

# Findings Brief

## External Review of the Urban Poverty and Environment Program

*This findings brief is based on the report, “Final Report to IDRC: Urban Poverty and Environment (UPE) – External Review,” by Dr. Patricia L McCarney, Dr. Riadh Tappuni, Dr. Axel Drescher. December 2008. The full report is available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.*

The objectives of this external review were to assess the extent to which the Urban Poverty and Environment (UPE) program is meeting its objectives, to assess its risk identification processes and mitigation strategies, and to evaluate the results of the program.

UPE approved 60 projects from the beginning of this prospectus period until the beginning of the review period in January 2008. Its total budget during that time was approximately \$18 million.

### 1. Program Aims

The Urban Poverty and Environment program supports “research, capacity building, and networking that help poor urban communities partner with local and national governments, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders to:

1. Understand the nature of environmental burdens and constrained use of natural resources, investigate their impact on poverty, and identify potential solutions;
2. Test interventions and assess policies in low-income urban neighbourhoods that seek to ease environmental burdens and enhance the use of natural resources for food, water, and income security; and
3. Contribute to the integrated planning, development, and implementation of sustainable and equitable urban environmental and natural resources practices and policies.”

### 2. Review Methodology

This review drew on data from multiple sources, including:

1. Documentation from the UPE program;
2. Interviews with program team leaders and members, as well as senior managers;
3. Interviews with a sample of project leaders through site visits to projects;
4. Interviews with other stakeholders such as government and community leaders as well as IDRC’s funding partners; and

5. An in-depth review of a sample of projects (both research projects and research support projects) through both site visits (19 in total) and desk research (23 in total) and review of related project documents.

The total budget of CAD \$17.7 million for the 60 UPE projects approved since April 1, 2005 breaks down as follows:

- 10 Research Projects (\$4.3 million)
- 8 Focus City Projects (\$9.3 million)
- 42 Research Support Projects (\$4.1 million).

The UPE review team examined 70% of these 60 projects. It selected projects to cut across UPE themes including urban agriculture, water and sanitation, waste management, and vulnerabilities to natural disasters, with land tenure as a crosscutting issue. In addition, the team chose projects to represent the four key geographic regions in which UPE works (Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, Asia, and Sub Saharan Africa). In all, the team held interviews and discussions with 190 people.

### **3. Review Findings**

#### **3.1 Thematic Focus**

Just under one-third of the projects (19 of 60) fell under the urban agriculture theme, constituting 57% of the budget for research projects. Water and sanitation projects make up the second largest thematic cluster followed by waste management. Land Tenure is not a dominant theme in any one project, though identified as a crosscutting issue in the Prospectus.

#### **3.2 Achievement of objectives**

Each project made significant progress towards its individual objectives and contributed towards overall program objectives (see below). Ideally, objectives evolve to meet changing contexts, opportunities, and constraints. Since the UPE program is a new program, however, it is too early to reflect on an evolution in objectives.

Through the *Focus Cities Research Initiative (FCRI)*, UPE began testing a more integrated approach using operational research to provide environmental services for the poor. This holds promise for addressing a number of municipal services in an environmentally sustainable manner. Yet the management of such projects is challenging due to their complexity and size. The eight Focus City research projects account for 53% of the UPE program budget.

Objective 1: *to help poor urban communities partner with local and national governments, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders to understand the nature of environmental burdens and constrained use of natural resources, investigate their impact on poverty, and identify potential solutions.*

UPE's main contribution is through specific project activities that build spread awareness, mobilize stakeholders, and build capacity. 18 of the 19 projects assessed through site-visits qualified for review under this objective. Taking into account that some projects were not designed to improve the environment for poor communities, four out of six Focus City projects (66%) and five out of 12 non-FC projects (42%) delivered improvements.

Objective 2: to test interventions and assess policies in low-income urban neighbourhoods that seek to ease environmental burdens and enhance the use of natural resources for food, water, and income security.

UPE's main contribution towards this objective is in small-scale projects, which allow poor communities to use available limited resources to improve livelihoods more effectively. Of the 12 projects examined that were directly and indirectly related to this objective, 10 (or 83%) brought economic benefit to the community through income generation or in savings. Technology development, which contributes to this theme, was achieved in one-third of six Focus City projects as well as in one-third of 12 non-Focus City projects visited.

Objective 3: to contribute to the integrated planning, development, and implementation of sustainable and equitable urban environmental and natural resources practices and policies.

This objective is particularly evident in UPE projects that stimulate partnerships between communities and municipal authorities, and allow more participatory approaches to city management. Focus City projects, in particular, aimed to foster dialogue between the different stakeholders as the foundation for integrated urban management. Capacity building contributes directly to this objective: four out of six Focus City projects (66%) built capacity, while 10 out of 12 (83%) non-Focus City projects did so. Overall, UPE built capacity in 14 out of 18 projects, a 78% success rate. In addition, 3 Focus City projects (50%) and five of 12 non-Focus City projects (42%) contributed to community strengthening, which also contributes directly to the objective.

