



Huairou Commission

EVALUATION REPORT: Grassroots Women's Participation in Habitat JAM

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Evaluation Report

Summary

The following evaluation assesses the facilitation and participation of grassroots women in the Habitat JAM. The paper is outlined as follows:

- Introduction: The Huairou Commission and the technology gap
- Process: The organizational process to engage grassroots women in the Habitat JAM
- Outcomes: What happened at the Habitat JAM
- Obstacles: Barriers of the Habitat JAM
- Successes: Victories of the Habitat JAM
- Overall Evaluation: What women said about Habitat JAM
- Conclusion: An assessment of the process and ideas for the future

I. Introduction

Founded at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, The Huairou Commission is a global coalition that forges strategic partnerships to advance the capacity of grassroots women worldwide to strengthen and create sustainable communities. Consisting of networks, institutions and individual professionals it links grassroots women's community development organizations to partners for access to resources, information sharing and political spaces. At the same time, it links development professionals to on-the-ground practice. Currently, the network focuses its joint efforts on governance, AIDS, disaster, secure tenure and post-conflict. The Huairou Commission brings together networks, institutions and individual professionals to participate in a coordinated way in global conferences such as the World Urban Forum or the Commission on the Status of Women and activities such as the Local to Local Dialogues. Working at these different levels (community, professional, institutional), the Huairou Commission confronts varying levels of expertise in implementing communications technology that it must reconcile, in order to create spaces where all partners share their voices equally. Previously working only within physical dialogue spaces at U.N. conferences and other such opportunities, the members of the Huairou Commission had not widely explored conference and communications such as Habitat JAM.

Habitat JAM offered a unique opportunity for grassroots women to participate and voice their expertise on equal footing with more traditionally recognized development experts. It also fulfilled the Huairou



Women in Huancayo, Peru meet for face to face discussions prior to posting on JAM.

Commission goal of linking professionals to on-the-ground practice, by sharing examples directly from the grassroots membership. While women may have felt reluctant to participate in a process so foreign to them, the opportunity and potential gains outweighed the potential drawbacks. Most of the groups, both the coordinators and their larger constituencies, had little or no previous participation in blogs, bulletin boards or chat rooms, yet they leaped at the opportunity to participate in Habitat JAM.

For three valuable days, grassroots organizations found the means to overcome some barriers to using the Internet as an international networking tool, thanks to the funds from Habitat JAM that the Huairou Commission distributed. Grassroots organizations in urban slum neighborhoods, peri-urban communities and rural villages face many barriers to using the Internet. Grassroots constituencies suffer from rates of low literacy and low computer literacy. Many communicate in their local native languages, and Internet communication sources such as websites and listserves often do not even provide sufficient translation into dominant languages such as French and Spanish. (This is unfortunately the case with many Huairou Commission communications as well, due to lack of funding.) Computer access is limited to residents of marginalized communities; when access is achieved, computer use is impeded by frequent disturbances in the electricity and phone lines, as well as consistently slow connection speeds. These barriers prevent members, included professional partners that coordinate activities between grassroots women's groups and the Huairou Commission Secretariat, from regularly reviewing updates sent through listserves, let alone managing regular e-mails received.

These barriers also prevent the women from experimenting or exploring opportunities through the Internet. Given the funds to be used for needs such as transportation, translation, Internet connections, Internet café rentals, babysitting, women took the time to patiently introduce each other to the Internet and to the Habitat JAM. Given that the Habitat JAM was a limited time activity, for which the Huairou Commission and Habitat JAM generated appealing publicity materials, women felt motivated to participate. Ongoing opportunities such as online bulletin boards or the existence of various Huairou Commission listserves, through Yahoo Groups, do not generate the same inspiration to participate. While ongoing opportunities can be repeatedly "put off until tomorrow," and do not provide the assurance of immediate feedback and interaction from one's peers, the 72 hour Habitat JAM contradicted this norm. Groups used this opportunity to advance their own local and national networking and organizing activities as well as to network with organizations in the global networks of the Huairou Commission, mainly GROOTS International and Women and Habitat Network, Latin America and the Caribbean.

