

International Development Research Centre

**SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT ON  
HABITAT CENTRE YORK**

By Dr. T.J. Cartwright

September 1987

File No. 3-A-87-2051

31739  
8-A-87-2051  
4161-53-3  
KEY DOCUMENT

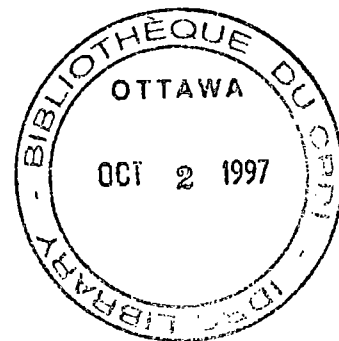
a Dastg  
Archives

3-A-87-2051

The terms of reference for this report have two distinct parts, one with quite specific reference to Nicaragua and the other with more general application to developing countries:

To identify areas in which the Ministry [Ministerio de Vivienda y Asentamientos Humanos or MINVAH] and the Habitat Centre in Canada can work together in developing a work plan with estimated costs and human-resource requirements; [and]

[To submit a] report providing [IDRC] with background on the programs and activities of York University in the area of Human Settlements and Urbanization that could be drawn upon in the future for the benefit of developing countries.



In addition to these two issues, a third is also discussed briefly at the end of the report: namely, the need to develop an overall research strategy for studying and promoting the use of information on urbanization as a means of benefiting the poor and disadvantaged.

Under the circumstances, this report is more in the nature of an overview of opportunities than a detailed feasibility study of any or all of them. Naturally, I would be pleased to provide a more detailed presentation of specific proposals on request.

AR 333.32 (328.5)

C 3

## 1. Habitat Centre York

Habitat Centre York was established in 1985 under an agreement between the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) in Nairobi and York University (Toronto).[\*] The agreement provides a general framework and an institutional mechanism for collaboration and proposes a number of areas related to human settlements wherein such collaboration might occur. Among these areas are:

- o exchange of information on resources, programs and activities as a basis for collaboration and innovation;
- o faculty and student exchanges on a short-term basis;
- o education and training, including curriculum design and development;
- o research on specific projects as well as reciprocal dissemination of research publications; and
- o promotion of contacts generally between Habitat and North American experts in human settlements.

Habitat Centre York is attached to the Faculty of Environmental Studies but has an Advisory Group drawn from people active in human-settlements teaching and research in all parts of the University.

Habitat Centre York has already been involved in a number of important activities related to human settlements. Among these activities are:

1. Establishment of an ongoing Internship program through which eight York graduate students have spent a term at UNCHS (Habitat) working on projects related to their respective areas of academic interest.
2. Creation of a selective, trans-disciplinary network of York faculty members active in the area of human-settlements planning and management.

---

\* UNCHS (Habitat) has similar though not identical relationships with several other universities, including the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogota, the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium and the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok.

3. Development of national and regional networks of human-settlements practitioners and activists (a) in Canada, (b) in the United States and (c) in the Caribbean states.

4. Organization of conferences such as the recent national conference on Homelessness sponsored by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the Canadian Real Estate Association (CREA) in 1986, whose report is soon to be published as a book.

All the activities of Habitat Centre York, it should be pointed out, are "self-financing". No direct operating or "block" grants are provided to the Centre either by UNCHS (Habitat) or by York University. So if a project cannot generate its own funding, it is unlikely to be implemented.

Early in 1987, Habitat decided to reinforce its existing links with York University by transferring to the York campus its Regional Office for North America and the Caribbean. The main function of a Regional Office is to disseminate Habitat publications, films and other information on human settlements to government officials, researchers, teachers, journalists, and other interested individuals or institutions.[\*]

In short, Habitat Centre York is a unique mechanism for focusing resources from a variety of university disciplines and professions on specific human-settlements issues. Habitat Centre York provides two essential ingredients for coordinating resources in a university setting: i.e. institutional flexibility and substantive direction.

Further details are attached describing the programs and activities of York University in the area of human settlements and urbanization.

---

\* UNCHS (Habitat) has a number of other other Regional Offices, including one in Mexico City for Central and South America, one in Amman for the Arab-speaking states, one in Bangkok for Asia and the Pacific, and one in New York. Although the functions of these offices are basically the same, the activities of each tend naturally to reflect the priorities and resources of their staff.

