

The Forum

promoting dialogue among Habitat for Humanity's worldwide partners

Helping more families through housing support services

By Steve Weir

This issue surveys a range of innovative housing support service programs and delivery systems and explores how they fit into Habitat's broader shelter strategy.

At Habitat, we define housing support services, or HSS, as:

A demand-driven service or product designed to enable a household to:

- a) Reach an adequate¹ housing quality standard in secure tenure, basic services, and shelter durability and space.
- b) Make shelter-related improvements in health, safety and livelihood.

HSS is quickly becoming a significant "scaling" strategy, serving more families than new or rehab construction annually. It allows Habitat for Humanity to leverage our core competency of housing and housing processes by partnering with low-income financial institutions, housing service companies and social entrepreneurs.

The HSS approach is a significant shift from Habitat's work as a contractor or construction manager toward consultancy and training, responding to homeowner demand. This is an *enabling* approach rather



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A future Habitat homeowner learns to make interlocking blocks in the Muang Len community in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The blocks were used to build two houses in the community and to supplement other blocks purchased for the Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project in 2009. Homeowners earned sweat equity by making the blocks both for their homes and for others, and they learned valuable skills that can assist with future livelihood development.

than a *production* approach.

As a complement to HSS, Habitat also provides technical assistance consultation to partner organizations so that they can provide housing support services directly to families and communities.

This issue of The Forum explores how the HSS concept is being implemented by Habitat around the world. In her article on HSS in Nepal, Hiew Peng Wong shows how a clear understanding of local housing

Continued on page 2

contents

Helping more families through housing support services	1
Housing support services in Nepal.	4
Construction Technical Assistance in Malawi	6
Habitat Resource Centers	8
Supporting families with construction advice and expertise	10
Empowering communities to obtain a sustainable habitat	12
Strategic Innovations Grant	14

Helping more families through housing support services

Continued from page 1

conditions leads to the choices of HSS as a scalable intervention strategy. Patrick Kelley explains how 11 Habitat countries are involved in a special learning project to test HSS approaches empirically. Bob Longino explores how construction technical assistance is helping homeowners in Malawi to make better use of small housing improvement loans. Peter Witton reviews the history of the Habitat Resource Center, which emerged in

WE WILL NOW TRACK AND
COMMUNICATE TO OUR EXTERNAL
PUBLIC 1) CONSTRUCTION, 2) HOUSING
SUPPORT SERVICES AND 3) VOLUNTEERS
AS THREE DISTINCT CRITICAL ACTIVITIES.

the Asia/Pacific region as a vehicle to provide HSS in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Monica Ramirez from Latin America and the Caribbean shows how HSS is closely linked to the community development strategies pursued in that area. And Katerina Bezgachina of Europe and Central Asia shows how HSS is suited to partnership approaches with microfinance institutions that make small housing loans to their clients.

Habitat's approach to housing support services

Habitat for Humanity International uses housing value chain analysis to identify gaps in the informal incremental housing process. This has led us to develop a growing complement of demand-driven HSS. Two components of these housing support services are:

- **Construction technical assistance:** Direct consultation to a household that does not include direct construction, oversight or construction management.
- **Nonconstruction**, including:
 - **Legal:** Tenure, permits and entitlements.
 - **Design:** Life cycle affordability, incremental, sustainable building, disaster resiliency.
 - **Training:** Financial capability, skilled and nonskilled construction, tool rental, material production, certification.
 - **Access:** Information resources/networks, supplier linkages, qualified contractors and product suppliers, government and private subsidy programs and services.

Interventions that are *not included* in housing support services are:

- Construction, construction management or

oversight, repairs or home improvements.

- Financial products.
- Nonshelter-related or shelter-enabling improvements, trainings or consultations.

Recognizing that the shelter inadequacy of the urban poor is often the result of inadequate public policy and urban planning, our approach to HSS is based on providing access to shelter-related information and services while pursuing policy changes that support adequate housing.

Developed economy origins vs. current usage

Housing support services² is a term that has been used for several decades by social service agencies in economically developed economies in the global North. These agencies provide referral services to housing programs and subsidies for low-income, vulnerable populations. Typically, they define housing support services as services provided to any person to develop that person's capacity to live an independent, productive life or to sustain his or her capacity to do so.

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Mission statement

The Forum exists to connect the worldwide partners of Habitat for Humanity International as well as provide a link to other organizations and individuals concerned with the effects of poverty by providing a means to:

- Explore issues related to housing and poverty.
- Describe the work that Habitat for Humanity is doing around the world to address housing and poverty issues.
- Present success factors and in-depth analysis of innovative and signature Habitat programs.





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Carpentry student Ilmidin Toshmatov (right) works alongside master carpenter Sheroz Kholmurodov in the Building and Training Center run by Habitat Tajikistan with support from the Canadian International Development Agency. The center is designed to create employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups. More than 200 people each year gain vocational skills and HIV/AIDS awareness through the 18 courses at the center.

These services cover a range of activities, including advice on budgeting and debt management; assistance with benefit claims; help maintaining the security of the dwelling; assistance with disputes with neighbors; and general counseling and advice. These are often provided alongside “supportive housing or service-enhanced housing” for special needs populations.

