



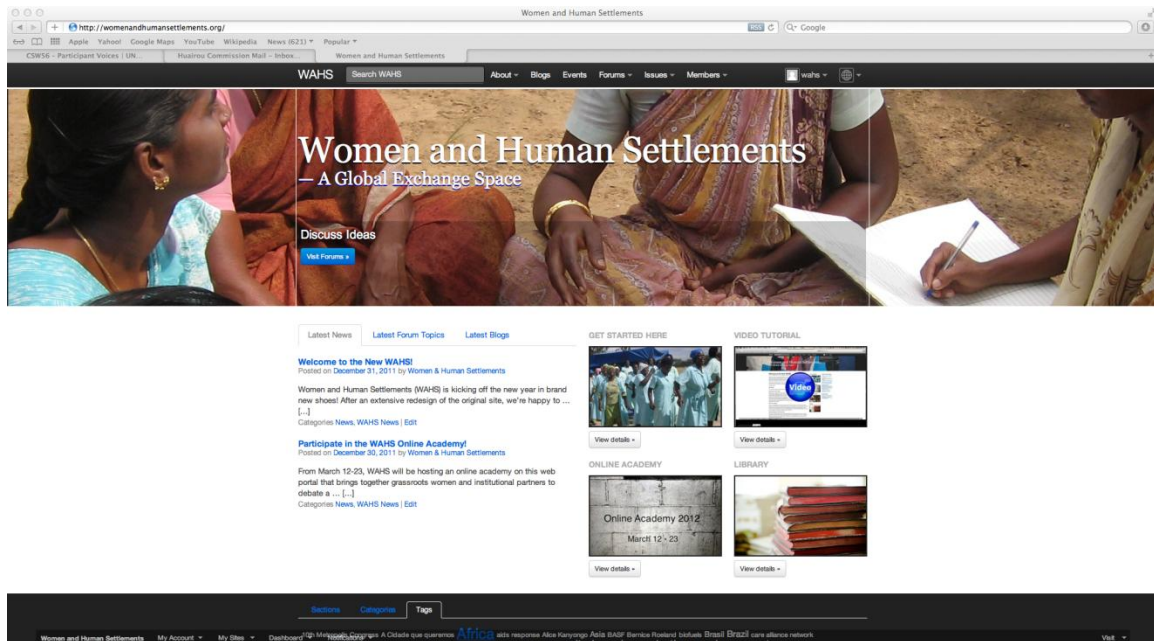
**Final Report**  
**Women and Human Settlements [WAHS] Online Information Portal**  
[www.womenandhumansettlements.org](http://www.womenandhumansettlements.org)

**I. Background**

The Women and Human Settlements online portal is a collaborative project between the Huairou Commission and UN-HABITAT to build an online exchange space for women active in the field of community development and those working to support them. Women and Human Settlements aspires to be an online community of practitioners, researchers, grassroots women leaders and development professionals, created for the purpose of sharing knowledge on women’s empowerment, gender equality, and human settlements issues.

This report encompasses the final phase of the WAHS portal project, during which the emphasis was on two projects. For one, the Huairou Commission initiated a radical redesign of the WAHS website (originally launched in the winter of 2010). Secondly, HC continued its online media literacy program and laptop distribution, culminating into an Online Grassroots Academy in March of 2012. This report will specifically focus on these two projects in more detail below.

Picture 1: the new front page of the WAHS portal





## II. Website redesign

Following the initial launch of the WHAS website in December 2010, the Huirou Commission (HC) reached out to its broad constituency to all become members on portal. In the months following, HC solicited input from members, both grassroots and institutional partners, to evaluate the user-friendliness of the website and make recommendations for improvements to the first draft of the site. Based on user recommendations, HC created a redesign plan and solicited proposals from various web designers. The decision to reach out to a new group of web developers was informed by an increasingly strained partnership with the original designer, Elgon Project Management, who turned out to be highly unresponsive to requests to make the changes necessary to bring the site to the level of functionality originally envisioned.

With the new web developer collective, Svaha LLC, the Huirou Commission embarked on a radical redesign of the original site, that not only enhanced visual appeal and user friendliness of the site, but increased the functionality of the website beyond the original vision to include popular social media functions such as personal activity feeds and online “status updates.”

Below is compact overview of the new site. In addition, The Huirou Commission created these user tutorials in [English](#) and [Spanish](#), available on the front page of the site, provide a comprehensive overview of essential features of the new site launched in February 2012.



