

# Shelter Forum: A network with a purpose

A number of networks have been and continue to be established in the belief that they will address and resolve the ever-recurring shelter problems. But how have they performed? To what extent have they matched their intentions with actions and achievements on the ground? This paper attempts to illustrate how Shelter Forum (SF) in Kenya as a network has performed and what lessons have been learnt in the process.

## Background

SF was formed in 1990 to bring together key actors to share experiences and lobby the government for policies that would help make decent housing affordable and accessible to rural and urban communities. The guiding principle was to stimulate creative synergy among various stakeholders in the shelter development sector in Kenya. The purpose was to establish a focal point for debate, information sharing, and collective action among partner organizations, professionals, and individuals involved in shelter development initiatives. The ultimate goal was to facilitate sustainable access to affordable and decent shelter for all, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and children, the aged, people with disabilities, and the financially disadvantaged.

Over the last decade, the Shelter Forum has:

- facilitated training, information sharing, and group exchange visits that have empowered vulnerable communities to design and develop appropriate and affordable shelter;
- worked with partner institutions to champion the review of building by-laws to enable the legal sanction of affordable housing technologies for the urban poor (the 1995 Revised adoptive by-laws);

- built awareness among professionals, community-based organisations, artisans and local authority personnel on alternative building technologies through its extension services, technical enquiry services, and exchange visits; and
- played a leading role in setting up the Nairobi Informal Settlements Co-ordinating Committee (NISCC) and formulating an inclusive strategy to support squatter settlements.

At the regional and international levels, SF has shared Kenya's shelter development experiences through membership to other networks such as *basin*, the Regional Appropriate Technology Information Service (RATIS), CERFE and *Africaucus*. The Forum played a leading role in the Habitat II process and continues to be the co-ordinating body for regional NGOs for Habitat's Commissions on Human Settlements.

## Strategies and approaches

SF has developed a four-pronged strategy:

- Research, to develop in-depth understanding of shelter issues
- Policy advocacy, to lobby for decent shelter for all
- Networking, to enable co-ordination and information gathering and dissemination
- Extension, to build the capacities of CBOs in sustainable shelter improvement

SF dialogues with individuals and groups living in target areas (informal settlements and rural areas) through member agencies working in shelter development or by recruiting community-based organizations (CBOs) to become members of the network.

SF also holds an Annual Event to build awareness about the network and provide a platform to discuss creative approaches to shelter, network with government and other agencies, and evaluate SF's activities. The theme is suggested by members, and the event is attended by CBOs, NGOs and development agencies, government officers, mortgage and housing companies, and UN agencies. The high-profile participation attracts mass media coverage.

At an annual review all programme partners come together to assess progress, discuss shortcomings, and map the way forward.

## Challenges

The demands for flexibility and dynamism in a network can be extremely challenging. In a region where there is no shortage of problems, SF must consistently identify new opportunities and assess members' needs to sustain interest in shelter issues. And since the network members have a similar background, there is often the danger of competition for resources such as access to funds, training, and influence within the network. To avoid conflicts, SF has worked on norms and procedures that are fair, practical, and generally agreed upon and understood by the network participants.

Like all evolving organizations, the major challenge facing SF was accessing the funding necessary to establish itself as a vibrant and authoritative network.

## Achievements

The principle achievement of SF has been to put shelter issues at the centre of the national policy debate. Other Key achievements and impacts include:

- tangible improvement in people's living conditions
- better co-ordination and integration between various stakeholders
- changes in policies and strategies
- institutionalization of partnerships
- recognizing and addressing specific opportunities and constraints
- changes in people's attitudes

## Lessons learned

**That the need for information is incremental.** The topics in the Shelterkits, which are a series of guidance notes highlighting ur-

ban survival skills for the benefit of the poor and low-income residents, led to requests for information on other topics such as income generation. The challenge is to design, package, and link the information to the network's goals.

**That leadership needs to have the patience and persistence to negotiate with people from different sectors (especially government officers) and development partners.** Facts and figures are critical in influencing the policy and thinking of governments in order to reach consensus. Since many networks in human settlements aim to influence government policies on housing, housing finance and credit, or land tenure, it becomes imperative that research-based indicators and data be a key part of their networking strategies.

**That the network can benefit a great deal by linking up with other networks and stakeholders at all levels — local, national, regional, and international.** Huge information capacity and technical expertise were added to SF after it joined the *basin* network. Involvement in the Habitat II Agenda and its partnership approaches has increased SF's capacity to implement local shelter interventions. The challenge remains, however, in how to translate these effectively into tangible results at the community level.

**That a number of factors are crucial for the survival of networks.** These factors as described by MacDicken (see references!) include:

- **An active core of participants:** A core group should be available to provide critical leadership and technical expertise so as to constitute the critical mass for the network.
- **Flexibility:** Networks need to have sufficient flexibility to re-direct their focus and allocation of resources as needed.
- **Neutral host institution:** In most cases networks need a host institution to provide a neutral and impartial venue which is beneficial to both the host and the other network participants.
- **Sustained long-term support:** According to MacDicken, a ten-year commitment of initiators and/or funding agencies is probably a reasonable minimum period for a network to grow from the organization to the sustainable operation stage.
- **Effective co-ordinating staff:** Network co-ordinators should be knowledgeable

in the subject area of the network and skilled in managing networks. They should be able to deal with a diversity of both people and issues.