II. Process

The Huairou Commission is a coalition consisting of Member Networks. These global networks in themselves have their own organizing processes set in place that were prepared to take on the activities of preparing for Habitat JAM. The Secretariat, in New York City, worked to communicate the basic idea of JAM to the Networks and directly to the members of the Networks. The complex networks in the Huairou Commission (mainly GROOTS International and Women and Habitat - Latin America and the Caribbean) consists of rural groups of women, that communicate with professional partner women with access to Internet, English communication and other resources. These women communicate with other leaders in their geographic region and with point people in their networks. The Secretariat has developed close relationships with these point people. Thus, a complex network of actors is already disposed and waiting for opportunities to be activated. The Habitat JAM presented a rare opportunity to activate this network of "live wires," and see it come alive!

The Secretariat carried out e-mail campaigns to the Networks, as well as the partners and individuals in the Huairou Commission. Next, it sent out applications and ideas for how groups could develop a grassroots process for participating in the JAM, by paying translators, holding face-to-face meetings ahead of time, or working in pairs to support each other. Staff and interns at the office communicated with groups showing interest, often walking them through the JAM process by phone.

Next, (leaders from three continents) in Huairou, with experience in drawing out the intellectual and policy implications from grassroots women's work, developed a set of Input Guidelines. By thinking through the goals of advancing Huairou Commission perspectives at our WUF activities, they came up with questions that would guide the groups to frame their work within the Forum Topics of JAM as well as the issues of governance and partnership that are being developed as key Huairou perspectives. The knowledge harvested from these discussions is hoped to guide the Huairou Commission activities at the World Urban Forum: Grassroots Women's International Academy, Networking Events, Daily Women's Caucus, Our Best Practices, and the Women's Roundtable.

At the same time, staff at the Secretariat developed funding guidelines and criteria for groups to receive funding. The funding was used strategically to support organizations that are contributing to the growth of their Network, groups that could guarantee a high number of participants, and organizations that have been highly active in our activities. For example, Ntankah Village Women Common Initiative Group is a new organization that is joining GROOTS International. By supporting them to participate, Huairou was supporting the growth of GROOTS, and was supporting a grassroots group to participate in its first international activity.

The organizations on the ground demonstrated a high level of organization. For example, in Jamaica, the Construction Resource and Development Centre (CRDC) partnered with Sistren Theatre Collective to bring grassroots women's groups together to participate. With very little communication to or request of support from the Huairou Secretariat, they organized about 200 women from various areas to participate. They made the best of their local resources by finding a woman in each group that was Internet savvy to support the others to participate. In this way, they sat in rather large clusters by computers, discussing and inputting as a group. CRDC and Sistren Theatre have worked with these grassroots groups for several years in different capacities. Their long time relationship of solidarity and support with these groups has provided both the two partner organizations and the grassroots groups with the opportunity to quickly collaborate and participate in exciting opportunities.

In India, Swayam Shiksham Prayog demonstrates a successful organizing model on a much larger scale, of up to 3,000 at one Melava held prior to the JAM. Their experience of organizing Melavas, or information fairs comes out of a long history of working individually with grassroots groups. These groups consist of savings and credit groups that work in federations with one another. Their high level of local organization makes it a smooth process for the women to participate in large numbers, spread the word and gather input from their local groups. They also carry a strong responsibility for reporting back to their local savings and credit groups.

III. Outcomes

The Huairou Commission was responsible for facilitating support and organizing grassroots women’s groups to be able to participate effectively and thoroughly in the UN Habitat JAM. The Huairou Commission supported groups to hold pre-dialogues in order to harvest their main points and strategies and them to organize to put these inputs directly into the JAM. As a result, 8,703 grassroots women contributed their solutions, actionable ideas and concerns indirectly to the JAM through representatives, and 611 of these grassroots women participated directly in the JAM. Grassroots voices from the Member Networks of the Huairou Commission came from Argentina, Canada, Jamaica, India, Philippines, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, Cameroon, Russia, South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe, and voices from groups outside the Huairou Network came from Nepal, Bangladesh, Uganda and Kosovo.

In addition to their contributions to the Habitat JAM, the Huairou Commission and its Member Networks perceived other outcomes such as networking, movement-building through a feeling of solidarity created in JAM, and a rich level of discussion that has been documented and will be shared in an internal document, and as a preparatory for taking the thinking and the practices of our movement to the World Urban Forum in June, 2006. The groups that are either members of loose affiliates of the Huairou Commission found out that they had much in common with each other, by participating in the JAM. Long time members discovered the voices of new members, and new members saw the value of being in a network reconfirmed as they recognized their “sisters” around the world had similar things to say! There were also concrete networking opportunities: one organization from Women and Habitat Network in Latin America communicated through a chat room translator with a GROOTS Canada member. The GROOTS Canada member offered to support the Latin American group on battling environmental struggles in their neighborhood in Cordoba, Argentina. They will continue to communicate and build on this new connection.