**The new *Women and Human Settlements (WAHS) Online Portal* –  
An overview of new features and enhancements gained through the redesign.**

New Fresh Design

- A fun, colorful space with a strong visual focus on women in their communities
- A personal identity for Women and Human Settlements by adopting the acronym WAHS as a brand throughout the site

Improved user-friendliness

- Less visual clutter
- Clearer spaces in which to navigate
  - o Strong distinction between Forums and Blogs
  - o Issue-based forum categories
  - o Individual discussion spaces for each forum category

Improved Functionality

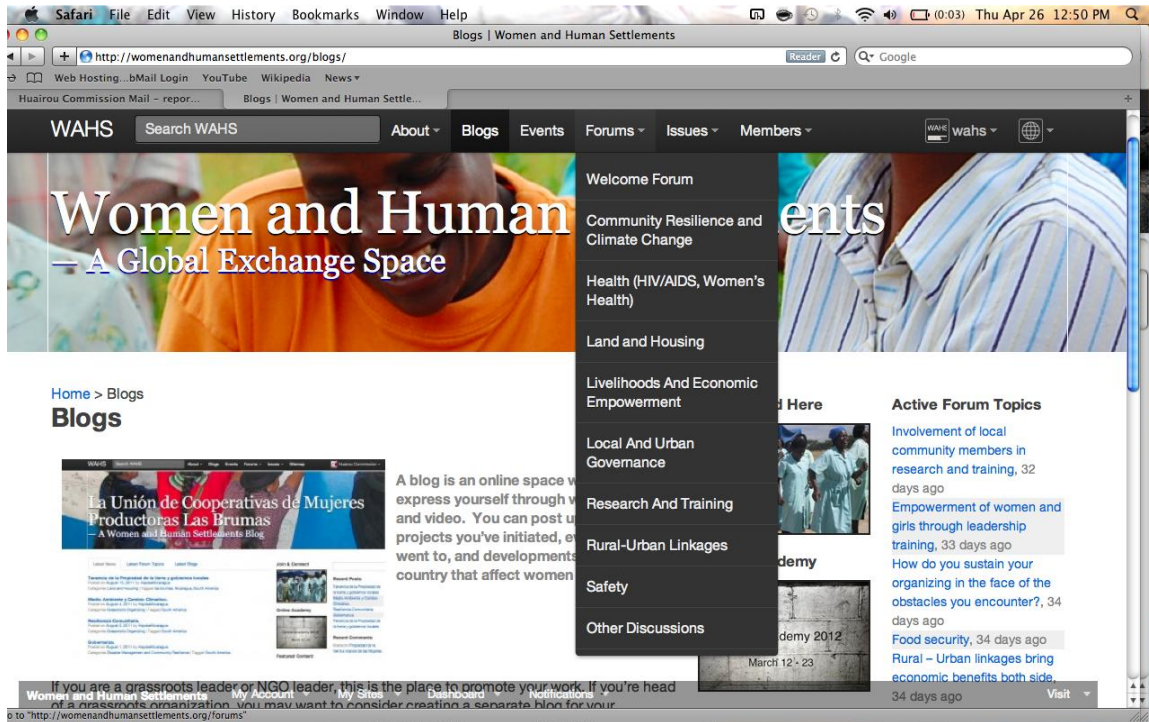
- Organizational sites/blogs and much more
  - o By using a Multi-Sites plugin, each user can create their own site within the main WAHS portal, with the possibility to directly link to their customized URL to promote their work (e.g. Nicaraguan grassroots group Las Brumas can build a blog at [www.LasBrumas.womenandhumansettlements.org](http://www.LasBrumas.womenandhumansettlements.org) )
- By incorporating Facebook- and Twitter-like features, we created a true social networking site for women working on human settlements issues.
  - o All users have a personal Activity Feed where they can post media and status updates. E.g. “HC is working on a presentation for CSW right now,” “Haydee is canvassing for the upcoming elections.”
  - o users can send each other messages in the style of Twitter, using the format “@username” to reach and refer to another member on the site.
  - o users can make people their “friend”
  - o users can make certain topics their “favorite” so they can easily find their way back to them



**Forums**

One major improvement gained through the redesign is a clearer distinction between Forums and Blogs, both visually and functionally. Each member/user on the WAHS site has access to the main WAHS forum space, which is divided in 9 categories, or sub-forums.

Picture 3: The Forums menu



Inside the forums, groups can start topic-based discussions. Members who are new to the site are invited to post in the Welcome Forum as a first way to connect to other users/ members.

