

PN-ACF-125

**The Regional Urban Development Officer's  
Annual Conference  
December 2-10, 1998  
Lessons-Learned Report**

December 1998

Prepared for

U S Agency for International Development  
G/ENV/UP

By  
Jim Carney  
Amanda Lonsdale

INTERNATIONAL CITY/COUNTY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

Municipal Development and Management Project  
USAID Contract No PCE-C-00-95-00001-00  
Request for Services #73

A

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	1
CONFERENCE DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION	1
SUBSTANTIVE LESSONS LEARNED	2
LOGISTICAL LESSONS LEARNED	2
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE	3
CONCLUSIONS	4

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The USAID Regional Urban Development Officer's (RUDO) Annual Conference was held December 2-10, 1998 at Nation's Bank and the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC. The purpose of the conference was to bring together key personnel from all of the RUDOs worldwide to discuss progress, problems, and future issues.

The conference was sponsored by USAID's Office of the Environment and Urban Programs (G/ENV/UP). The International City/County Management Association was hired to facilitate the conference. What follows are the recommendations of the facilitators for future conferences.

**The Regional Urban Development Officer's Conference –  
December 2-10, 1998  
Lessons Learned Report**

**Introduction**

This report discusses lessons learned at the 1998 RUDO Conference. It is divided into three sections: 1) Lessons learned on substance – incorporating participant critiques, 2) Logistical lessons learned, and 3) Recommendations for the future.

**Conference Design, Development and Implementation**

**Key Lessons from the Workshop Preparation**

There are some basic lessons to be learned from the process of developing the RUDO Conference. The above bullets identify the most visible, but the entire process was a challenge because of the differing expectations of what the Conference should be. Should it be a show and tell from the UP point of view? Should it be an opportunity for the RUDO's to have the floor and raise their issues? Should it be largely interactive and discussive, or should there be a substantial number of speakers who would elaborate on the topics on the agenda?

While there was general agreement that the Workshop should be primarily interactive, it soon became apparent that the definition of what "interactive" meant varied widely among the members of UP. For some, it was believed to be a highly participative process, with a great deal of emphasis on input and ideas from the RUDO's. For many others, it was a chance to "inform" the RUDO's with a barrage of speakers and presentations. In some cases, the RUDO's themselves made presentations to each other. As a result, the "talking head" problem, while perhaps not as bad as in some previous years, was still a factor.

On the other hand, the feedback from several of the RUDO's was that, in many ways, this Conference was better than its predecessors. They felt that the substantive areas covered were for the most part useful to explore with other RUDO's and UP, and that there were opportunities for them to engage in worthwhile discussions with their colleagues, both from the field and from Washington.

The major lesson to be taken away from this experience is that it is not necessary to load up on speakers and presenters. Conferences for experienced field people do not have to be saturated with external information. Workshop discussions about important issues among these experienced people are vastly more important than outside speakers who may or may not be relevant to the concerns of the participants.

The problem with the '98 Conference was that while people talked about it being interactive, and even worked with the facilitator to create such interactive discussions, at the Conference itself staff members tended to retreat into the more comfortable format of speaker(s) followed by questions and answers. While better than a straight lecture without Q & A, such a format rapidly becomes redundant and less engaging each time it is used.

One last important consideration is the "training of presenters" activity. Again, for this conference, those that took the time to lay out what they planned to do, and at least had some form of practice beforehand, had the best sessions. It is particularly important when you are organizing presenters, discussion leaders, and/or facilitators from outside, and even more important when they are from a different culture and have English as a non-native tongue. Such presenters should be required to come in at least a day before their time on the program, and to be "trained" by the conference facilitator and the lead AID person for that session. This experience would significantly reduce misunderstandings on topic, presentation style, leadership issues, and time management of the session. While such an approach would be slightly more costly, the payoff would be a much better session and conference.