Groups entered the JAM in a variety of ways. For example, Canada used a “talk and type” method where a focus group type setting was created in order for people to discuss and brainstorm; they then contributed these ideas in to the JAM through available laptops. The format of guided questions and conversation was a common method used by groups to harvest and input insights. Often groups first held pre-dialogues to gather and attain consensus from large groups and then group leaders/facilitators input the group

8,703 women and men contributed indirectly to the JAM through representatives.

611 participated directly in the JAM.

Participating Countries:

- Argentina
- Bangladesh
- Bolivia
- Cameroon
- Canada
- Chile
- Columbia
- India
- Jamaica
- Kenya
- Kosovo
- Nepal
- Nicaragua
- Paraguay
- Peru
- Philippines
- Russia
- South Africa
- Uganda
- United States
- Uruguay
- Zimbabwe

“This is fantastic. Thanks to technology we can exchange information with people that we will surely never see, say what we think as women, what we want for our cities, and we hope that this doesn’t just help to better our city of Montevideo, but that other cities can also improve.” Cristina, Community Center, Montevideo, Uruguay, Cotidiano Mujer

findings into the JAM. While achieving consensus was difficult at times (see Challenges for more details), this method sparked fruitful internal dialogues and debates.

Groups met in NGO offices, internet cafes, and other community spaces. For example, one organization entered the JAM at a center for women and technology. In addition, groups often partnered with NGOs and local authorities to enter and access the JAM. A group from Bangladesh held participated in pre-dialogues with grassroots women and local government officials to discuss organizing and the conditions of basic services for those living in slum settlements.

Participants: “40 slum dwellers, Grassroots Women Consortium, CUP, BTS, Disable Federation, Doctor, Engineer, Writer, Poet and Social Worker.”
-Quazi Baby, PDAP, Bangladesh

While some groups chose to focus on one or two forum topics, many chose to contribute to a range of topics such as healthcare and education (including community responses to HIV/AIDS), land tenure, safety in our cities (including violence against women and indigenous groups; women’s role in relief, rescue and rehabilitation; and community solutions to insecurity such as community policing models), water and sanitation (including access to basic services), finance and governance (including expanding micro finance services and women’s participation in decision-making processes), and improving the lives of slum dwellers (including capacity building for communities; organizing and advocacy).

Grassroots women were active leaders and participants in the JAM. For example, in JAM forum six, Safety and Security, grassroots women led dialogues, which appeared as two of the seven hot topics. Grassroots women not only posted questions to the JAM forums, they also actively dialogued with a range of participants, networked with other grassroots groups, organizations and professionals, and presented a number of actionable ideas and translatable solutions.

IV. Obstacles

As indicated by the outcomes, there were a diversity of grassroots women on the Habitat JAM, inputting information in a variety of methods. Across all regions and methods, however, there were some common obstacles that the grassroots women had to overcome. In the pre-JAM planning process, the Huairou Commission was sensitive to not make assumptions about technology. However, many of the groups indicated that they had trouble conceptualizing or explaining how exactly the Habitat JAM was going to work.

“when the internet was not functioning on Dec 2nd, we could not manage to find an alternative internet café for all three communities”
-GROOTS Kenya

Although some additional information may have aided the meetings leading into the Habitat JAM, the majority of obstacles occurred within the three days, December 1-3. In these three days the two primary obstacles were technology and language barriers. Several groups had trouble with registration, not knowing how to register or experiencing technical problems within the website. Many women were jamming from computers with much slower broadband than needed for Habitat JAM. Participants