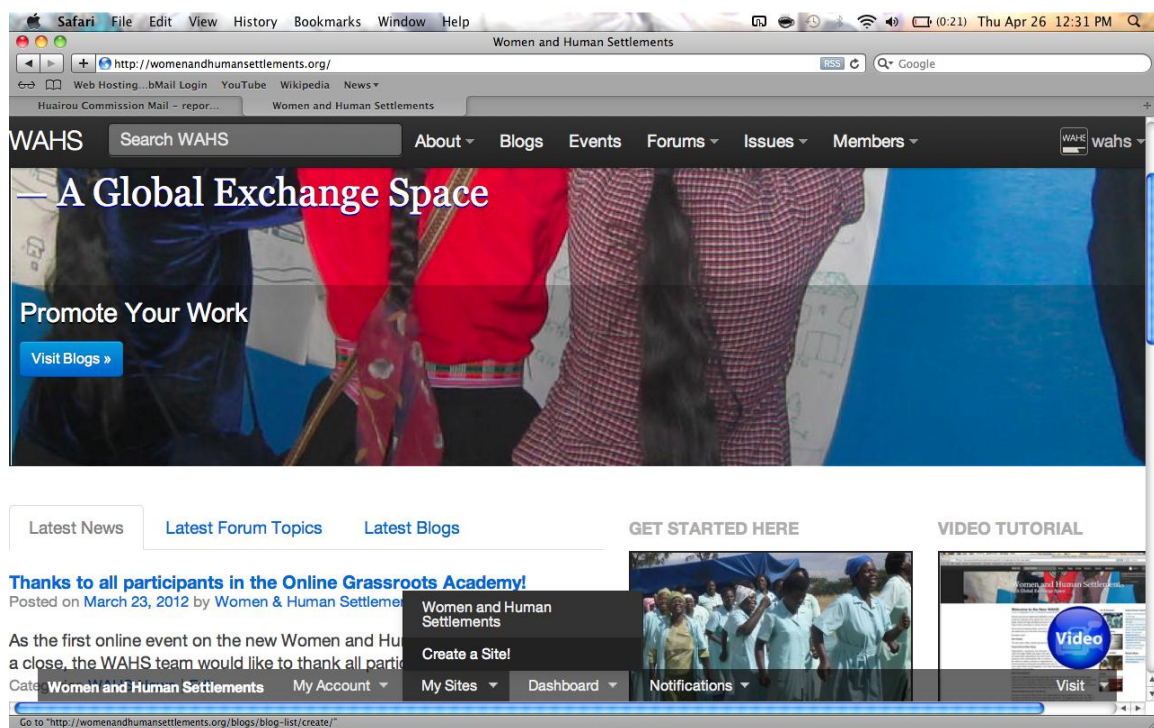
In addition to being active in the forums, independent practitioners, researchers and representatives of organizations who wish to create a permanent online presence for themselves or their organization can chose to create their own site (or “blog”) under the umbrella of the WAHS site, where they can describe and promote their ongoing work.



## Blogs

Since the launch of the new design of the WAHS web portal in February 2012, a number of grassroots groups and international practitioners have begun to create their own blogs/ websites within the portal, where they post reports on their work, as well as photos and videos of community activities. Blogs allow grassroots groups and organizations to have a permanent web presence that builds their profile as development practitioners, and facilitates their online information sharing and fundraising efforts.

Picture 4: "Create a site"



The picture below shows the blog of a Peruvian grassroots group Mujeres Unidas, based in an informal community in Lima. As shown in the address field, the group chose the web URL [www.mujeresunidas.womenandhumansettlements.org](http://www.mujeresunidas.womenandhumansettlements.org).



Picture 5: Front page of a member blog site



The blue titles listed in the center of the page (above) represent individual blog posts written by members of Mujeres Unidas. Clicking on any of the titles reveals the underlying post (below), in which Mujeres Unidas have included descriptions and photographs of their community work (below).

Picture 6: A blog post





Once a representative of a group or organization has chosen to create their own blog site, they can grant various levels of author rights to their site to other users on the WAHS portal. This means different members of one organization can have direct access through their user account to a shared blog and thus collectively contribute to the organization's web presence.

### **Bridging the Digital Divide – What WAHS does for grassroots organizations?**

#### Fully functional websites

Practitioners in the field of women and human settlements, including grassroots women, who previously had no web presence are now able to easily create their own fully functional websites within the portal. In addition to writing blog posts on issues of interest to them, groups are able to customize their blogs/sites by adding additional static pages where they can show background information on their organization, upload PDF publications or contact information. In addition, groups benefit from the clearinghouse-like nature of the WAHS site, as visitors to the site easily stumble upon blogs by practitioners and organizations they would otherwise not have known about.

#### Easy setup

Unlike setting up a professional website from scratch – which requires significant knowledge of blogging platforms, as well as searching and paying for a host server and a domain name provider – users on the WAHS can set up a blog with one click after becoming a registered member of the site (**see above**). As webhosting and domain-names are provided by the WAHS site, costs are moved away from the grassroots and absorbed centrally by the Huairou Commission and UN-HABITAT.

#### Flexible hosting

To facilitate this ongoing expansion of websites that are part of the portal, the WAHS site is hosted with a server company that provides flexible server setup, thus allowing for the WAHS host server to expand in size as the number of websites under its umbrella grows. Likewise, increased traffic during online events like the Online Grassroots Academy in March was offset by a temporary increase in the server size (and monthly billing) to prevent slow connections and dropouts. Following the academy, the server size and monthly hosting fee was decreased again to levels needed for day-to-day operation of the WAHS portal.