## 2. Collaboration between Habitat Centre York and MINVAH

The Ministerio de Vivienda y Asentamientos Humanos (MINVAH) is the chief agency responsible for the planning, design and management of public housing and human settlements in Nicaragua. In the nine years since the Revolution, MINVAH has delivered approximately 50,000 housing units (ranging from serviced lots, through core-housing to completed housing units) and prepared preliminary outline or structure plans for about twenty-five cities or regions. In view of the economic and political difficulties facing Nicaragua, this is an impressive performance.

However, there is still a great deal that remains to be done. As far as housing is concerned, demand is estimated to be increasing by 16,000 units per year; so public housing is not even keeping pace with overall demand, let alone reducing the number of homeless. As far as physical planning is concerned, a lot more needs to be done to refine and apply the only preliminary plans that have been made so far.

One of the most critical problems facing MINVAH is a shortage of trained manpower. Computerization will help increase productivity, to be sure, but machines cannot replace people when it comes to finding new ways to promote housing and strengthening the local planning process. For that, the Ministry needs planners -- and this is where Habitat Centre York might be able to help.

For example, Habitat Centre York might undertake to put together a team of six to ten faculty members and graduate students who are specialists in various aspects of human-settlements planning and management. After preparation and briefing in Toronto, the team would go to Managua and spend (say) four weeks working alongside MINVAH staff in various parts of the Ministry. Among the areas where the team might work are: urban and regional planning, sectoral planning, information systems, housing (including the use of indigenous building materials in construction), administration of public housing, feasibility studies and project evaluation, etc. The precise allocation of resources would naturally depend on the priorities identified by MINVAH and the resources available to the Habitat Centre team.

As far as the costs of such a project are concerned, Habitat Centre York might be able to provide the team of specialists without cost, if (say) IDRC paid the international travel costs and MINVAH provided accommodation, food and local transport in Nicaragua. For IDRC, that would mean a total of something like CAD 10,000. For MINVAH, it is harder to estimate the costs involved, but most of them could be in-kind rather than cash (e.g. accommodation in university dormitories or hostels).

### 3. Development of an Urban Information Strategy for IDRC

The experience of agencies like UNCHS (Habitat) as well as research carried out at York University and elsewhere shows that improvements in information flows can do a lot for development. Of course, there are the instrumental benefits that can be derived from improvements in public administration: higher productivity, more efficiency and greater equity. For example, computerization of public-housing records can lead to better use of available resources through faster allocation, fewer vacancies, lower arrears levels, and so on. But there are also direct and tangible advantages for the beneficiaries too. For example, better records of public housing programs mean stronger claims to title and that means better access to capital through financial institutions.

In short, better information can make a big difference to development not just by revealing what is happening but also by providing the means for improving it. Thus, IDRC needs an information strategy aimed at strengthening not just the collection and dissemination of information but also its application to and use for improving the planning and management of human settlements.

Another important consideration in the development of such a strategy is to establish an institutional process that can first propose and then continue to contribute to its adaptation and evolution. In this way, IDRC can benefit from a continuing outside input and, at the same time, contribute to a strengthening of appropriate institutions and networks related to human settlements and information.

To this end, the existing network of university-based Habitat Centres represents a potentially very useful resource. With a bit of strengthening and coordination, these Centres could provide the basis for an institutionalized network of resources around the world. At the present time, each is working more or less in isolation from the others and building up networks within their respective geographical areas more or less without specific focus. But with the proper support, they could be encouraged both to focus on the role of information in human settlements planning and management and to collaborate on a more global basis in the preparation of some broader strategic guidelines. Most important of all, however, a process developed in this way would not disappear once the immediate task had been completed but would continue to function in the same and other areas. In other words, meeting a short-term need would also have long-term, institution-building payoffs with potential benefits for IDRC as well as the Habitat Centres involved.

In other words, it is proposed that Habitat Centre York could also play a role in coordinating similar university-based human-settlements centres around the world in developing a broad strategy for meeting urban information needs in developing nations. Through a coordinated series of regional and sub-regional conferences, workshops and seminars, a Habitat Centre network could be formed, leading to a series of reports and proposals to IDRC. Habitat Centre York would be responsible for coordinating the process and synthesizing the results. Thereafter, the Habitat Centre network would remain in place to provide a continuing source of evaluation and advice on this issue as well as a potential resource in other areas.

