of policy makers. The concern at this point in time is how to transform this informal network into a more sustainable arrangement. Indeed, in more general terms, international assistance programs increasingly recognize the need to move to more locally-based, rather than donor initiated, institutions whose membership provides the basis for sustainability. The purpose of this paper is to outline key issues regarding the creation of a sustainable network as background for the Urban Forum roundtable discussion in Istanbul in October, 1996.

### Introduction

Networks are an increasingly valuable mechanism for bringing peers together to discuss common development issues and to mobilize the experience and intellectual capacity of network members. While the concept of a network is not new, networks are frequently now part of an integrated development approach within a defined geographic region. Development programs such as MEDURBS for the Mediterranean Basin, the Metropolitan Environmental Improvement Program (MEIP) in Asia, and the proposed Managing the Environment Locally in Sub-Saharan Africa (MELISSA) contain network components as an integral part of capacity building efforts. Indeed, a recent survey identified eight urban-related networks currently in operation in the Near East - North Africa (NENA) region.

The notion of a network recognizes that:

policy makers and practitioners in a given region are themselves experts in identifying and resolving development issues in their region;

dialogue among diverse actors and among countries enriches the search for sustainable approaches to current and emerging issues;

validation and support for innovations is derived from their dissemination among decision makers and practitioners operating in a similar environment;

and,

controversial subjects can be discussed more openly in a non-threatening regional forum than in a politically charged national environment.

Networks have been designed or have evolved to fulfill many roles related to information exchange. Some are primarily forums for dialogue or provide technical assistance through twinning and consultation, while others offer more sophisticated electronic means for information and documentation sharing. Many of the recently established issue-specific networks that operate in the NENA region and other regions in the world are designed at donor initiative and operate to a large extent at donor direction. These reflect a primary concern for achieving a specific programmatic thrust. On the other hand, networks have also developed from member initiative, reflecting concern for either an issue (environmental concerns, for example) or the development of a sustainable institutional form ( networks formed around municipal or city issues). Regardless of the genesis of a network, its sustainability is a function of the extent to which it serves its members' interests and is able to mobilize their support, including in financial terms.

In 1991, the RHUDO established a regional advisory committee (RAC), a core group of high level specialists in diverse areas related to urban management. The RAC had the dual purpose of 1) periodically bringing the group together to exchange experiences about emerging issues and innovative approaches, and 2) advising the RHUDO on issues that should constitute the focus of regional activities. Out of these regional activities, several bi-lateral agreements between institutions represented on the RAC have been established (ANHI - ARRU, ANHI - HUDC, for example). Over the past three years, RHUDO and the UMP have joined forces to successfully organize regional activities. This collaboration has effectively expanded the informal network of urban management specialists who could constitute the embryo of an urban forum for the region. The RHUDO and the Urban Management Program recognize the interest in institutionalizing the productive information exchange that has characterized their successful collaboration over the past few years. However, designing a sustainable network must be the result of conscious decisions by members to create an institution that serves their needs. These decisions regard several key issues, including the following:

focus and activities: unifying themes and range of activities;

membership: individuals or institutional representation, diversity of member perspectives;

organizational structure: mechanism for making program decisions, structure for administering the network, structures within respective participating countries;

financing: funding for activities/events and for administrative operations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues and options for resolving them, based on lessons learned from other network operations. The paper will not make recommendations. Rather, it will ask the questions that are essential to establishing a network and discuss how the issues have been resolved in other circumstances. In this way, the paper will serve as the basis for discussion at the Istanbul roundtable in October, 1996.