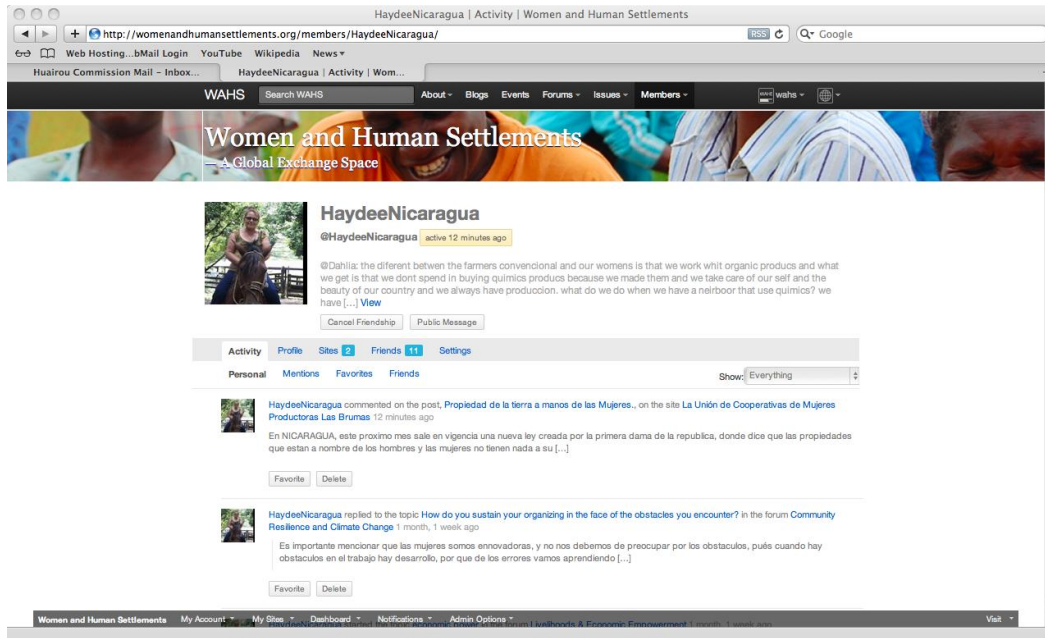
### **Activity Feed**

All users on the site, whether they choose to set up a blog site or not, are assigned a personal profile page that includes personal information and an automatic activity feed that displays their activities on the WAHS site to other users. Users of Facebook will easily recognize this feature as similar to a “Wall” that allows users to upload photos and videos, link to news stories and write status updates. Like on Facebook, users can leave each other personal notes and can comment on activities.



By including the Activity Feed feature, the website redesign has added an aspect of popular social networking to the WAHS site, which encourages users to check in regularly and see what their “friends” on the site are doing and allows for lighthearted interaction on the site, in addition to serious discussion on development issues. The feature thus contributes to WAHS getting “a life of its” own that essential to the site becoming a vibrant communications hub.

Picture 7: Example of a user’s Activity Feed



Picture 8: Close up of Activity Feed







### **Moving forward**

Since the re-launch of the website, we have seen an influx of user requests from individuals who are not currently a part of the Huairou Commission, both grassroots and institutional partners, and are receiving requests from international organizations to use the WAHS as a way to engage and learn from grassroots practitioners' knowledge.

As the WAHS portal continues to develop a life of its own, it becomes increasingly important to commit staffing and financial resources to respond to the expanding demands of services associated with the site. These range from continued support to existing users with various levels of media literacy, to new and potential users who are interested in the networking platform that WAHS provides. In addition, the WAHS site requires continuous web maintenance of the site and its host server— maintenance needs that will grow in tandem with the number of users and websites within the portal.

Spam control is another major point of importance relating to a membership site like the WAHS portal. In an effort to keep the site spam-free, each new user application on the WAHS portal is currently manually approved by our web administrator, whose daily tasks further include one-on-one support of active site users and responding to inquiries by individuals and institutions who have come across the WAHS portal in their online search for development and human-settlements related topics. In moving forward, the website will continue to require the daily attention of a web administrator who serves a dual role as point-of-first -contact for technical issues, and a proactive media trainer who reaches out to users to maximize the outreach potential of their sites. The Huairou Commission is committed to continuing to facilitate media trainings and host special discussion events that connects groups around special subject areas and hopes that UN HABITAT will continue its support to these projects to continue to increase the relevance of the WAHS portal in the field of international development.

### **Financial Statement**

While the WIPHS grant will be included in the overall project audit in November 2012, associated with the Amendment to the Agreement of Cooperation between United Nations Human Settlements Programme and the Huairou Commission (17 April – 31 December 2012), we are providing a summary financial statement of total spending through the duration of the WIPHS project (Annex 1).

A note regarding budget line 4A – Needs Assessment: As mentioned further on in this report (see section III. Online Academy), one major obstacle to bridging the digital divide between grassroots groups in the global south and their peers in the global North is a continued lack of access to computers and internet technology, paired with continued high costs of both to poor women. In light of the fact that the cost for performing the original needs assessment surveys in various communities in 2010 was less than



budgeted in budget line 4A, after distribution of Academy preparation funds The Huirou Commission was left with additional funds in this line. The Huirou Commission proceeded to put these funds to purchasing additional equipment that went directly into the field to benefit groups in their endeavor to involve more community members in online communication and documenting their practices. We trust that this decision to allocate additional funds to products benefitting grassroots practitioners based on the outcomes of our needs assessment can be considered spending in line with the intention of these funds.

### III. Online Academy

To celebrate the launch of the new design of the Women and Human Settlements online portal, the Huirou Commission hosted a two-week online dialogue from March 14-23, 2012 that brought together grassroots practitioners, academics and development professionals around important themes in the lives of women at the community level.

Grassroots women (and a few men) representing over **25 organization** spanning more than a **dozen countries** answered and debated questions in three theme-based Forums: *Community and Innovation*; *Policy and Partnership*; and *Grassroots Organizing and Leadership Development*.

Within these Forum spaces, participants showcased their own work at the community level and Academy participants shared personal and professional experiences to answer a set of questions that, among other topics, identified grassroots solutions to concrete development problems; teased out the essential ingredients of win-win partnerships between community practitioners and (local) authorities; and explored the successes and challenges grassroots group experience in their efforts to build women’s leadership and mobilize local constituencies.