Other key areas to success include the:

- creation of a broad-based constituency;
- effective lobbying for policy change and adaptation at both local and international levels;
- creation of awareness on housing rights at global level;
- involvement of beneficiaries and policy-makers in campaigns for programme implementation in human settlements;
- participation and involvement of private sector;
- dialogue on shared objectives and concerns with others and provision of adequate checks and balances to ensure continuity;
- geographical coverage and representation globally;
- regular consultations with membership and gender-articulated information strategies; and
- appeal to the spirit of volunteerism and solidarity.

We have also learned that there are many questions and issues that are still begging answers and resolutions.

### Constraints

Networks like Shelter Forum face many constraints. The most disturbing constraint, particularly in East Africa, is that governments have hampered the process of improving human settlements by pursuing retrogressive policies and encouraging political interference and patronage.

Other constraints include:

- Inadequate commitment to implement and follow through on both national and international protocols
- Need for a solid research base and a case for indicators
- Need for continuous exchange of information rather than hiding it or disseminating it on an ad hoc basis
- Empowerment and participation of all individual partners rather than domination of one partner by the other

### Conclusion and recommendations

From the experience of SF and other networks, it is clear that the following factors are keys to success:

- Recognizing the resources/skills of local communities and tapping them
- Identifying common ground for networks to work on together
- Strengthening of the capacity of the umbrella body and sharing costs between communities and networks
- Lobbying the various actors to reduce political and donor influence and patronage
- Embarking on rights campaigns, for long-term solutions and sustainability
- Creation of a strong research base
- Devising of mechanisms and monitoring strategies to involve members to undertake a wide range of activities

The following recommendations may go a long way to address the constraints facing the networks from the region:

- A system should be put in place to monitor information sharing and networking at the community level. One of the shortcomings of grassroots information sharing is the difficulty of proving how effective communication materials have been and this can be very complicated in societies where people use oral means of communication more often than written records.
- A survey of collaborating institutions and agencies working within the region should be carried out to identify potential network partners in human settlements
- To replicate SF's experience successfully, a strategic decision should be made early in the process about long-term funding of the network's activities.
- The many research studies on human

*La principale réussite de Shelter Forum a été de mettre le logement au centre du débat politique nationale à travers la participation aux niveaux local, national et international. L'expérience du Forum montre cependant qu'un réseau efficace a besoin d'être soutenu financièrement de façon durable pour qu'un investissement dans un travail innovant et de diffusion puisse se faire.*

*El principal logro de Shelter Forum ha sido poner el tema de la vivienda en el centro del debate de la política nacional a través de la participación a nivel local, nacional e internacional. Sin embargo, la experiencia de Shelter Forum demuestra que una red efectiva necesita financiación a largo plazo para invertir en trabajo innovativo y difusión.*

settlements in the region should be collated within focal resource centres and, based on needs, further studies and research should be carried out on some of the most successful networks in human settlements, e.g. HIC, Habitat for Humanity, and the Asia Coalition on Human Settlements, to synthesize lessons for dissemination.

- Strong links should be fostered with informal settlement residents' movements on urban poverty, land tenure, housing, and urban governance.
- A participatory impact assessment matrix should be designed to gauge the real effect of networks.
- Encourage and organize best practices events for all stakeholders, focusing particularly on networks and networking in human settlements and their improvements.
- Develop a sustainable financial support base for the network that does not entirely depend on external finances.

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## Box 1 Unanswered questions and unresolved issues

### Unanswered questions

How can network organizations increase their contact with grassroots?

What can networks do in order to understand the needs of their members?

How can networks support civil society processes more effectively?

How do we develop the capacity to keep networks interested and active especially where there are limited financial resources to maintain the system at a regional level?

How can synergy be derived from networking?

How can we ensure information within the network is shared and disseminated?

How free are development networks from the interference of the funders and governments to carry out their own agendas?

How can a development network be wholly acceptable to its participating organizations?

How can networks enhance learning between and among organizations?

How can networks measure the impact of their work on member organizations?

To what extent can networks become powerful agents for influencing development policies?

Can networks satisfy community needs or achieve significant impact?

How can one achieve a balance between a strong creative secretariat with an active, participatory membership?

What systems should umbrella organizations and co-ordinating units explore or put in place in order to maximize participation and resource sharing in development networks.

How can the beneficiaries, particularly the poor and other marginalized groups, get fully involved?

Do the beneficiaries have a forum to influence the mainstream process dominated by the professional groups?

How does the network account to membership, particularly the beneficiaries?

How are the networks organized at grassroots level to maintain momentum and sustainability?

How does information get to the beneficiaries and in what form? Is it user-friendly to the beneficiaries?

### Unresolved issues

Apart from the questions opposite, there are also a number of broader issues that remain unresolved. These include:

Lack of strategy to motivate local volunteers

Failure to provide elaborate conceptual guidelines or instruments for monitoring and evaluating the impact of a network's output

Lack of systematic mechanisms of measuring the output of the networks. This is particularly so in terms of impact assessment through data or any other form of measurable indicators

Lack of practical and self-reliance strategies for fundraising after donor funding is over

Lack of rapport with either government agencies or major international funding agencies

Failure to show how use of appropriate and low-cost housing strategies has spread among the users as a result of networking globally, regionally, and nationally

Lack of integration of other stakeholders in sustainable human settlement issues such as provision of clean water and sanitation services

Failure to demonstrate a strategy for involving children in the networking process as a way of ensuring continuation of the network when the older generation move on

The networks seem to be driven by professionals and although some have enthusiastic grassroots support, little is said on how the grassroots communities are involved in the provision and multiplication of shelter through training in low-cost building materials and technologies for the needy. Focus also seems to be on the urban poor and not on the rural areas