



# Urbis in Abidjan

## Empowering the Poor to Access a Government Water Subsidy through Advocacy and Capacity Building

The Urbis program in Cote d'Ivoire focused on amplifying the voice of Abidjan's slum dwellers to increase their access to basic water services, thereby dramatically

improving their quality of life.

At the program outset, a slum dweller in need of a water connection for his/her home faced two challenges. First, only one household per plot of land was eligible for a subsidized connection, a condition that most households did not meet given the high population density in slums. Second, the required administrative steps were time-consuming and confusing, yet slum dwellers tended to have neither spare time nor easy access to information. As a result, slum dwellers were not benefiting from a state subsidy that was intended for them. The Urbis program seized this untapped opportunity.

The Urbis model in Abidjan was two-fold: capacity building of slum dwellers was combined with improving their advocacy skills to increase access to potable water. With regards to capacity building, first, slum dwellers needed to be organized and informed. Thus the pro-poor non-governmental organization *Comité Régional pour l'Eau Potable et l'Assainissement* (Regional Center for Water Supply and Waste Management, or CREPA) organized slum dwellers and helped demystify the government subsidy. Second, utility managers needed to view all end users in their service area as valued customers. To this end, CREPA worked in collaboration with the utility to train slum dwellers on properly filling out the requisite paperwork to access the subsidy, how to use water efficiently, prevent and fix leaks, and how to save daily to pay water bills on time. Ultimately, the idea was to convert the members of these households into long-term clients of the water utility.

Urbis also supported CREPA in its efforts to organize the poor so that they, in turn, could influence the government's water policy. CREPA was not alone in this effort; it entered into an alliance with the influential para-statal entity called the *Bureau National d'Etudes Techniques et de Développement* (National Bureau of Technical and Development Studies, or BNETD).

**Results:** During the three-year program, Urbis connected 59,094 slum dwellers (an estimated 8,442 poor households) to potable water networks, by providing the capacity building support they needed to tap the national water subsidy. Access to this water subsidy was critical because it reduced the cost of a water connection from USD 340 to USD 40.

An important aspect of Urbis' water activities in Abidjan was improving slum dwellers' advocacy skills to increase their access to potable water. With support from BNETD, the Urbis team successfully convinced the government agency responsible for the subsidy at the launch of the Urbis program, the Department of Human Hydraulics, to remove the one-connection-per-plot-of-land restriction and to simplify the application process for Urbis beneficiaries. As a result, an additional 3,488 families (representing over 24,400 slum dwellers), who would have otherwise been excluded, were able to access and benefit from the water subsidy. Thanks to the Urbis team's efforts, the government invested an impressive USD 1.5 million to connect slum dwellers to potable water services.

An independent assessment of Urbis' water activities in Abidjan, conducted in September 2010, revealed that an estimated 97.5% of households connected through the program maintained their water service. This result was attributed to Urbis training for families on how to secure a long-term connection. In addition, the assessment showed that families who now benefit from a connection pay three to five times less for water than they used to when buying it from illegal re-sellers. Given the improved quality of piped potable water, almost half of the 400 families interviewed also reported a reduction in the incidence of water-related illnesses. The impact of bringing affordable, quality water to the homes of Abidjan's poor was consequently felt at many levels, improving their health as well as their economic and social well-being.