There is much in the original use of the term housing support services that is consistent globally with developing economies — but there are distinct differences. In many urban cities in the global South, the average “urban workforce” household includes teachers, policemen and entry-level government and private-sector salary workers. These are not “special needs” families requiring case management, but fully productive households needing access to information and services to help them better invest in their own incremental shelter improvements.

Strategic positioning

The rise in importance of this approach has led us to redefine how we count and communicate Habitat’s work in the field. We will now track and communicate to our external public 1) construction, 2) housing support services and 3) volunteers as three distinct critical

activities. Previous “nonconstruction” activities will be renamed “housing support services” in an effort to reposition and promote nonconstruction HSS interventions as important activities in their own right. We continue to include construction technical services, a growing HSS delivered directly to the family, under the appropriate “construction” category.

Research, development and global peer learning exchanges

In 2010, we launched the first global Strategic Investment Grant, a three-year global learning initiative to refine HSS approaches for Habitat. The SIG will identify best practices and develop sustainable business models by supporting and evaluating the demand-led HSS provided in 11 countries from throughout HFHI’s program regions. We began the grant with a global training in Nicaragua to learn from PRODEL, a development program globally recognized for its housing support services. PRODEL’s research suggests that its services divide into three categories, each with different levels of HSS options to build and promote sustainable businesses. We would like to adopt and further develop this framework in Habitat.

Continued on page 16

Housing support services in Nepal

By Hiew Peng Wong

When Habitat for Humanity began working in Nepal in 1997, the focus was on providing low-income families with decent and affordable housing. By 2005, Habitat had completed 830 houses.

Today, the focus remains the same, but there has been a strategic change in direction. To develop a cost-effective, environmentally friendly housing program, Habitat for Humanity Nepal tapped its partnership network of nongovernmental organizations, microfinance institutions and village lending and savings groups. By June 2011, Habitat Nepal had marked its 10,000th family served.

If Habitat's early role in Nepal can be characterized as



Women in Nepal prepare bamboo to be used as building material. In Jhapa, Habitat for Humanity Nepal has set up an enterprise to create corrugated roofing sheets out of bamboo mats. Women learn to produce the mats through a training program set up by Habitat Nepal.

a housing provider, the recent years have seen a deliberate shift.

Nepal has grown much faster since 2005 than it did in the eight years between 1997 and 2005. In the early years, Habitat's Save & Build program fit in well with the incremental housing model favored by the low-income communities. Low-income families would save about 35 percent of the cost of a house while the remaining 65 percent was met by Habitat and its partners. Within three years, the families were contributing 68 percent of the house cost, with Habitat and its partners coming up with the remaining third.

Many of Habitat's microfinance institution partners were also able to expand their portfolios and provided additional loans for housing. For example, for every house Habitat Nepal funded, microfinance institution

Jeevan Bikash also extended a housing loan.

"The need for decent housing is great in Nepal, and Habitat cannot bank on its own strength," said country representative Aruna Paul Simittrarachchi. "There is vast potential in our partners to play a key role in accelerating the growth of our program. To tap this potential, we need to move beyond being a housing provider. We aim to be a facilitator, a mover and a supporter of housing solutions."

The housing support services concept allows Habitat Nepal to fulfill that vision, particularly in light of its 100,000 Housing Campaign unveiled in July 2011. Habitat aims to serve 100,000 additional families in the next five years.

"HFH Nepal is aiming for a snowball effect in terms of reach and impact," Simittrarachchi said. "Upon the successful completion of the 100,000 Housing Campaign, we want even more partners to be involved in reducing Nepal's housing deficit by 25 percent, or 1 million houses. Our sight is set on the total elimination of poverty housing from Nepal by 2030, or in 20 years' time. This will not be done solely by HFH Nepal, but with diverse partners, including the government."

To this end, Habitat Nepal aims to:

1. Connect with the cooperatives, village banks and microfinance institutions to encourage them to add housing to their loan portfolios and, if required, to build their capacity to do so.
2. Bring expertise, knowledge and skills within Nepal together to respect, promote and enhance traditional architecture and its practices.
3. Promote and improve the quality and durability of eco-friendly construction materials through sharing of knowledge and technical training.

With a manual developed by Habitat, staff members of microfinance institutions are trained to help their clients estimate the amount of loan required, how much each client has to save, and how to optimize the use of locally available construction materials.

Another manual will help families decide on house design and work out the construction cost, with advice from Habitat Nepal's staff members. Habitat's staff also can provide technical supervision at some construction sites and guidance on improving the quality of the final

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housing product.

Habitat Nepal will also train partner organizations, local communities, families, masons, carpenters and Habitat volunteers in the use of cost-effective construction technology.

Staff members will travel to communities to train people in the adobe technology of making bricks, using clay in the foundation and plastering, and using lime for protection against termites — techniques found in traditional architecture used in palaces and other large buildings.

To help such training, Habitat aims to set up and provide initial funding for as many resource centers as possible throughout the country. Eventually, these centers will be transferred to and run by the community.

