UPCA fund: First $6,000 loan capital comes from Asia’s urban poor...

Before the UPCA launch in the Philippines, an idea was floated of setting up a fund, which the UPCA would manage, as a symbol of collaboration and solidarity between the region’s urban poor groups. The idea was that the fund would belong to poor community groups in Asia, would support their housing, land acquisition, upgrading and livelihood initiatives, and would help make their ongoing community process stronger, wider and clearer, with better negotiation power.

Instead of just talking, though, several community networks began gathering contributions from their savings members and brought fat envelopes of cash with them to the Philippines, to put in the collection box that was passed around during the meeting. The US$5,622 that was collected may not be a huge sum, but it was symbolic because this seed capital for the new fund came entirely from the pockets of poor people around Asia - not from any donor or government.

That was just the start, but the idea has been to make participation in this fund something active, that all the groups in all the countries can take part in and contribute to. Later, it was agreed that a sum of US$100,000 still available in the ACCA Regional Loan Fund would be added to this, for the UPCA coalition to manage collectively.

UPCA launch in Quezon City: The new coalition was launched in a big regional workshop and community fair in Quezon City, in March 2012. The four-day event was hosted by the Philippines Homeless People’s Federation and brought together about 60 urban poor community representatives from 11 countries and another 1,000 from around the Philippines. To start with something concrete, the workshop began with field visits to five different cities, where the groups visited community-driven housing and upgrading projects, talked with the communities and local governments and exchanged ideas. Back in Quezon City, the groups from all 12 countries presented their community-driven development processes back home, discussed the new coalition, talked about issues, set some initial plans and elected a management committee to facilitate the UPCA process for the first year or two (which includes community leaders from 5 countries: Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Cambodia).

Declaration by Asia’s urban poor communities: Any new movement needs to have a declaration, of course, and the UPCA’s workshop launch culminated in a festive reading out of UPCA’s own “Declaration of Commitment and Action.” Afterwards, the declaration was signed by everyone in the hall, including the Mayor of Quezon City, the Secretary for the Department of the Interior and Local Government, and the president of the Social Housing Finance Corporation, who pledged their support for this new people-driven development.

Dialogue with key development agencies: One of the interesting parts of the UPCA launch event was a series of meetings that were organized with five international development agencies, in which the urban poor organizations met with key people in these agencies, introduced the new UPCA process and discussed possible collaborations. The meetings with World Bank, ADB, CDIA, UN-Habitat and Habitat for Humanity were a first step in building a new, friendly political space for the real “experts” on poverty - the urban poor themselves - to dialogue with these agencies that are tasked with alleviating poverty, but on their own have not been able to deliver the kind of change that’s really needed in Asian cities. (Reports also available from ACHR website)

Next steps for UPCA: In the months since the launch event, the community networks in each country have been spreading around word about this new coalition and the UPCA Fund, and discussing how they would like this regional grassroots platform and support system to assist their local process. The UPCA’s management committee has met twice since then: once in Serey Sophoan, Cambodia (June 2012) and in Chum Phae, Thailand (December 2012). The next big regional UPCA meeting will take place in February 2013, alongside the ACHR Regional Meeting in Bangkok.