Picture 9: Front page for the three main forums

#### Academy Forums



##### Community & Innovation

What innovative solutions have grassroots groups found for concrete development problems in their community, and what makes these solutions innovative? In this forum, grassroots groups and institutional partners will explore these and other questions, including, How can these innovations be transferred and scaled up? What are unique values and assets of (informal) communities that residents wish to hold onto in the ongoing process of urbanization, and how do these values and assets feed into community-led projects.



##### Grassroots Organizing & Leadership Development

In this forum, participants will share their experiences of organizing and mobilizing local communities. What conditions and capacities are needed for grassroots women to find innovative solutions to problems of rapidly urbanizing settlements? What obstacles do grassroots groups encounter in their organizing efforts and how do groups develop women's leadership? What values do groups organize around and how do they organize toward those values?



##### Policy & Partnership

In this forum space, grassroots groups, institutional partners and development professionals can share their experiences in designing and implementing partnerships between communities and (local) authorities. Within this forum, participants will explore the essential elements of win-win partnerships; what are obstacles to successful partnership; and how can successful partnerships be sustained and replicated.



In the weeks during and leading up to the academy, the WAHS portal team approved close to 150 new user registrations, bringing the total of users/ members on the site to 439. The number of new registrations (150), however, by far does not reflect the total number of participants in the Online Academy, many of which collectively shared user accounts to participate, while many more were involved in community focus groups that harvested key information prior to the online event. Although estimating the total number of participants is made difficult by this fact, based on written reports by participating groups that list the numbers of community members involved in Academy activities, a conservative estimate of 400 people worldwide contributed to the event.

Picture 10: A grassroots group participating in the academy



Above: SWID, in Uganda, brought together 12 grassroots women from various districts to participate in the Online Academy. As part of the groups local preparation, “Grassroots women were explained the objectives of the event and they were initiated in how to use a computer to share information by use of online service.” In addition to using the laptop they received in 2011 through the Portal Media Literacy Program, SWID utilized a small preparation grant to transport participants to an internet café and purchase a number of 3G USB internet modems.

Groups applied different strategies to involve a large group of community members, and in some cases local political officials, regardless of often-limited numbers of computers



to access the internet. The Huairou Commission distributed a set of questions prior to the online event, which allowed groups to prepare answers collectively, expanding the total participation far beyond the core group of representatives who registered a username on the WAHS portal on behalf of the organization. In many cases, groups held focus groups prior and during the online academy, during which groups as large as 60 people (Report PDAP, Bangladesh) collectively discussed the topics at hand, after which designated members would post the collective deliberation into the designated forum space on behalf of the organization. Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) in India, for example, involved network members from remote regions into their deliberations by holding phone conversations that allowed members without internet access to give their input on forum questions, after which leaders with computer access would include their input in a collective forum post (Report SSP, India). In addition, SSP got the attention of a local radio station to report on the Online Academy.

Picture 11: Photo of a grassroots focus group during the academy



Leaders of Bancos Comunales, a member of GROOTS Peru, discuss the questions distributed prior to the Academy. Bancos Comunales involved eight women from two districts. The National Network GROOTS Peru together mobilized over 40 participants who came together in various communities and focus groups like these (Final Reports, Bancos Comunales, CONAMOVIDI, Mujeres Unidas, and Lima Este, Peru).



## Preparations

### Small Grants

In preparation of the academy, grassroots groups were able to apply for small grants to help them organize their local constituencies and access communication tools that are often taken for granted. For a relatively small investment, the Huirou Commission was able to significantly increase the participation of grassroots leaders in the portal, and sustain their ability to engage in on-line platforms and communication in the future. Groups wrote activity proposals that best suited their local needs, ranging from media training to renting an internet café to printing materials and hiring an on-site translator to facilitate the participation in the online forums. (While the WAHS portal is a multi-lingual website that allows for direct translation of all content into over 50 languages, some groups preferred additional language assistance during their group activities.) The Huirou Commission distributed a total of \$9,781 to 17 grassroots groups.

A large number of groups who received funds used this money to hold focus groups within their organization or community at large. Thus, groups decided on what topic areas were most pertinent to their local situation and what points they collectively found most important to make. As evidenced by a number of the groups' final reports, these community meetings, which brought together a broad array of local leaders, were in themselves forums for essential discussions that uncovered local power disparities and broke down barriers of communication between grassroots women and local officials. In one example, provided by AWARE, a grassroots organization operating in northern Uganda, women used the community meeting to discuss cultural norms that for a long time have infringed upon women's rights to property and land. Consequently, *"The respected elder Mr. Tom Nangiro stood up and told the group openly that [he] did not know women were not comfortable with the cultural law, but will work hand in hand with women to make sure they are safe and owning property and land."* (Final Report, AWARE, Uganda)

Cooperative Las Brumas, in Nicaragua, brought together grassroots groups from seven provinces to collectively participate in the academy. What's more, the organization was able to leverage its existing partnerships with local government to invite the Mayor of Jinotega, one of the Communities in which Las Brumas is active, into the organization's headquarters, where the Mayor contributed to the online discussions in the Policy and Partnership Forum, detailing the ongoing collaboration between local government and the women of Las Brumas.