from the ICASA in Nigeria had to wait several minutes for each time they refreshed the page. Some organizations, including GROOTS Kenya, had difficulty getting onto the Internet at all. Jill I Conway and Carol Njogu explained that, “when the internet was not functioning on Dec 2nd, we could not manage to find an alternative internet café for all three communities.” Some of the grassroots women did not like the layout of the forum discussions, citing too many subjects, too many threads, or difficult navigation as confusing or time consuming. The evaluation submitted from DAMPA, which included over 200 women from the Philippines in JAM activities, stated, “during the JAM, the information produced was tremendous, and it was very difficult sometimes to keep up. The webpage did not have a button for jumping backward several pages instead of per page.” They said that a lot of time was lost just scrolling through the pages. Other obstacles mentioned surrounded language, that the only options were English and French. Although many of the groups hired translators, this slowed down the process and their ability to input information. Liliana Rainero from CISCA, representing neighborhood women’s groups in Argentina, said that she would have liked to see Spanish forums with equal format to the English and French forums. Anne Michaud, a subject matter expert in Safer Cities spoke about the marginalization of the French speakers. She said that the French forum did not feel global and many of the French speaking grassroots women were disheartened. A final concern that was expressed by several participants is the degree to which the dialogues will be preserved and utilized by the United Nations. Jill Conway and Carol Njogu from GROOTS Kenya in Soweto said, “we feel there is no way for us to tell if our inputs will be included [in the World Urban Forum].”

V. Successes

For the grassroots women’s organizations, full participation in the Habitat JAM far exceeded logging onto the Internet of December 1st. The benefits of the JAM thus occurred in preparatory and discussion meetings as well as at the computer. The pre-JAM meetings enabled women to convene around issues in their communities. They were able to facilitate dialogues and look at content. Albina Batusha from She-Era, representing women from Kosovo, said of pre-JAM content discussions, that they had “a better sense of sharing and better support from the whole group.” Many of these content dialogues may otherwise not have happened. Quazi Baby from PDAP, representing 500 women from Bangladesh, said, “Participation level was good, although it is first time for them, but they had spoken their sufferings very freely.” Women were able to network with other community leaders, professionals and non-grassroots women activists to discuss the issues in their community. The Pre-JAM dialogues, distinct from the JAM itself, facilitated an opportunity to mobilize and to discuss content. For those organizations skeptical of the use of this information in the World Urban Forum, or for those organizations who were not able to access the internet, these dialogues alone were a valuable asset.



Pre-events such as this rally by Participatory Development Action Programme in Daka, Bangladesh, provided motivation and personal contact for women who would otherwise have little motivation to participate in an Internet event.

One of the primary objectives of the Habitat JAM itself, which we feel we accomplished in several ways, was to provide women with a voice. As women's voices often go unnoticed, this format of democratic unregulated digital input allowed women to speak freely. Femie Duka from DAMPA said that there was an, "environment of hope" that their voices will be heard in the international community." Albina Batusha from She-Era, representing women in Kosovo, said, "Habitat JAM has included participants from around the world and has proven to be a very positive thing since we shared views and ideas." Olga Segovia from SUR, representing 35 women in Chile, expressed that, "When the opportunity to express their opinions arises quite often women speak up extensively." The barriers for women's participation in community dialogues were broken down by the Habitat JAM. It is only the utilization of those dialogues that is yet to be determined.

Femie Duka from DAMPA, in a list of several positive effects of the engagement of women in community activities, said that women were validated as mobilizers, women were recognized as credible in terms of managing finance, and that "public officials also perceive women to be more incorruptible than men, especially older women." Smita Sawant for SSP, representing 4,000 women in India, said, "for us we feel organization played the role of facilitator and putting grassroots ideas in international language" She said that it was a learning experience, and more, that it did not suffer ongoing work. "No wait for visa and hassle with travel agents."

The most basic success was for grassroots women who had never participated in an international activity, to have this kind of exposure. A coordinator from Montevideo, Uruguay, commented that the women saw that they shared problems with other women, such as the problem of living at a far distance from basic services. The participants recognized the gravity of the problems in other places, for example the African women must walk kilometers through the desert in order to bring water to their homes."

Another success of the Habitat JAM was the ability to share practices and learn from others participating in the dialogue, grassroots women and professionals alike. Albina Batusha from She-Era said they made contacts for operation. Other organizations engaged in dialogues on

strategies for improved livelihoods. Smita Sawant from SSP in India was able to share ideas on water sustainability with academics and civic leaders alike. This sort of exchange is extremely valuable and is not often achieved. Femie Duka from DAMPA said that the richness and diversity of sharing of experiences worked well in the workshop forum.



Jan Peterson, Chair of the Huairou Commission and Sandy Schilen, Global Coordinator of GROOTS International collaborate in posting ideas to JAM, at the Grassroots Women's International Academy on AIDS, in Nigeria.