To promote the use of cost-effective construction materials, Habitat plans to set up bamboo production centers and straw mills, depending on the needs of the community. Bamboo will be treated at the centers to increase its durability. The centers can also produce bamboo shelter kits that can be easily assembled for temporary housing in response to disasters. Masonry training will be conducted with skilled workers available for hire by families or organizations. In addition, the centers will provide guidance and advice on housing design.

Sawmills will also be set up in some communities, especially where former bonded laborers, known as *Kamaiyas*, live. By providing sawmill services, Habitat will help families and communities cut back on timber waste, conserve natural resources, and minimize the risk of injury and death in the event of a house collapsing in an earthquake or other disaster.

In Jhapa, Habitat Nepal already has an enterprise that produces strong corrugated roofing sheets from bamboo. The mats used to make the sheets come from 30 mat-weaving centers set up by Habitat Nepal in various communities, and the “raw” material for the mats eventually will come from nurseries. Habitat Nepal is considering setting up 20 training centers for the cultivation and harvesting of bamboo, providing income to poor families.

Another locally available construction material is straw bale, made from pressed, dried straw. Used as a



Putting to use cost-effective building technology based on local materials, home partners and local volunteers in Pokhara, Nepal, build frames of treated bamboo on a foundation of concrete and stone for the houses that were completed during Habitat’s Everest Build in October 2010. Home partners learn the bamboo construction techniques through a Habitat training program.

wall insulation, it keeps a house cool in summer and warm in winter.

Habitat Nepal also wants the local community to take ownership. “Housing needs to be owned and driven by the community with appropriate consultation from the authorities,” Simittrarachchi said.

Infrastructure such as roads, drainage and sewerage disposal should not hinder house construction or vice versa. Such considerations are particularly crucial in flood-affected or flood-prone areas.

The cutting down of trees for timber needs to be minimized — a decision that should lie with the community. With public education, the use of timber can be optimized with a community-owned sawmill, Simittrarachchi said, and cutting back on the use of timber as pillars or rafters or beams will also lessen the risk of injury or death when earthquakes hit.

A community needs to have access to eco-friendly building materials, practices and methodologies. The resultant cost savings can be invested in housing, be it paying off a loan faster or building the next stage of the home.

“In Habitat, we are used to talking about giving a family a leg up,” Simittrarachchi said. “The housing support services concept extends that idea to our partners. More-informed, better-equipped partners and families make a world of difference to Habitat’s mission.” 🏠

Hiew Peng Wong is the writer/editor in Habitat for Humanity International’s Asia/Pacific area office.

HOUSING AS A PROCESS

Construction Technical Assistance in Malawi

By Bob Longino



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George Phiri, 28, is using technical construction training from Habitat along with microfinance loans from a Habitat partner to incrementally build a new home for his family in Lilongwe, Malawi.

George Phiri, a 28-year-old teacher, stands in the brick entrance of what will become his first purchased home and smiles, thinking of the day that he, along with his wife, Beatrice, and their two small children, will move in.

To own a home instead of paying rent, as Phiri does now with another house, will mean a lot to him.

"It's big. Very, very big," Phiri says. "In Africa and in Malawi, not everyone owns a house. You waste money when you rent. So for me and my family to have our own house, it's like you have taken

one huge weight off your back."

Phiri is part of Habitat for Humanity's Construction Technical Assistance pilot program in Malawi. He's using a series of microfinance loans from a Habitat fund partner along with technical building expertise from Habitat Malawi CTA staff. Over time, he will build and complete his home and join the ranks of the hundreds of thousands of families Habitat has served worldwide.

The CTA program is different from the traditional model of Habitat home construction. The latter involves soliciting donated building materials, organizing volunteers to build alongside home partners, and financing the home with a no- or low-interest loan as part of a revolving fund. The traditional model sees housing as a product — the house — and Habitat as the project manager and often builder, too.

In CTA, Habitat offers construction advice and products that help the homeowner build his or her own house. This can be advice on building materials and building practices such as proper foundations and proper roof support, the provision of a BOQ (bill of quantities), and house design. CTA is done in concert with a microfinance partner that lends the finances and oversees the loan

aspect. This model sees housing as a process, focusing on incremental building in a series of steps. Building in stages is by far the main way lower-income people improve housing in the developing world.

The contrast between Habitat's traditional model and CTA indeed is stark. But the potential gain for Habitat in being able to increase the number of families helped each year

"THROUGH CTA AND INCREMENTAL HOUSING, THE FUTURE HOLDS THE POTENTIAL TO SERVE 2,000 TO 3,000 (FAMILIES) A YEAR."

— CARL QUEIROS, PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR FOR HABITAT'S AFRICA/MIDDLE EAST AREA OFFICE

is remarkable and provides a service that is far more affordable than the traditional model, says Carl Queiros, program development director for Habitat's Africa/Middle East area office.

"Before Habitat Malawi started doing incremental housing and CTA a year ago, they could at best serve about 200 families per year," Queiros says. "Through CTA and incremental housing, the future holds the potential to serve 2,000 to 3,000 a year."



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A microfinance loan study in Ghana involving improvements done without construction technical assistance revealed that this home received a new roof improperly placed on a structure of mud walls that cannot properly support the addition. The home could collapse, the study said, or the roof could be blown off during a heavy storm.