While some groups bridged disparities in media literacy by designating a number of representatives to enter the online Forums and post answers on behalf of a group, other groups included individual media training into their preparation activities, using training material the Huirou Commission created and distributed to groups prior to the academy. Fundacion Guatemala (FG), for example, used the funds they received for preparation to bring 12 women leaders from various regions in Guatemala together in their central office in Isobal, where FG leadership reproduced training manuals and held



a three-day-long training on the use of the online WAHS portal, how to create a user profile and personal blog, and participate in online discussion forums.

#### In-house media training at HC headquarters

The training Fundacion Guatemala provided to its members at home was modeled on a media literacy session held at the Huirou Commission office in New York during the CSW 56. During the session various grassroots groups who participated in the CSW 56 received a two-hour long tutorial on the use of the WAHS portal and other social media, like Twitter. Following the Portal tutorial, Huirou Commission staff helped groups in creating personal user names and organizational blogs where they can showcase their ongoing development projects. Groups learned how to write a blog post and how to add photos with descriptions and video content into their blogs.

Participants who were interested in videography got a chance throughout the week to work with Flip cameras and work with Huirou's in-house video editor, who showed the women basic skills in editing and shooting video.

From the experience with women during this media literacy session, it became clear that this one-on-one support experience between grassroots women and trainers is essential to making digital technology tangible to poor women and breaking down perceptions of digital communication as "difficult," impenetrable and overwhelming.

#### Remote Media Support Prior to and During Academy

Having realized this during the in-house media training, the Huirou Commission Communications staff set aside two days prior to the academy to provide one-on-one support to groups trying to register for the site, begin to create their personal profiles and experiment with posting content.

Staff supported individuals via email, phone and Skype on March 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>. Still an unexpected need for technical support continued throughout the academy, ranging from basic media literacy issues ("how do I upload a photo?") to password requests, to internet connectivity issues that often were outside the ability of HC staff to fix, as they related to local restrictions and outages in participants' countries.

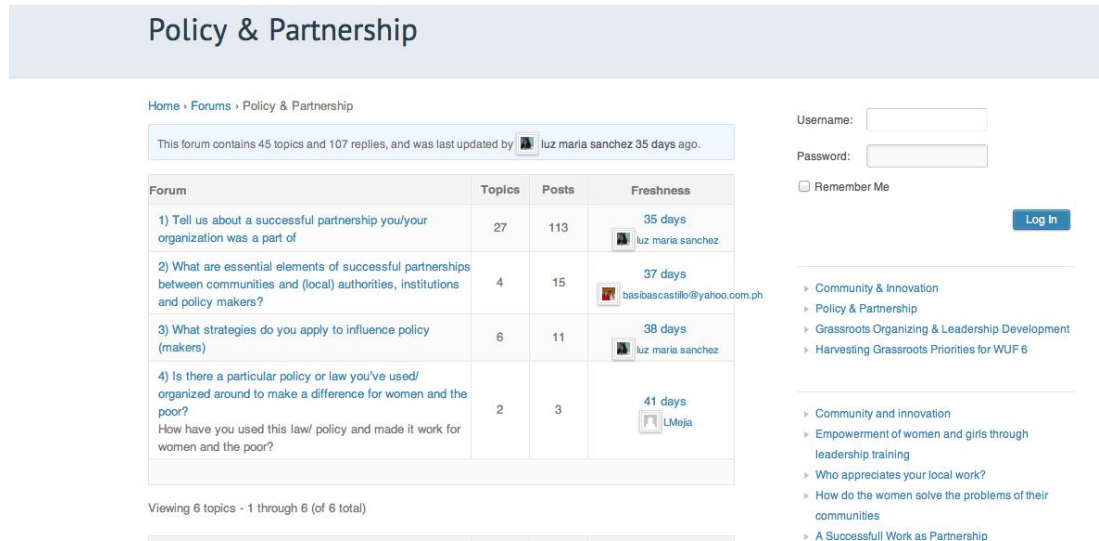
#### **Successes**

From an organizer's point of view, the sheer turnout during the academy was a success worth celebrating, as it involved grassroots groups from often remote areas overcoming significant obstacles in accessing technology and the internet to participate.



The energy of groups to be part of this process created an atmosphere of excitement in the Huairou Commission Office, as personal email and phone calls to our office expressed.

Picture 12: Screenshot of the Policy and Partnership forum



This picture displays the four discussion questions asked by the Huairou Communications team and the number of topics and responses to each question. Question 1, as displayed here, prompted groups to start 27 topic discussions with a total of 113 posts.

This sense of enthusiasm was also reflected in the final reports groups wrote, which showed in more detail to what length groups and individuals had gone to be able to participate. “I had to take my laptop and climb up a hill to get reception, but I got on!” was among the strong visual images from groups’ reports that summed up the divides that participants traversed to be part of the experience.

It were the small stories of trial and error, as well as the fun groups had learning a new skills and tools, that makes the Huairou Commission eager to continue offering opportunities like these in the future.