## Issues

### Issue 1: Focus and activities

#### A. Background

All networks must have a **unifying theme** that serves as the rallying point for members and the focus for network activities. For some networks the unifying theme is specific, in others it is more general. For example, the MEDURBS network focuses on the municipal role in urban environmental management. Network members are primarily municipalities and the focus of activities is environmental management. The Arab Cities and the IULA/EMME networks focus on the municipal or city role in economic, social, and political development. The Latin American Center for Urban Management (LACUM) network offers a different model. With a diverse membership that includes professional associations, community-based organizations, housing finance institutions, real estate development and construction industry representatives, and organizations representing local government, the network recognized that a single technical theme would be too narrow. Furthermore, LACUM's most significant contribution was in bringing diverse stakeholders in urban development into a dialogue that produced a common vocabulary and a common perspective on issues. Therefore, the unifying theme for LACUM is the importance of dialogue on a wide variety of topics as part of the process of urban development. Clearly, the selection of the unifying theme is largely a function of the interests of the network membership. In the case of the NENA Urban Forum, membership has cut across a range of largely but not completely governmental institutions. At the same time, many of the topics of regional activities up to now have not been within the specific purview of these agencies, although they have been highly relevant to the discussion of urban management.

An inventory of network functions indicates that existing networks in the urban sector undertake a variety of activities. These include twinning among cities; preparation and distribution of case studies, methodologies, and research reports; organizing workshops and conferences on technical themes; and organizing study tours and exchange visits. Most typically, networks that are associated with broader development assistance programs have engaged in the broadest range of activities. For example, the MEIP complements networking among government officials, community

groups, and business leaders in five cities with pilot urban environmental programs, development investments, and institutional capacity building. LACUM used RHUDO assistance funding to develop case studies that were distributed to the network. The RHUDO/UMP conferences over the past five years have been closely linked with the development of concrete case studies of development projects in the region. Clearly, network interaction is enriched when it can be fed with concrete analysis of and approaches to development issues. For the NENA Urban Forum, the issue will be how to build in the enriching quality of complementary activities in light of the of the RHUDO phase out.

## **B. Decision points**

1. Urban Forum vision and mission: What should the Forum try to achieve, what is its justification? What is the particular niche the Forum will fill, as distinguished from other networks in the region?

2. Scope or breadth of unifying topic: a specific topic, such as housing finance will allow some participants to easily identify with the forum, however, it will also narrow the potential field of members. On the other hand, a broad topic, such as urban management, is inclusive but its general nature could lend confusion about what the Forum actually chooses to deal with.

3. Type of activities: Different types of activities require different types of support and bring the Forum membership together in different ways. A broad range of activities - conferences, newsletters, research - will require a significant level of support and membership involvement. Newsletters require strong editorial support, but otherwise require somewhat passive membership involvement. Conferences require strong organizational capacity, but to bring members into face to face contact and allow formal and informal discussion. What general types of activities should the Forum undertake? What specific activities should be planned for the next 3 years?

## **Issue 2: Membership**

### **A. Background**

Membership of networks varies considerably, depending on the objectives of the network (or in some cases, the inverse). There appear to be two basic membership strategies: individuals or institutions. Some of the networks currently in operation in the NENA region have clear institutional targets. The MEDURBs program, IULA, the Arab Towns Organization, for example, target local governments or national associations that represent them. In networks that have more diverse membership, institutional affiliations (local governments, governmental service agencies, ministries) have the dual benefits of providing access to high level public decision makers and facilitating sponsorship of activities. For example, the LACUM network has been

successful in having institutional members play a leading role in organizing and financing regional conferences. On the other hand, institutional representatives may feel limited by having to represent an official viewpoint, making frank, open discussion of an issue more difficult. Individual membership, on the other hand, facilitates open discussion because members can express their own view. (Of course, there are frequent exceptions to these statements.) In addition, some foresighted thinkers do not necessarily have an institutional affiliation that would be meaningful to the network. LACUM's solution has been to maintain, in effect, two groups of members, one a group of thoughtful individuals who are known for their insightful understanding of urban issues, and second a group of key organizations who represent major stakeholders and who can be influential in policy dialogue in the region. According to a former RHUDO director, the selection of the network membership has been critical to its success.