Further, a new global partnership between Habitat and Opportunity International, a Christian-based microfinance institution, opens up the possibility of working with a healthy portion of that organization's client base, which numbers roughly 290,000 in Malawi alone. Some 20 to 40 percent of OI's microloans are income-generation or consumer loans that are diverted to home construction or improvement, meaning Habitat Malawi could become involved with thousands and even tens of thousands of new families.

"That's huge," Queiros says.

Although CTA as an intentionally designed and stand-alone model is very new, the basic idea has been used by Habitat for years, especially in Egypt, Nicaragua and other countries.

Now AME is developing technical assistance as a stand-alone program with its own system and philosophy.

Another pilot program is under way in Ghana, where the CTA staff is in the initial verification stage with its first client. But a completed study of Ghana loan practices by microfinance institutions done without construction technical assistance reveal many cases of

improper building and wasting of funds by people who cannot afford to waste resources. For example, one homeowner added a new roof to her existing house. The addition was not properly anchored, and the home's mud walls did not provide good support, meaning the roof could "easily be blown off during a heavy storm," or the house could collapse, the study said.

"One strong indication that people have a need for us is that MFIs are coming to us and saying, 'We need your technical assistance and support,'" Queiros says.

By working with microfinance institutions, Habitat can leverage their capital for the finance segment and put the nonprofit funds solely toward technical assistance. Plus, Queiros says, MFIs "usually are better equipped and set up to manage loan

programs and portfolios than we are and are so strong in many parts of Africa we can piggyback on their client base, expertise and infrastructure."

In Malawi, the effect of Habitat's CTA program can be registered by George Phiri's wide smile as he looks over his nearly completed home.

He says Habitat advised him on a number of construction issues, including dealing with the land's water table, use of cement and drainage needs.

"Without CTA," Phiri says, "I'd still be on the foundation." 🏠

Bob Longino is director of Creative Support Services for Habitat for Humanity International.

Habitat Resource Centers

By Peter Witton



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Flooding in eastern Sri Lanka in January 2011 affected more than 1 million people and displaced more than 367,000. Habitat for Humanity Sri Lanka worked through its Habitat Resource Center to distribute cleaning kits and emergency shelter kits to flood victims in the Batticaloa district.

A few years ago, a debate arose within Habitat for Humanity about how to organize and talk about all the “other stuff” Habitat for Humanity was doing apart from building homes. In the Asia/Pacific region especially, the traditional Habitat approach, with its focus on local affiliates raising funds and building in their communities, was being supplemented by newer and more complex responses.

National offices overseeing many affiliates were being asked to build the technical skills of local affiliate teams. Sometimes the national offices had the expertise to do that. But it was clear some affiliates lacked the valuable knowledge to share, whether organizing a construction site or fitting a certain type of roofing or running an event project. What was the best way for Habitat to organize

and package this reservoir of practical wisdom, these “soft” skills?

“The traditional affiliate model served Habitat well — and continues to be an important way for helping families. But to create real scale and sustainability and thereby have greater impact on the misery of poverty housing, there needed to be a better way of doing things,” according to Peter Gape, director of programs at Habitat for Humanity’s Asia/Pacific area office.

The answer was what are now called Habitat Resource Centers, or HRCs.

“An HRC broadens the reach of Habitat for Humanity’s mission and home-building programs,” Gape said. “When people think of HRCs, many think of a physical structure. A resource center is a concept: a source of technical and

knowledge resources for providing housing solutions.”

The focus of an HRC depends on what is required. But it may offer expertise in project and construction management; in construction skills training for local people; in appropriate technology, including the production of low-cost, high-quality building materials; and more. HRCs are a channel for implementing Habitat’s responses after disasters. They are also becoming a vital component in Habitat’s growing housing finance initiatives, providing housing support services to accompany the financing.

“AN HRC BROADENS THE REACH OF HABITAT FOR HUMANITY’S MISSION AND HOME-BUILDING PROGRAMS. WHEN PEOPLE THINK OF HRCs, MANY THINK OF A PHYSICAL STRUCTURE. A RESOURCE CENTER IS A CONCEPT: A SOURCE OF TECHNICAL AND KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES FOR PROVIDING HOUSING SOLUTIONS.”

— PETER GAPE, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS,
HABITAT FOR HUMANITY ASIA/PACIFIC

HRCs take a flexible approach to providing building resources and skills to communities.

Engineers and specialists offer design and architecture services for Habitat home-building projects. They can also supervise construction and provide expertise in logistics, procurement and transportation. Some resource centers produce materials for Habitat homes; materials produced in excess may be sold to a wider market to generate jobs and income for homeowners. For example, the HRC in tsunami-affected Meulaboh, Indonesia, was a source of bricks for the local house construction market. The Philippines HRCs are noted for the use of cost-effective concrete interlocking block technology and lightweight steel frame technology.

HRCs also train local construction workers in traditional and alternative approaches to masonry, woodwork, painting and other building practices, and they transfer knowledge to local supervisors, enabling them to plan and run complete housing projects. In one Habitat program in the Pacific, an HRC ran monthlong carpentry and joinery workshops for a year, along with courses on masonry techniques and concrete interlocking block construction. The training program paid particular attention to the needs of women and vulnerable groups.