### 3.3 Outputs

UPE disseminates information (outputs) on two levels: the development research community, and development and donor agencies (international); and policymakers, decision-makers, local researchers, and the targeted community (national). The quality of outputs varies depending on the partners' technical capacities, as well as on the nature of the projects. For this review, the team selected representative outputs in several media:

- Of the 12 **websites** reviewed, only five were effective at disseminating UPE project news and links;
- The nine **videos** reviewed offered excellent opportunities to promote awareness and influence policy;

- UPE project **publications** included articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals, as well as more popularly-written magazines;
- IDRC's website features the **UPE Publication Series**, but could also feature more peer-reviewed publications through the same window;
- Among **manuals and information bulletins**, the UPE Newsletter was fairly comprehensive and informative, but its publication has been irregular; and
- The UPE program disseminated its research through **international conferences**, including UN-Habitat World Urban Forum and World Water Week.

### 3.4 Policy influence

18 projects were assessed for policy impact. The reviewers searched for material evidence in the form of changing policies, new regulations and legislation. Such achievement was considered solid positive evidence and was given a score of 1. The review also evaluated the degree of success of projects in attaining a mind shift among policy and decision makers, or in taking steps that would lead to policy change, which were recognized as possibly leading to policy influence in the future. Where there was evidence of this kind of policy influence, projects scored 0.5. The projects reviewed scored a total of 11.5 out of possible maximum score of 18.

### 3.5 Research Capacity

In addition to building capacity of stakeholders, the projects also strengthened capacity of researchers through the trans-disciplinary makeup of the team, as well as through the involvement of students, attendance at international events, and the engagement of the community in research. However, building the capacity of researchers is an objective not uniformly achieved in the UPE projects examined and summary data was not available from the program.

Building the capacity for gender awareness in UPE funded research projects is still developing and requires more attention. Adopting gender analysis tools in research has been a strong emphasis in the urban agriculture body of projects; in some projects the researchers are publishing these findings and sharing them with other global partners. Building capacities of women in the community is more overtly recognized as an objective in UPE and it is one that appears to be quite successful, though an effective set of indicators for progress monitoring was not found.

### 3.6 Influence on technology development

Technology development has two goals: finding solutions to a community's environmental problems (which can achieve positive outcomes), and testing prototypes that could be adapted or replicated (which helps achieve broad UPE objectives). The review found several examples of technologies being developed, adapted and adopted. For example, a waste-recycling project in Indonesia demonstrated a hands-on operational research that led to appropriate technologies (a sifting machine).

The examples that the reviewers had the opportunity to see in the field proved the effectiveness of the practical, often trial and error approach in these types of projects. The challenge remains as to how to replicate these projects and use such results in influencing policy change.

#### **4. Issues for consideration**

##### **4.1 Risk**

The Focus City projects, relative to others in the portfolio, demonstrated a higher level of conflict, particularly over assets and livelihoods. Without timely and skilled mitigation, such conflict can escalate. The review identified conflict as a recurrent trait in five of the six Focus City projects assessed.

The team made five recommendations:

1. Understand local governance dynamics at the outset to help identify risks of conflict, stakeholder rigidities and insecurities, and preferable and effective fora for dialogue across communities of interest and government bodies of concern;
2. Once research leaders understand the governance framework, build platforms of dialogue in the projects to help alleviate conflict over the course of the project;
3. Involve the media to help competing interests appreciate the need for a common vision and set of hopes;
4. Provide more seed funding for project formulation to allow more time for negotiation, partnership building, and participation; and
5. Design exit strategies to ensure sustainability once funding ends.

##### **4.2 Local community inclusion**

Local poor communities are the first targeted beneficiaries of operational projects and their buy-in and understanding of the importance of this information being disseminated is essential for the projects' success and sustainability. Project design should ensure effective local and community-level visibility of the project, communicated in the most appropriate means. UPE staff should help research teams engage with policy communities throughout the project cycle. In site interviews, it was reported that these trans-disciplinary urban projects are very time consuming and require that the UPE program more closely consider the timeframes allocated for projects and the need for flexibility in timeframes.

### 4.3 Visibility, local influence and global reach

UPE should discuss strategies for increasing local and global visibility. Projects could build in technical and financial assistance components for municipal government to support media, website, and other electronic communication on projects funded in those cities. It is also recommended that UPE achieve a higher presence of projects in local universities. Suggestions include using UPE videos and DVDs as teaching tools, supporting research assistantships through projects; and supporting the involvement of city planning students and teaching faculty in projects.

### 4.4 Cooperation with international partners

The UPE has been cooperating with other international donors such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization and UN-HABITAT via flow-through funding and parallel funding. The review recommends broadening and deepening international partnerships with other donors with more co-financing arrangements. UPE could also increase its collaboration by joining research committees, attending conferences, and initiating donor roundtables on thematic development, among other activities.

### 4.5 Thematic coverage and thematic niche

Given the findings on UPE's thematic concentrations, the review recommends consideration be given to thematic niche and coverage in future discussions within IDRC. On the established theme of urban agriculture, the review recommends that the next generation of urban agriculture projects needs to take on a more global role and a scaled up approach in which critical policy and governance issues associated with urban agriculture are addressed. While the prospectus does address an opening to new themes and progress is certainly being seen in this regard and with respect to the FCRI, this review suggests the thematic focus remains narrower than necessary. For the UPE program to become more robust in the future, and to extend its credibility in the urban field, the review recommends an expansion of themes and expansion of its recipients and partnership base.

### List of Acronyms

CAD	Canadian Dollar
FC	Focus Cities
FCRI	Focus Cities Research Initiative
UPE	Urban Poverty and Environment