

Old friends at

the Forum

Clyde Sanger, associate director of the IDRC's Publications Division, gives his impressions of the happenings at the Habitat Forum.

What part did the IDRC, or rather the people connected with the Centre, play at Habitat? There was no huge banner or totem pole under which they gathered in serried ranks, as did some other groups. Nor did the IDRC set up a booth in Hangar 8 alongside the scores of organizations (from the Appropriate Technology Group to the International Planned Parenthood Foundation) that enlivened that huge building.

Yet the IDRC, which supports many research projects relating to the problems of human settlements, was well represented. To attend the news conference with which the Vancouver Symposium launched its opening Declaration on the first Sunday, was to be among old friends and campaigners. Former IDRC governors Barbara Ward and Maurice Strong were fielding most of the questions, and Dr Soedjatmoko, a member of the present Board, was sitting encouragingly beside them.

The Symposium, also known as the Group of 24 or "Barbara Ward's Circus," worked hard throughout the conference to get the fullest possible discussion of the fairly controversial views they had embodied in their Declaration. They lobbied delegations, they made major speeches at the Forum, they spent a full day halfway through to review and enlarge their

statement. They lost some of their battles at least for the time being (the moratorium on nuclear power generation) and they won others (unearned increment on land values). They fought them all spiritedly.

There were friends, too, among the heads of delegations. The Nepalese delegation, for example, was led by Dr Ratna S. B. Rana, who was coordinator of an IDRC-supported regional development study, and is now a member of his country's National Planning Commission.

One afternoon at the Forum there was a workshop session on low-cost housing addressed by five speakers who have been working on the collaborative studies in Asia and Latin America that have also received IDRC funds. The room was crowded, and there was too little time to discuss all the issues raised. But each speaker provided plenty of copies of his paper, so that the ideas are now well distributed around the world.

On another occasion, in the biggest forum of all (the plenary stage of Hangar 5) two other men who have directed IDRC-supported projects gave papers on rural development. Chandra Soysa, of the Marga Institute, argued that placing more emphasis on rural housing had excellent spin-off in terms of jobs that would fill the "slack season" on the farm and develop non-agricultural skills such as carpentry and masonry, useful in diversifying rural activities and increasing incomes. Vinyu Vichit-Vadakan, of the UN Asian Development Institute, was candid about some of the past mistakes made in resettling hill tribes and also people affected by dam construction in Thailand.

At a conference where the strength of feeling was against high-rise buildings, Yue-man Yeung, of IDRC's Asian Regional Office, took a brave stand in a workshop on the role of tall buildings in

human settlements. In a paper called "High-rise, high-density housing: myths and reality," he challenged the criticisms that high-rise living runs counter to neighbourliness and has other adverse social and psychological effects. They will be proud of him in Singapore.

Prod Laquian was, of course, everywhere during an exhausting week: organizing the low-cost housing workshop, mediating in the dust-up over the Tondo resettlement contest in his native Philippines, making a speech to introduce Margaret Mead at a big lunchtime meeting, fielding questions at a news conference, huddling with his Symposium colleagues.

Finally, Jorge Hardoy of Argentina, who will be an IDRC Research Fellow in coming months, gave a hard-hitting address on "The Habitation of the Poor." A particular target was land speculation in Latin America.

A brilliant talkfest? Undoubtedly — but what about the action? As Prod Laquian says in his article above, Habitat-at-Vancouver has to be seen in the continuum of the work done in preparation and the work that is to come.

At IDRC the Population and Health Sciences division is now organized to lend its support to a range of projects in the sectors of rural water supplies and sanitation; two recent workshops in Nairobi and Maseru explored the priorities as African scientists saw them. In the Social Sciences many projects in the broad field of human settlements are already under way, whether in migration or low-cost housing or regional development. Nothing happened at Vancouver to lessen these concerns.

Despite the frenetic pace of the Forum (a dozen interesting events happening almost simultaneously) it was a place where many workers were able to recharge their batteries to the full. □



Photos: Neill McKee