HRCs work with partners and provide project management knowledge and technical resources. This was the model used for reconstruction in India, Indonesia, Sri

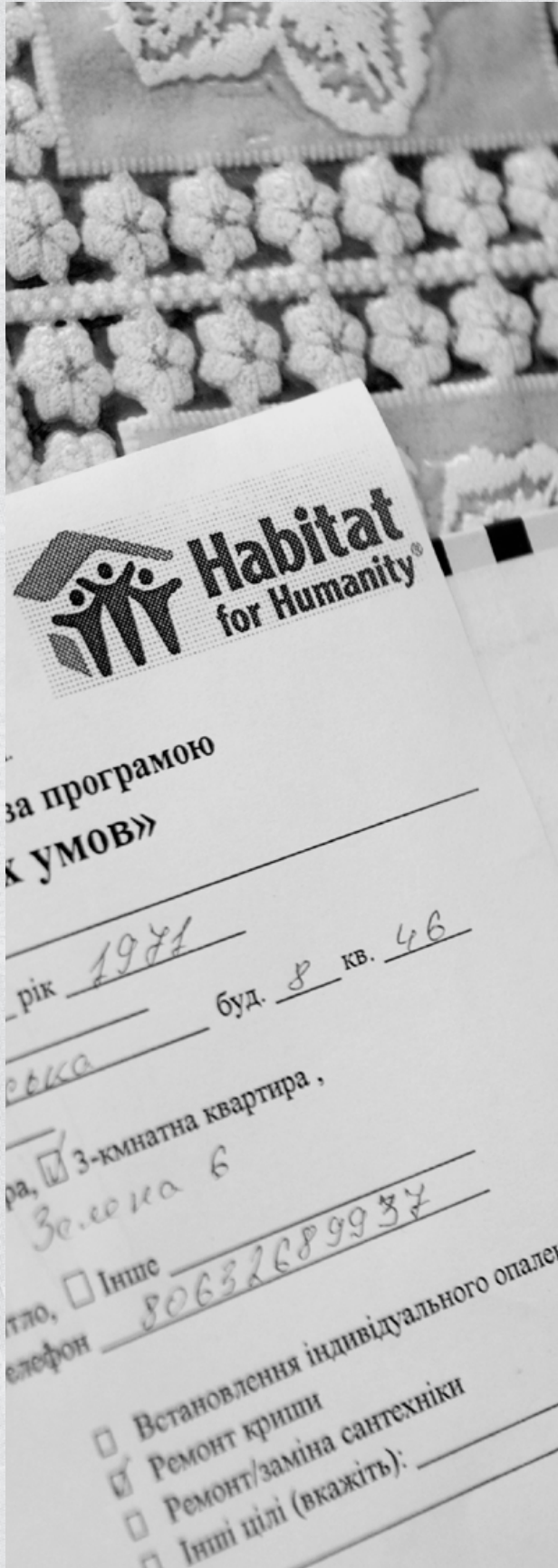
Lanka and Thailand after the countries were devastated by the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The HRC in Chennai, south India, was the focus for years of building for tsunami-affected families. This role has morphed, and the resource center now leads extensive disaster-mitigation and preparation training programs to teach families how to protect their lives and property in the face of a future calamity.

India is also a locus for HRCs with housing finance expertise. Habitat experts offer assistance to microfinance institutions and nongovernmental organizations as they design shelter-related financial loan products for low-income families. Sometimes these partners also want Habitat to train their staff on construction-related aspects so they can assist — and monitor — as their clients spend their loans on improving their shelter conditions. Sometimes these partners delegate and prefer to have the HRCs furnish families with the necessary construction skills and assistance to improve their homes themselves.

HRCs have been established in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand, among other locations. The concept has proved to be such an efficient use of human and material resources that the national programs switched from a network of affiliates to a fewer number of HRCs. This has happened, for example, in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Sri Lanka, the volunteers who used to run affiliates are encouraged to stay involved in what are called satellite centers, identifying local housing needs and mobilizing resources and supporters. The volunteers no longer have to worry about the business of financial accounts or loan management or construction management: These are handled by the HRC. In Bangladesh, the switch led to higher staff morale, and an increased tempo of house building as a women’s group savings initiative took off.

HRCs will be center stage as Habitat develops its new “nonbuilding” classifications for its programs, the housing support services initiative. This portfolio of services will incorporate many of those offered by HRCs. But the new initiative could see housing services actually delivered by partners and third parties. HRCs will be just one channel in the effort to provide people with the skills and resources they need to create safe, affordable homes and communities. 🏠

Peter Witton is the communications director for the Asia/Pacific area office in Bangkok, Thailand.



SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Sharing our construction advice and expertise

By Katerina Bezgachina

Over the past few years, Habitat for Humanity has been striving to expand its impact in Europe and Central Asia by scaling up existing programs and making them sustainable.

One way to achieve sustainability is by using housing support services to train families on how to approach and deliver home improvements, and using technical assistance to train partner organizations in ways that will build their capacity to deliver housing support services.