In response to the report question “What went well in the activities you organized and in participating in the academy more broadly,” Zambia based grassroots group Katuba wrote the following:

“We had several women who were previously secretaries and had secretarial training, but had not used the computer before. The women realized that using the computer was simple and just required a bit of training for them to learn how to access the



internet. The women who found it easy but had not used the computer before were those who were conversant with the keyboard, as they were familiar with the typewriters. Three women are enthusiastic to continue learning and have registered for introductory courses. We can therefore safely say that this academy has ignited women's interest to learn how to use the computer."

Group also responded predominantly positively to the report question whether the WAHS site and the online Academy were good tools to use in the future, with only one group answering in the negative due to the restrictions on access they were facing in the rural outback. Groups who responded positively had various uses for the site, ranging from the benefits it provided as a tool for communication with like-minded women across countries and regions, to collective organizing to hosting their own peer-learning activities. Katuba again:

"There are so many possibilities, for instance, we learned about the beadmaking business of [another participant] in Kenya and women realized they could find resources to ask her to come and teach beadmaking in Zambia. Grassroots women can organize events or learn skills on how other women are raising income for their families."

Other groups, like SSP in India highlighted the importance of being able to give visibility to the work of women in the community. Being part of a project organized by an international network on a website connected to a UN organization contributes to increased recognition by the local government, as was also the case for Cooperative Las Brumas in Nicaragua. The ability for women to "reflect on their own capacity," "model to other groups" and "get recognized as a campaign" were other important contributions of the academy that various groups mentioned (Final Report, SSP).

#### *Positive side effects of the online academy*

One byproduct of the academy that's worth mentioning here is the fact that many women received local support in setting up their first personal email account, as having an email address is a necessity for creating a user account on the WAHS site. This means that these women have significantly opened up their possibilities for online communication outside of the portal, including email and signing up for other online services that require an email address.

What's more, a number of groups have begun to set up their blog site during and after the academy, made other users their "friends" and continued conversations online.

Other byproducts from the in-house media literacy training encompassed aspects of online communication beyond the portal, such as how to set up a twitter account. As some groups reported, cell phone communication continues to be more popular and readily accessible than the internet in some areas, making twitter an interesting tool for the grassroots.





Picture 13: Screenshot of the new Twitter account of grassroots leader Violet Shivutse



Violet Shivutse of GROOTS Kenya, who will be joining the Michelle Bachelet’s Civil Society Advisory Board this year, set up her Twitter account during the media literacy session at the Huirou Commission in March. Her followers now include UN organizations and development practitioners. For many women, cell phone technology remains more easily accessible than the internet and thus a second interesting avenue to explore in the larger mission of bridging the digital divide between grassroots practitioners in the global South and their counterparts in the global North.

The Huirou Commission is committed to continuing to provide media literacy support to groups relating to the WAHS site and beyond and is currently fundraising toward this goal.

*Laptop and Equipment Distribution*

Through the portal Media Literacy Program, the Huirou Commission has distributed 36 laptops and three digital video cameras to groups so far, and another six laptops and five cameras are committed to groups who had strong participation in the online academy.

**(Ongoing) Challenges**

**From the Groups’ point of view**

Access to computers continues to be a struggle for many groups. While the laptops distributed through the WAHS Media Literacy Program have greatly helped to get



groups online who lacked access and increased the access of other groups, a culture of web sharing requires continued investment in poor people's access to equipment and internet time. In one case, the laptop the Huairou Commission distributed to the remotely located Alliance of Caregivers in South Africa was the only computer with internet access within the entire community. This meant that group members had to gather in one member's home and take turns participating in the online discussions from one computer. In addition, the group faced internet breakdowns, which contributed to their feeling that a two-week time-span was too little to contribute significantly. "I think the academy was allocated a short time period," reported a grassroots leader from the Alliance. "With one computer, the output is not satisfactory. Nevertheless [we] received emails from another participant who said she read about us on the WAHS site and would like to communicate and share information with us."

#### *Day-to-day responsibilities*

Other groups reported the academy was too long, as their day-to-day work and family responsibilities prohibited them from committing to a multi-day event. Groups who mentioned this were primarily those who had to travel to access the internet and thus had to invest significant time and resources to participate.

#### *Continued need for training*

One common thread throughout the reports was a call for continued media training which is an important point to pay attention to if continued progress is to be made in linking women in poor communities to other practitioners within the human settlements field. "I call for training rural woman in ICT literacy, as they are keen to learn and know," states the South African Alliance of Caregivers, while Katuba in Zambia would like to build on the success they had with women during their academy by "helping women acquire at least introductory lessons for computer skills" at a local training facility they have already contacted.

While each organization has a core group of leaders who are very capable in the use of computers and the internet, some of whom have participated in media training activities in the Huairou Commission office throughout the last two years, a larger number of community members in the areas in which these organizations are active have little to no experience with digital communication and continue to be intimidated. In some cases, like that of Fundacion Guatemala (FG), who held an extensive media literacy training for their participants, participation still waned once individual members returned home as they were missing the in-house support they had received during their stay in the FG office.

#### *Various levels of "the divide"*

It has to be noted here that the divide is not only visible along Global North-South lines, but also along age and rural-urban locations. Groups like the Manila-based DAMPA in the Philippines, for example, had an active group of participants, largely new to the Huairou Commission, many of whom appeared to be under forty and were excitedly



posting photos into their personal profiles and participating in the forums. It can be assumed that digital communication plays a larger role in the day-to-day life of this age group, along with urban areas which generally provide a larger access to information technology.