Depending on the objectives of the network, membership composition is an issue. Where dialogue across diverse stakeholders in urban development is sought, the membership of the network should also be diverse. For example, the MEIP network seeks to facilitate discussion of innovative solutions to urban pollution by involving a cross section of government officials, business, and community groups. LACUM attempts to promote a dialogue among stakeholders in the urban development process by involving individuals and institutions that represent a broad range of interests, mostly the private sector, professional associations, associations of cities, and community groups. Few central government institutions are represented. However, the focus on associations and other non-governmental organizations reflects the rich non-governmental sector that exists in Latin America. In the NENA region, professional associations and other forms of NGOs are less present than in Latin America. Nevertheless, the lesson remains that the network is useful in promoting dialogue and understanding of diverse issues, in part, because it has diverse representation. At present, members of the RAC have largely, although not exclusively, represented government agencies, primarily related to housing development and infrastructure provision.

Beyond the ability to promote dialogue and bring in innovative thinking, network composition should take into account the ability to attract financing, either through individuals are familiar with donor funding mechanisms or by including donor representatives in the network. For this reason permanent or observer status members drawn from funding agencies are sometimes included in network membership. At present, USAID has been the only donor agency that has been directly represented in the network.

## **B. Decision points**

1. Individuals and/or institutions: while individuals may be chosen on the basis of their innovative thinking about problems of urban management, institutions may provide greater access to policy making and resources. What combination of

individuals and institutions should comprise the NENA Urban Forum membership? What criteria should be used in selecting individual or institutional members?

2. Membership diversity: Based on the objectives of the Forum, what types of individuals or institutions should participate in the permanent membership (as compared to participants who might be invited to a specific event)? What groups are missing from the current membership?

3. Role of donors: What presence should donor agencies have in the membership? Which donors should participate in one way or another?

### **Issue 3: Organizational Structure**

#### **A. Background**

There are two structural issues for any network: how programmatic decisions are made and how administrative or operational issues are managed. A third structural issue, management of national teams, can be present if the network proposes to provide support at the national, as well as the regional level. An additional organizational issue concerns the legal status of the network.

Regarding programmatic decisions, nearly all networks have a form of executive or advisory committee which makes decisions or recommendations about programmatic direction. The functions of this committee are to define general policies, prepare annual plans, and identify funding strategies for programs and activities. The work of the committee is critical in ensuring that the network programs respond to the interests of the membership. Advisory committees appear to predominate in donor organized program networks while executive committees are typical among membership networks such as IULA and the United Towns Organization. The members of the executive committee may be appointed by a donor group, in the case of networks that are donor initiated, or designated by the membership of the network.

The administrative structure of a network is critical to the well functioning as well as the cohesion of the network. It has been pointed out that the secretariat of a network is not just a function, it is also a person who maintains the spirit of the network through periodic personal contact with network members. Therefore, the ability to communicate with all members is critical. Of course, the secretariat is responsible for network administration, including oversight of activities such as conferences and document preparation dissemination. Depending on the division of labor for activity management, this aspect of the secretariat can be either demanding or more of an oversight and coordination function. In a network where member institutions assume significant responsibility for organizing activities, as in the case of LACUM, the secretariat coordinates with member associations that assume primary responsibility for hosting events. The secretariat may also be responsible for preparing funding

requests. In almost all cases, the secretariat is a paid function.

Many networks include national level activities, and therefore require a management structure for each country. For example, the MegaCities project, a large network of the world's largest cities, creates a network among decision makers and community leaders from each participating city. The city teams are responsible for developing activities to improve conditions within the city. The MEIP in Asia has a similar city steering committee structure. United Towns Organization has a national committee that organizes and coordinates the activities of member cities.

The legal status of network organizations vary considerably. It appears that most of the donor-funded or programmatic networks have not formal status as they exist under the umbrella of the donor's development assistance program. Formal status is not necessary for the network itself because all activities can be carried out in the name of the donor. On the other hand, private and membership organizations clearly must have a legal basis on which to operate and receive funding. Typically, network organizations are established as some type of private, not-for-profit or non-governmental organization, the specific form being a function of the laws of the country in which the network is established and the type of activities the organization intends to carry out. At present the RAC and UMP networks have functioned as informally, under the umbrella of the respective donor programs.