In 2008, Habitat partnered with HOPE Ukraine, a microfinance organization, to offer affordable loans to families in need of improved living conditions. HOPE has been operating in Ukraine since 1997. With their loans, families could start and grow small businesses such as transportation services, clothing shops and retail outlets. But the high cost of renovations meant those families could not improve their homes, so HOPE decided to add housing loans to its portfolio and partnered with Habitat for Humanity.

The joint project was piloted in Transcarpathia, in the west of the country. HOPE reached out to the network of its existing clients, and Habitat offered expertise on how to design and deliver housing loans.

Habitat hired a construction project manager who could advise borrowers on what interventions were needed and the best way to implement them. Habitat's construction and microfinance specialists held workshops for HOPE's loan officers and construction managers to

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train them on how to estimate necessary construction works, put together budgets and select needed materials.

In fall 2010, a similar approach was taken in a new partnership in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Microcredit Foundation LOK. LOK had been providing microcredit to support entrepreneurship for several years, and had identified the need for housing microloans. Habitat helped the organization conduct market research and develop those microloans.

Reconstruction of the existing housing stock is the pressing problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country was a part of the former Yugoslavia, and the civil wars of the 1990s destroyed almost half of its housing stock.

At the moment, LOK offers housing finance loans to low-income households in Bosnia and Herzegovina to carry out individual home repairs and energy efficiency upgrades. At a later stage, it plans to offer loans for residents of apartment blocks. Funds for the microloans were obtained through the Dutch International Guarantees for Housing Foundation. Habitat brings to the table construction advice and technical expertise.

In 2010, Habitat trained 52 loan officers to offer and manage home renovation loans. It also assisted the partner in hiring and orienting a construction manager. At the same time, Habitat developed manuals and guidelines on how to carry out basic repairs such as replacing windows, installing doors and laying floors, as many customers prefer to do this work themselves to save money on labor. These manuals can now be translated into other languages and offered to the families in Ukraine.

Microfinance has been hailed for offering real possibilities for fighting poverty in the developing world, where a stable financial system is absent. Affordable housing loans for basic repairs coupled with housing support services can solve the existing housing need, but the supply of such loans and services is still well below the demand.

“The importance of adequate housing tends to be overlooked among the development objectives,” said Loucine Hayes, regional housing finance man-



Opposite: Habitat construction manager Oros Pavlo assisted with paperwork for a microloan from Habitat and HOPE International that enabled Vitaliy Perets to renovate. **Above:** In May 2011, Habitat for Humanity and Microfinance Centre agreed to establish a regional Center for Innovation in Shelter and Finance for Europe and Central Asia.

ager at Habitat for Humanity Europe and Central Asia. “However, it is the basis to break the cycle of poverty for a family. To achieve this, we need affordable housing. Widespread housing microfinance can be seen as one of the solutions to the problem.”

At the end of May, Habitat for Humanity and the Microfinance Centre, a regional microfinance network working toward increased financial inclusion, signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a regional Center for Innovation in Shelter and Finance.

“This initiative will help empower microfinance institutions in the region,” said Katarzyna Pawlak, deputy director at Microfinance Centre. “It will allow them to broaden their lending portfolios to offer a range of housing finance products for home improvement projects. Experience so far has shown that housing microfinance not only works for poor families, but also is an attractive product for microfinance institutions.”

The regional center will work with microfinance institutions in Europe and Central Asia and a range of actors in the public, private and NGO sector interested in designing housing finance products for families on low incomes. Along with that, it will offer reliable specialist assistance for implementing construction work and identifying available funds. 🏠

Katerina Bezgachina is public relations and media manager for Habitat for Humanity’s Europe and Central Asia area office, based in Bratislava, Slovakia.

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SUSTAINABILITY

Empowering communities to obtain a sustainable habitat

By Monica Ramirez

Recently, several staff members in Habitat's Latin America and the Caribbean area office spent time working with a volunteer construction team in Tejarsillos, a shanty town near the center of San José, Costa Rica. Our task was to help the homeowner, Yahira, replace the shack where she was living with her six children with an improved house built of pre-fabricated panels. Although we felt satisfied with the task, we also realized what a drop in the bucket it was compared with the similar needs of 400 other families living in her community. With the imminent risks they face — mudslides caused by heavy rain, health risks to children caused by a lack of adequate water and sanitation systems — the potential for community-level disaster was inescapably evident.

Habitat for Humanity is learning that the task of securing adequate housing with minimum quality standards requires that we go beyond home construction and become involved, when possible, with the so-called “social production” of housing — that is, the process by which communities resolve

IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, HABITAT IS PROPOSING TO INTEGRATE AND DELIVER HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICES WITHIN A SYSTEMATIC, COMMUNITY-BASED HABITAT MANAGEMENT CYCLE.

their own housing issues one step at a time to create more sustainable and integrated housing interventions.

There are examples of Habitat national organizations that become involved with the community in order to devise relevant housing interventions in addition to the house itself, such as providing support for securing land tenure, training families in construction techniques and financial education, and empowering communities to advocate for better sanitation conditions. But only recently have we started to recognize and classify these “additional” interventions as housing support services. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Habitat is proposing to integrate and deliver housing support services within a systematic, community-based Habitat Management Cycle.