VI. Overall Evaluation

Taking into consideration both the successes and obstacles throughout participation in the Habitat JAM, we asked the grassroots women's organizations to rank their overall experiences. Using the indicators, excellent, very good, good, fair and poor, we tallied overall responses. Figure 1.1 represents all of our survey respondents. The majority of grassroots women indicated an excellent or very good experience, with only one

respondent indicating good, one respondent ranking fair, and no respondents ranking the Habitat JAM as a poor experience. Our surveys also asked for an explanation of the designated ranking. Although the explanations varied, those organizations that ranked the experience excellent did so because of the opportunity to exchange ideas and read input from people around the world,

Grassroots Women's Overall Ranking of Experience in Habitat JAM

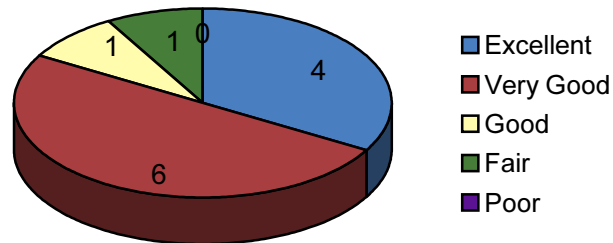


Figure 1.1.

the opportunity to have a voice in a UN facilitated event, and the opportunity to engage in intra-organizational dialogues. Those organizations that ranked the experience less than excellent often posed grievances concerning technology, the format of the Habitat JAM itself, or language barriers. Lajana Manandhar from Lumanti, representing 30 people from Nepal said, "overall it was good to be exposed to so many thoughts/ideas and also an opportunity to respond." However, foremost, Lajana wrote, "Our office computer was slow. (Frustrating)." Liza Bozhkova from ICIWF, described the overall experience as, "from the one hand Russian women have a big problem with English, communication and understanding the new ideas and problems, from the other hand we were receiving new contacts, huge experience participating in world event and receiving new knowledge, It was beautiful experience." For many, excitement surrounded their ability to input their own experiences and ideas, into a forum in which they could educate people around the world. Olga Segovia from SUR, representing 35 women in Chile, commented that, "It is the first time grassroots women's groups from Chile take part in an event such as Habitat JAM, in which they can discuss in the context of a global event, the problems they face on a daily basis." The statements received for the overall experience of participating in the Habitat JAM were overwhelmingly positive. Grassroots women were excited to have participated in a global event and excited to have access to new technologies.

In addition to asking respondents to rank their experience, we asked grassroots women their interest in participating in an event like Habitat JAM again. Despite any aforementioned obstacles, all groups replied yes, some with much enthusiasm, that they would like to participate in another online chat dialogue. The only concern was presented by Anne Michaud, a subject matter expert in the area of Safer Cities, who is curious to see if or how the Habitat JAM dialogues will be used in the World Urban Forum III. While some participants felt concerned and maintained a concentrated

focus on the concrete outcomes for the WUF, others felt the experience of organizing and participating in an Internet forum as rewarding in and of itself.

VII. Conclusion

The Huairou Commission has learned a great deal about its capacity for “activating” its network, and for participating in Internet processes which are traditionally non-inclusive. Members networked with one another, networked with organizations and individuals outside of the Huairou Commission, and discovered how to harness the power of the Internet.

The experience of using the Internet is often left to the professional partners in larger NGOs. Huairou Commission members reach other generally by communicating through these partners and grassroots representatives that have access to the Internet. However, the Habitat JAM gave the grassroots women the opportunity to communicate directly with one another across continents. The overwhelming experience of chatting in Spanish between groups around the Latin American continent, for example, demonstrated the eagerness of grassroots women to connect in these ways. The Huairou Commission will use this fantastic experience as a springboard for future chat room, bulletin board and Internet conference activities. We have been brainstorming about how to use chat rooms or JAMs to strengthen our network relationships among grassroots women, how to bring the members of Thematic Campaigns together, and how build on the excitement of JAM for future activities and for WUF.

The Secretariat also reflected on its organizing process. While we generally felt content with the process and outcomes, we could have sent out detailed notices earlier and concentrated on sending out contracts and Input Guidelines earlier. During the JAM itself, we would have liked to specify times for our groups to “meet” together and participate in the same discussion or discussion thread. Grassroots women from CONAMURI in Paraguay noted that they would have liked to set a specific moment and place in the JAM where grassroots women could meet and exchange ideas. We also could have coordinated our voice and our responses to particular Hot Topics.

The many lessons learned, both on the power of this experience and the obstacles to making it really work for us, will be implemented in future activities. The experience itself has left members of the Huairou Commission feeling the solidarity and understanding the common ground that we all share in our development work.