
Strengthening Local Government in the Developing World: ICMA Goes Overseas

Steve McCoy-Thompson

In October 1989, ICMA was awarded a contract by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to begin an ambitious international municipal development program. Since that time, ICMA has worked to strengthen local government management overseas by providing technical assistance, training opportunities, and information exchange on local government practices. Drawing on more than 75 years of experience, over 7,500 members and a talent bank for overseas assignments of more than 1,000 professional managers and consultants, ICMA has placed urban management experts in a number of developing countries throughout the world, as well as in Eastern Europe, to share their expertise in the fine art of local government management.

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The International Municipal Development Program has grown out of a recognition by the development community that local government is the foundation for a strong democracy as well as a strong economy. As national governments around the globe begin to decentralize authority to the local level and as urban centers continue to swell in size, the need for efficient and cost-effective city management practices has become ever more urgent.

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This renewed emphasis on urban management has been sparked by the initiative of USAID's Office of Housing and Urban Programs under the leadership of Peter Kimm. What makes ICMA's program unique is its focus on sending the practitioners of municipal management and local service delivery, rather than traditional consultants, to transfer their expertise to the developing world and to the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe.

Advise and Assist

ICMA has provided technical assistance in many areas, from environmental management to the establishment of user fees for government programs. In 1990 alone, ICMA filled 64 requests from USAID and this year is looking to focus on larger scale programs in Eastern Europe, Honduras, and the Philippines (see the accompanying articles for further details on these programs).

A large share of the work has been in the urban environmental field. For example, Frank Ohnesorgen, the former assistant public works director of San Antonio, Texas, has already worked in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Ecuador and has upcoming assignments in solid waste management in Morocco and Botswana. Other ICMA assignments have included a feasibility study for establishing a toll road system in Jamaica; work on a Geographic Information System program in Morocco; recruitment for work concerning the privatization of sewer services in Thailand; and a lecture in Portugal on earthquake response.

Other forms of assistance include study tours and research. In the latter case, ICMA has contacted its members to find effective municipal programs that may be used as models in other countries. Among those research projects are a survey of programs on the privatization of public housing to glean ideas for cities in Eastern Europe, and a

study of local government solutions to environmental problems that may serve as examples for developing countries. Similarly, the study tour aspect of the program involves the identification of model municipal programs. In this case, ICMA contacts cities throughout the United States to arrange for study tours by visiting foreign professionals. In one instance, ICMA arranged for a month of on-the-job training with three Florida water service authorities for a visiting Moroccan official. Other tour proposals focused on affordable housing projects for a group from Algeria, land use planning for visiting Tunisian officials, and effective municipal management programs for two separate groups of parliamentarians from Poland and Hungary.

ICMA's USAID-funded program offers a unique opportunity to address these issues by providing local administrators with a com-

modity that cannot be bought, but is essential to good government: the practical experience of a manager who has implemented a municipal program and who has the ability to translate that experience to another culture. By encouraging this network of local administrators, ICMA seeks to improve the professionalism of local government as a whole. In hopes of maximizing its contribution, ICMA has already begun focusing on a few areas in which it has the capacity to make a long-term impact. Those areas are establishing and developing municipal associations in developing countries, urban environmental management, municipal finance, and municipal management practices. See the Guidelines for an Overseas Work Assignment for an outline of how the program works and how you can get involved. **PM**