Housing support services transfer capacity to communities, project partners and volunteers by providing housing solutions and supporting the development of sustainable settlements. Such an approach allows additional partners and volunteers to get involved by supporting complementary

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nonconstruction community projects and services — both tangible and not tangible. This creates caring and relevant bonds between communities and across social and geographic boundaries.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the Habitat Management Cycle is a process through which housing support services providers systematically engage with communities over extended periods. To deliver relevant support services, the process should begin with the national organization's becoming familiar with the community's existing efforts to improve their housing conditions and with the stakeholders involved in the process. The first step is to approach community leaders and organizations to establish a relationship that opens the door to further, structured work with individual



Claudio Barga (right), project coordinator for Varjada, Brazil, leads a community meeting. Habitat's Latin America and Caribbean area office is expanding the community involvement concept to work with communities as a partner on projects that will achieve new development goals.

community members related to their needs. This requires a thorough process of gaining the trust and confidence of local stakeholders, assuring them Habitat is a legitimate housing expert and a socially committed organization. It requires dialogue and negotiation in order to establish a partnership in which both parties — Habitat and the community — have stated responsibilities.

The second step is to assess, in detail, the housing needs within the settlement, the socioeconomic situation of each family, and the shortcomings of the local housing market. This can be done through any of the available assessment tools from Habitat or others, such as the Vulnerabilities and Capacities Needs Assessment, or VCA, and the Emergency Market Mapping Assessment, or EMMA. This needs assessment should be conducted in a participatory manner. The response strategy should be spelled out in an action plan developed in partnership

with the community, incorporating the range of housing support services that will help the community overcome the obstacles preventing members from improving their housing conditions.

It means devising services, construction products and improvements tailored to the families' needs and economic capacity, and facilitating those services over a period long enough to accompany families on their pathway to permanence. Within this model, Habitat will help the community connect with other partners to meet additional needs, and will channel resources from different sources to implement integrated housing solutions. Throughout the implementation, housing support services should also contribute to building capacity in organization, management and the social production of housing in the community. Thus we will help to empower these communities to continue providing additional services and projects for themselves, which will continue to move more families toward a more sustainable and livable environment.

Such an approach requires Habitat to enter as a partner/collaborator with the community and other actors. In other words, we must renounce the need to own the process from "A to Z." We will need to increase the skills, knowledge and capacity that will strengthen the services we provide to communities. In general, it is the families and communities who will establish priorities, while Habitat will act as a supporter and facilitator. This requires not only empowering communities to achieve sustainable and adequate housing, but also empowering each family and the community as a whole to set and achieve new developmental goals.

Although our activities are too new to illustrate long-term success, we are confident the housing support services can become the key transformational vehicle for Habitat in its mission to help families and communities resolve their housing issues. They add specific value to the services that we wish to deliver, according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, empowering people to achieve adequate housing and a nourishing environment for individual progress and collective development. 🏠

Monica Ramirez is director of housing and human settlements in Habitat for Humanity's Latin America and Caribbean area office.

Strategic Innovations Grant

By Patrick Kelley

The Strategic Innovations Grants for Housing Support Services is a three-year learning grant that seeks to develop a sustainable and replicable Habitat for Humanity program framework for providing housing support services.

As Habitat promotes small, incremental housing solutions, our work more closely resembles community development than it does construction. Although at many times the solutions still include construction-related services, Habitat often remains more of an adviser than the implementer. Developing the skill sets and delivery mechanism for housing support services is critical for Habitat programs transitioning to incremental or housing microfinance programs. This Strategic Innovations Grant aims to help the Habitat network develop these skills, experiences, best practices and business models.

What does “learning grant” mean?

Habitat for Humanity International adapted the Learning Network methodology from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the SEEP Network. A learning network grant

PHOTOS: COURTESY HHHI GLOBAL PROGRAMS



Delegations from Habitat for Humanity Ghana and Habitat for Humanity India discuss their plans for housing support services during a March 2011 Strategic Innovations Grant learning group meeting in Nicaragua.

creates a structured platform for:

- Focusing on a common challenge (e.g., how best to provide housing support services).
- Receiving funds targeted for that purpose.
- Facilitating peer exchange and learning in a specific period.
- Developing learning products for dissemination.

The SIG-HSS began with a request for proposals to the global Habitat network. In response, we received proposals from national organizations already working on housing support services and

looking to pilot innovative strategies for delivering those services to clients in conjunction with housing microfinance.

What is the learning agenda?

The learning agenda is built around the key challenges in replicating and scaling up housing support services for low-income and poor families. In order to provide value to families and other stakeholders, Habitat for Humanity seeks to demonstrate that:

- Families benefit from and demand housing support services.
- Housing support services can be

sustainable and are a good investment for families and financial service providers.

- Housing support services improve:
 - › The quality of the housing intervention.
 - › The quality of life for the household.

SIG-HSS participants will focus on these themes and implement their innovative proposals, generating and documenting knowledge that will help to answer or prove these hypotheses. As a result, that knowledge will be translated into documentation that will enable other national organizations and partners to replicate those successful business models.

