Ayuda Urbana:
Creating Communities on Urban Issues

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Responding to client need
Urban development policies in Central America and the Caribbean are critical for millions of people who live in hundreds of crowded cities. The quality of transportation, water and sanitation, social services, and more depends largely on the ability of local urban officials to analyze problems using information from reliable sources and to learn from the experiences of their counterparts in other cities in the region. However, getting relevant and timely information and establishing a dialogue with others present difficult challenges.

The Ayuda Urbana initiative is a direct response to these challenges. By linking staff at municipal governments in Guatemala City, Panama City, Havana, Managua, Mexico City, San Jose, San Salvador, San Juan, Santo Domingo, and Tegucigalpa, it serves as a forum for sharing knowledge on pressing urban issues and priorities. What distinguishes Ayuda Urbana from other programs is that it originated from a request made in early-2000 by several mayors in the Central American and Caribbean region who recognized the value of collaboration across borders in addressing problems in their cities.
Creating vital communities of practice
How does Ayuda Urbana facilitate knowledge sharing? What is its focus? How has it created communities of practice? Ayuda Urbana comprises dozens of practitioners specializing in various aspects of urban planning and management in the above cities. While the World Bank played a significant role in convening and guiding the preliminary discussions, the mayors and their staff themselves chose the eight topics of most concern to them: e-government, urban upgrading, environmental sanitation, municipal finance, urban transportation, the renovation of historical city centers and poverty alleviation, disaster management, and integrated urban development. Members of Ayuda Urbana share knowledge in the following ways:

**Workshops:** Every 2-3 months, several staff from each municipal government and, depending on the topic, representatives from local non-governmental organizations meet to exchange experiences on one of the eight topics. The priority is on inviting those staff with expertise on that particular topic. Content experts from the World Bank also have participated. During each workshop, participants choose a facilitator who puts together resources on the topic and disseminates them to the group using the website and email.

**Website:** A prominent feature of Ayuda Urbana an interactive website that complements the face-to-face workshops by serving as a repository of key documents selected by members for their suitability to their needs. It also acts as a portal to the websites of the member municipalities. In addition, the website provides access to a help desk that members use to pose questions.
The result of these different activities has been continuous learning for Ayuda Urbana members: eight thematic communities of practice that contribute to better decision-making on important issues, serve as a means of problem solving for the entire group, and generate the type of knowledge that urban practitioners need in their daily work. For example, one question raised recently was regarding the price of waste management services - a member in San Salvador explained how the price was determined in his municipality, and this information was shared with other members.

**Working in partnership**

Ayuda Urbana is a partnership in every sense. It works closely with the municipal governments in the ten cities mentioned above and with the CAMC (Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean) region of the Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas (UCCI), a partner organization actively involved in training technical staff in metropolitan areas. Funding for the project comes from the Dutch Government and the UK Department for International Development. The World Bank has provided overall coordination and the assistance of experts from the Urban Poor Thematic Group and other related Thematic Groups.

**Building capacity and replicating the model**

Ayuda Urbana was designed from the start as a sustainable project that will be completely owned and operated by its clients. Not surprisingly, a plan is in place that will hand over the website to the members in 2002, publish a training manual for how to manage the community, and allows the different cities to alternate as hosts of the website and developers of new content. The project is also serving as a model that can be replicated in other countries as they seek to form their own communities of practice on urban issues. China, for example, is now launching a major initiative linking hundreds of municipalities, while India is organizing a similar project on a smaller scale. Ayuda Urbana coordinators are advising the World Bank task teams working in these countries.

**Lessons learned**

Communities of practice are extremely powerful: As informal organizations, the eight communities within Ayuda Urbana are effective in knowledge sharing and problem solving. Ayuda Urbana's real value is on how it has facilitated the formation of thematic communities by actively connecting practitioners in the same region who share similar responsibilities, concerns, and challenges.
**Complementary activities:** A lively and productive community of practice is sustained by activities that enhance the impact of each other on learning and knowledge sharing among its members.

**Client needs are all-important:** At every step, consultation with members is the key - the members must drive the ideas and content.

**Best practice is subjective:** Best practice, as defined by development agencies, may not be appropriate for other groups and organizations. Members must choose which policy topics, content, and activities are appropriate for themselves.

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**Contacts**

For further information on Ayuda Urbana, go to: [http://ayudaurbana.com](http://ayudaurbana.com)

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