The reports not surprisingly showed that rural groups had the largest media-literacy divide to bridge, with many leaders spending significant amounts of time teaching community members how to operate a computer before explaining them how to navigate the WAHS website.

While not all urban groups performed better than their rural counterparts, it can be concluded that urban groups overall performed better than rural ones during the academy. Slum Women in Development (SWID) in Uganda, members of GROOTS Peru in and around Lima, and DAMPA in Manila were among the most consistent and eloquent in their participation.

### *Language*

Language continued to be an issue for a number of the Spanish speaking groups, regardless of the translation tools provided on the WAHS site. In some cases, groups did not view the information provided to them before hand and thus simply did not proactively with or know how to use the automatic translation button on the WAHS website. In other cases, the tool did not satisfy their translation needs, as certain colloquialisms after translation did not convey the essence that the writer intended. On a day-to-day use basis, it's not clear how to solve this problem, as the tools available on the site are among the most advanced available on the web today. But it's important to keep this in mind when hosting large online events to continue funding additional on-site language support.

### **From the Huirou Commission point of view**

#### *Large need for technical support*

In an effort to keep technical support needs to a minimum during the academy, the Huirou Commission initiated a two-day support period prior to the academy during which groups were encouraged to try to create a user account and explore the site. While some groups took advantage of this opportunity to receive one-on-one support via email and skype, other groups did not or were not able to because of other obligations during this time. This contributed to waves of last-minute support needs throughout the first week as groups joining late frantically tried to sign up new users with various levels of success.

The technical obstacles, while often minimal in nature, required extensive back and forth by email, phone and skype to diagnose the problem, ranging from an expired password to failed attempts to use one person's email account to register multiple user names. In other cases, groups experienced local internet restrictions and outages that



were beyond the Huairou Commission's ability to solve but nevertheless caused significant frustrations among groups.

In all, the volume of support requests, coming in at all hours of the day due to participants' time-zone differences, was such that a future online event would benefit from an additional tech support person.

*Lack of facilitator participation*

One major obstacle that prevented the Academy from reaching its absolute potential was the last-minute cancellation of a number of discussion facilitators, including institutional partners. This strongly diminished the aspect of exchange between grassroots women and development professionals that is such a central part of the mission of the WAHS portal project. As a collaborative endeavor between the Huairou Commission and UN-HABITAT, WAHS and events like the online academy are essential points of entry for bridging institutional actors to the ideas and needs of women and communities that ought to be taken as seriously by institutional actors as they are by actors at the grassroots.

The limited participation of facilitators was disappointing also in conjunction with the above mentioned steady stream of support needs, which meant that the Huairou Commission Communications team was not able to fully fill the facilitation void created by the facilitators who did not participate.

One important role assigned to facilitators was to deepen and synthesize ongoing conversations as the number of posts and questions in each forum expanded throughout the academy. As part of this, their task was to draw connections between the work of various groups described in the forums, tease out common themes and initiate dialogue between groups. While a number of grassroots facilitators as well as Huairou staff were able to respond to new posts on the forums and ask questions to get to the heart of their work, the volume of posts was such that a larger group of active facilitators was necessary to make ongoing connections between related forum posts. In the absence of strong facilitation in each forum space, a lot of groups' posts were primarily focused on answering the main questions asked in the forum based on their own experiences and work, as not all groups made connections to the work of others.

*More need for interaction among groups*

This brings up the last point, which is the need for more interaction among groups in a future online event. This observation is not to take away from the success we feel the Academy was for the reasons stated earlier, but merely a recognition of the next step in an ongoing process of enabling a large and diverse group of poor women to use the internet for active issue-based exchange. While not all groups engaged others in direct discussions, almost all groups in their reports said they learned a lot from reading other groups' posts, indicating that peer learning was nevertheless a central aspect of their experience in the forums.



Having made a first introduction to the WAHS website (and in many cases the computer and the internet) has thus opened the way for more online events in the future that move groups from collective knowledge sharing toward a model of active online discussion.

Finally, it is also worth taking into account in how far the donor-grantee dynamic that is inherent in an event hosted by the Huairou Commission and UN-HABITAT for grassroots actors, which may have contributed to groups primarily focusing on detailing their own work, as opposed to engaging other groups on theirs.

#### Concluding Remarks and Road Ahead

The Huairou Commission is proud to report on the significant accomplishments in the final phase of the portal project and looks forward to future work and engagement.

A summary of accomplishments over this period:

- Redesign and re-launch of the WAHS portal
- Establishment of community media literacy training and continuation of equipment support
- First online academy held with over 400 users. A significant number of grassroots women are now able to access the internet, use online tools and share their work.

In this next year, the Huairou Commission will continue to maintain the site and activate the users, discussions and utility of the portal. The costs of this endeavor are estimated around \$10,000 a goal the Huairou Commission will continue to fundraise toward, while encouraging the institutional support and engagement of partners, particularly UN-HABITAT, to ensure grassroots women and other practitioners working on human settlements issues are engaged and consulted in on-going activities of the agency.