### ***Substantive Lessons Learned***

- **Too many talking heads** – the lecture/presentation method was ineffective at times. People seemed to lose interest more quickly and were generally less engaged during some of the longer presentations.
- **Leave more time for discussion** – this relates directly to the "talking head" problem. Having more time for discussion would keep people more involved.
- **More breakout groups** – same as above.
- **Make sure outside presenters have an international perspective** – it is important that all presenters and/or facilitators have a clear idea of the situation in RUDO countries. While presenters may have valuable information to share, it is important that their context is relevant.
- **Don't have a 7-day conference** – The length of the conference led to "listening fatigue" on the part of the participants. If the conference needs to be this long, see the recommendations about fewer talking heads, and also consider leaving more time for individual meetings (don't over-program the days with presentations).

### ***Logistical Lessons Learned***

#### **Ronald Reagan Building/USAID Issues**

- If you are holding an event in the Ronald Reagan Building and it is not in USAID space, you have to have permission from GSA to place the signs in that space. We had receptions at both the Information Center and the Woodrow Wilson Center and were unable to place signs in the hallways to direct people to the events. We had to stand around the building and direct people instead.
- Caterers in the RRB must be approved. We had lined up one caterer to for our first

reception and had to cancel them and line up another caterer on short notice  
Currently the only approved caterer in the RRB is Bucks County Coffee Contact  
GSA for more details on caterers

- Caterers/film crews/anyone coming up through the loading dock must be cleared into the building and escorted to the site
- People coming in from the field who do not have badges for the RRB will need to be escorted by someone who does Alternatively, they could have an appointment made for them when they first get to Washington to have a badge made
- Alcoholic beverages must be either cash bar or donated USAID cannot pay for alcohol In addition, you must have a permit to have alcohol in the RRB or any government space

### Prepare for anything

- Always have a back-up speaker for your main events We had Hattie Babbitt lined up to speak at the Making Cities Work launching event and she had to cancel ~~about 2~~ days in advance We were luckily able to get Administrator Atwood to speak, but this caused a lot of stress that could've been prevented by lining up a second speaker well in advance
- Always have back-up rooms reserved/ don't use the Administrator's conference room The last three days of the conference were held in the RRB They were supposed to be in the Administrator's conference room, but we were bumped from the room two of the three days and ended up moving to three different locations in the last two days
- Try to the extent possible to have a list of the audio/visual equipment that will be needed and on which days Perhaps having each presenter list this as part of his/her presentation would help Even if the presenter is unsure of the need for a particular kind of equipment, have him/her request it to make sure it is available

### ***Recommendations for the future***

#### Site Selection

There are pros and cons to having the conference off-site Mostly pros The facility we used at Nations Bank was spacious, comfortable, well equipped, beautiful, and generally much nicer than the meeting rooms in the Reagan Building They were able to do all their own catering, were able to respond to all of our needs (they had phones, a/v equipment, copiers, computers, etc )

Nations Bank was an exceptional case, however We were only charged for the catering and not for room rental Most other hotels and conference facilities charge for rooms as well as catering It would be useful to either pursue a continued relationship with Nations Bank or begin searching for a different facility very early on

The advantage to using the Reagan Building for the last 3 days of the conference was that it increased attendance of Washington-based staff dramatically, as they were able to

come in and out for specific sessions and didn't have to commit to walking over to Nations Bank

Some thought might be given to having the conference outside of Washington in the future. The advantages and disadvantages to this idea are similar to those discussed above, namely, holding the conference in a facility equipped to handle such events is advantageous, but it can be costly and can negatively impact the attendance of USAID/Washington staff

### **Conclusions**

Next time, it will be important to allow the facilitator a freer hand in developing the design from the outset. It is a great deal easier to facilitate a design that has been developed as a whole entity, as opposed to one that has been designed piecemeal. It is much more difficult to make such a patchwork design work.

This freer hand does not mean a unilateral design. Rather it means that the facilitator takes all the needs and expectations of those involved in the conference and puts together a complete draft design from opening to conclusion. This draft design is then presented for comments and additional input. Following this process, appropriate revisions can be made. The value of such a process is that it ensures that all the technical, political, financial and administrative elements desired for the conference are included, but are designed to maximize the interactive and discussive activities, as well as encouraging more input from more of the participants. It also allows for differences in methods and techniques from session to session, thereby reducing repetition and incipient boredom.