## **B. Decision points**

1. Organizational structure: In view of the need to fulfill executive (programmatic) and administrative functions and the build in representativity as a way of maintaining member support for the Forum, what organizational structure is best adapted to the needs of the Forum? What should be the roles of the component parts of the organization?
2. Executive function: The executive function is critical to ensuring that the network maintains a programmatic direction that is consistent with the membership's interest. It can also play a key role in securing funding for activities through its knowledge of potential donor institutions. Membership on the executive committee can be filled on at large basis or in some other representational way: geographic (country, sub-region), institution (public, private, ngo), or gender, for example. The executive committee must also ensure that it reports to the membership about its decisions. What criteria should be used in designating individual or institutional members of the executive committee? How should the executive committee report to the general membership of the Forum?
3. Role and location of the secretariat: the secretariat is critical for performing administrative tasks and maintaining "dynamic" contact with members. What role should the secretariat play? Can an individual be the designated secretary or should there be an institutional base? What should be the criteria for selecting the secretariat?

4. Regional and national structure: while the Forum will obviously have a regional form, a national level would also permit activities at that level and stimulate more frequent contact among members from a particular country. However, this would require an additional layer of organization. Should there be country-level organizations? What should be their function and structure?

5. Legal status: an informal status provides flexibility and requires little legal or administrative action to function. On the other hand, a more formalized legal status would give the network greater standing and ability to receive and manage funding. In addition, particularly in the case of country level activities, it might make the network a stronger presence vis à vis the host country. Under what legal status should the Urban Forum be established, for its core regional office and at the national level?

#### **Issue 4: Financing**

##### **A. Background**

Financing is a function of many of the issues discussed above, but it is the element on which the sustainability of the network stands. Financing needs exist for the basic coordinating (secretariat) operations of a network and for the activities it undertakes. It is useful to distinguish between the two because different types of funding may be available for the different functions. Typically, three types of funding have been made available to networks: donor funding, membership fees, and in-kind services. In donor initiated program networks such as MEIP in Asia, LACUM in South America, MEDURBS in the Mediterranean basin, donor funds support at a minimum the operations of the network's administrative arm. In addition, donor funding supports activities, although some in-kind resources are provided by the participating members. Membership organizations, such as IULA, United Towns, and ICLEI support their secretariat function, at least in part, with membership fees. However, these networks have institutional members, rather than individual members, which facilitates charging membership fees.

Funding network activities appears to be subject to more flexible arrangements and mixing in-kind and donor sources. LACUM conferences include a considerable in-kind contribution from the host institution and network members generally pay their own way to conferences. An effort has been made to schedule LACUM events around other regional events which network members are likely to attend. The RHUDO feels that the commitment of members own resources is a barometer of their satisfaction with the network, and a testament to their willingness to participate. Many networks also successfully mobilize co-funding from several donors for an event. Indeed, donors are typically more willing to have their name added to a list of sponsors for a single event, rather than to the base operational funding of an organization. However, donor funding requires effective proposal writing and a clear knowledge of donor objectives so that proposals may be tailored to donor objectives.

In its early stages, it is hard to imagine that the Urban Forum could exist without some form of donor funding. In view of the declining availability of RHUDO and UMP funds, it probable that the Urban Forum will require some creative financing, combining funding from multiple donor sources with some locally generated funding that will demonstrate the interest and commitment of network members to donors.

**B. Decision points**

1. Donor funding: What are donors interested in funding? What donors should be contacted as potential funding sources and for which aspects of the Forum's operations?

2. Member contributions: how realistic is the expectation that individual and/or institutional members could pay a membership fee? What kinds of in-kind contributions could be expected?