The first grants

Staff from 11 Habitat national offices gathered in Nicaragua in March 2011 to discuss housing support services. The 11 attendees were winners of a competitive proposal process, selected from more than 25 proposals, featuring the most replicable and innovative housing support services within the global Habitat for Humanity network.

Participating programs also had an on-site look at the operations of PRODEL, one of the world’s top innovators in the area of housing microfinance and housing support services. PRODEL works alongside a network of microfinance institutions, complementing their financial services with a battery of well-trained construction technicians. Technicians advise seven to nine families a day, a rate of efficiency that keeps costs low to clients. The Habitat participants were able to probe into the specifics of how PRODEL organizes, delivers and covers the costs of serving clients.

The remaining days in Nicaragua were spent developing consensus principles and critiquing one another’s plans to provide housing support services in our respective countries. The learning group has committed to constructive mutual critique and to openness and honesty about what is not working.

On the last day, goodbyes were briefer than most Habitat workshops because this group knows we’ll be hearing from one another frequently. The Housing Support Service Grant has an emphasis on peer learning, with at least two more physical gatherings planned. Additionally, virtual exchanges on progress will take

Continued on page 16



Staff from 11 Habitat national offices — selected for their innovative and replicable housing support services — learned from each other’s methods and from the work of housing microfinance innovator PRODEL during a gathering in Nicaragua in March 2011.

DEVELOPING THE SKILL SETS AND DELIVERY MECHANISM FOR HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICES IS CRITICAL FOR HABITAT PROGRAMS TRANSITIONING TO INCREMENTAL OR HOUSING MICROFINANCE PROGRAMS. THIS STRATEGIC INNOVATIONS GRANT AIMS TO HELP THE HABITAT NETWORK DEVELOP THESE SKILLS, EXPERIENCES, BEST PRACTICES AND BUSINESS MODELS.

Helping more families through housing support services

Continued from page 3

Level 1 – Nonskilled maintenance and repair: This requires basic handout materials on things like how to hire and oversee a contractor as a homeowner, access to HSS information in the community or over the Web, and tips on disaster-resilient construction where appropriate.

Level 2 – Skilled: This requires a mason or carpenter but is not technically or structurally complicated.

Level 3 – Complex: This involves structural work that benefits from trained technical support.

Interestingly, PRODEL in Nicaragua found that Level 1 represented nearly 80 percent of its loans; Level 2 represented 18 percent; and Level 3 represented only 2 percent. If these prove to be globally representative, Habitat should be able to provide local, community-based organizations and microfinance institutions with information that they can distribute to all levels and also offer workshops through Habitat Resource Centers. If only 2 percent of the families require technical support, this suggests a very different business model from the one Habitat has typically used.

Conclusion

Housing support services provides a significant shift from Habitat as a contractor or construction manager toward consultancy and training, responding to homeowner demand. While some argue that the poor will neither appreciate nor pay for these services, the experience of PRODEL in Nicaragua and others suggests this is not the case when these services are aligned with and appropriate for varying levels of construction complexity.

Construction and construction management will continue to be an important part of the Habitat portfolio. However, if we are to work effectively in an increasingly urbanizing world and to have influence at any scale, we will need to master and develop effective, sustainable housing support services.

Finance institutions are focused on providing the best housing financial products. Housing NGOs are focused on providing quality housing for the poor. Housing support services may prove to be the way that we meet in the middle of the continuum, providing equal access to information to 80 percent of the households globally who improve their homes each year.

In the end, this can become a catalytic initiative to realize our vision: A world where everyone has a decent place to live. 🏠

Steve Weir is vice president of Global Program Development and Support at Habitat for Humanity International.

¹ Habitat for Humanity International defines adequate shelter as one with access to secure tenure, water and sanitation, adequate space, and durable structure.

² Today the term is commonly accompanied by the term “Supportive Housing.” together, they are defined on Wikipedia as “a combination of housing and services intended as a cost-effective way to help people live more stable, productive lives. Supportive housing is widely believed to work well for those who face the most complex challenges—individuals and families confronted with homelessness and who also have very low incomes and/or serious, persistent issues that may include substance abuse ... mental illness, HIV/AIDS, or other serious challenges to a successful life. Supportive Housing can be coupled with such social services as job training, life skills training, alcohol and drug abuse programs and case management to populations in need of assistance, including the developmentally disabled ... and elderly people who are medically frail. Supportive housing is intended to be a pragmatic solution that helps people recover and succeed while reducing the overall cost of care.”

Strategic Innovations Grant

Continued from page 15

place at least quarterly. Insights and key lessons will be shared throughout the Habitat global network, with a focus on examining the implications of what is working and why.

The first group of 11 SIG winners

HFH Ghana
HFH Paraguay
HFH Mexico
HFH Malawi
HFH India
HFH Nepal
HFH Vietnam
HFH Bangladesh
HFH Nicaragua
HFH Armenia
HFH Macedonia

Congratulations!

Be on the lookout for the products this group of 11 produces in the three years of the learning grant. Output will include case studies, recorded virtual presentations, a compendium of results and perhaps a video. 🏠

Patrick Kelley is director of International Housing Finance for Habitat for Humanity International, based in Atlanta. In this role, he coordinates global strategies to expand the poor's access to financial services for housing.

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