



Red Ribbon Award:
Celebrating Community Leadership and Action on AIDS
 XVIth International AIDS Conference



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The Gii Maa Moob Min at the XVI International Aids Conference was inaugurated this morning with warm welcomes, introductions and an orientation session. In the language of the Native American Ojibway people, "Gii Maa Moob Min" refers to a "place to gather and discuss in the community." The ambience of the dialogue space reflected this idea of inclusiveness; concentric circles of shared benches surround straw mats at the center of the space where delegates can sit and interact. The space also evokes an informal, "outdoorsy" feel, with green carpeting and more than fifty live trees, shrubs and other plants filling the area. Works of art further heighten the beauty of the dialogue space: dozens of stone sculptures from Zimbabwe dot the room, and several evocative photographs of AIDS orphans, taken by artist Johnny Fernandes, hang from the bamboo walls. Beautifully packaged female and male condoms, provided by UNFPA and the Condom Project have been placed out for distribution to the public.

The first session began when Sean Southey and Estelle Fach from UNDP welcomed the delegates to Global Village. Mr. Southey welcomed delegates to the Gii Maa Moob Min, telling them that the space is theirs, and they will decorate it together before the conference begins. Mr. Southey and Ms. Fach confirmed which languages are spoken by the delegates. Mr. Southey then introduced the three facilitators, likening their role in the group to that of the sherpas of Nepal. The facilitators were identified as Jennifer Proudfoot from Canada, Solome Mukisa from Uganda, and Esther Mwaura-Muiru from Kenya.

Jennifer expressed her appreciation for the Gii Maa Moob Min space, saying that it "gives a good feeling" and "makes [her] think that the delegates are in for a special week together." She indicated that delegates should use the day to get used to the space, get comfortable, and prepare for the conference. The UNDP staff spent time discerning the delegates' expectations for the conference and following-up on how best to meet those expectations.

Solome indicated that there have been several proposals to make the delegates more comfortable in the space, including the daily display of the conference schedule, and the construction of a message space where notes can be left for each delegate and ideas can be shared. She invited colleagues who believe they possess strong facilitation skills to join the facilitators' team and assist them. Solome declared the Gii Maa Moob Min space to be the primary space for the delegates, and requested the assistance of individuals with strong cultural and spiritual experience to make a blessing before the delegates introduced themselves to one another.

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Cambodian delegate Chan Bou was introduced to the group by Syed from Bangladesh. Because Chan Bou was the only representative of his organization at the conference and does not speak any of the other finalists' languages, it was agreed that all delegates would be responsible for caring for each other, and that every attempt must be made to include Chan Bou in the activities. The two new friends smiled from the podium with their arms around each other's shoulders. At this point, the group broke out to pick up name tags and gold colored Gii Maa Moob Min t-shirts.

Facilitator Jennifer recalled delegates, inviting them to join her on the mats in the center of the circle for a communal blessing. Dumisani Rebombo from South Africa led a blessing "so that the creator can take us through these days successfully."

Dumisani's blessing:

" I greet you all from all the spirits in Africa and all the different parts of the world -- the good spirits that us as human beings. I want to do the blessing in this manner: I will sing. You might not know the song, but you can still participate. Please kneel with me now. As different people we have one spirit, we will be in this village together. We ask for your guidance as the creator. We ask for the strength to face the challenges that come our way. We remember all those living with AIDS. Help us to roll up our sleeves to take part and take action. When we are united we have all the answers and have the potential to reach out to one another. Bless us and bless this village. We ask that you be with the facilitators and give them the wisdom they need. We pray we will be together and you will help us to do this. We thank you. We thank you."

After the blessing, Solome instructed delegates to find someone who speaks the same language as them, but whom they have never met before. Partners then exchanged the answers to the following questions: 1) What is your name?; 2) What organization do you work with?; 3) What is your role in the organization?; 4) What does the organization do?; 5) What would you like to be remembered for after this community meeting/conference? Delegates paired up and exchanged this information, some through translators. Delegates were recalled to the circle and asked to introduce their partner.

Sean Southey and Caitlin Wiesen were then called to take the floor. Caitlin applauded the group for representing such a great wealth of knowledge. She then likened the Gii Maa Moob Min space to the Shona sculptures, assuring the delegates that good spirits will help them to sculpt something great out of the opportunity provided by the conference. Caitlin related the honor felt by the UNDP and the conference organizers in having the delegates as the anchoring communities of the event, representing the face of community in the response to HIV/AIDS. Mr. Southey thanked Caitlin for her pivotal role in the development of the dialogue space -- a place in which the aims are to "celebrate success, share knowledge, and inform policy." Caitlin thanked all sponsors of the conference, and explained how their recognition of the delegates at the opening ceremonies and on the award night reflects the importance of community to this conference. Mr. Southey recognized the sacrifices made by delegates to attend the conference, and urged everyone to take full advantage of the opportunity to form partnerships for continued collaboration in the future. Mr. Southey brought the session to a close by recognizing the facilitators and asserting that the stories of the five eventual Red Ribbon Award winners will not be enough to incite change, but together, all twenty-five of them have the potential to do so. "For us, you are our winners, our champions," he

concluded.

There were three main topics for the next session, which was led by Esther.

1. A brief session on preparing the delegates to engage the media.

As UNDP's Media Officer Niamh Collier-Smith pointed out it was critical the delegates understood the following while courting the media to have their work publicized

- It is important to humanize their work and to emphasize that their work is a communal response to the epidemic and not just elaborate about their project in the abstract.
- Keep it succinct. In the notorious world of media editing a lot of what is said is left out.
- Describe the role of Red Ribbons in the communal response to the epidemic, as it is more than an awards ceremony. It provides a forum for delegates from some of the most successful communal projects, internationally, to exchange ideas and best practices between themselves and to have disseminated to the rest of the world.

Niamh spent time mingling with all the delegates, to help them understand that publicizing their work is her primary responsibility during the conference and the media resources of UNDP would be at their disposal.

2. "Media prep" was followed by the more mundane topic on "logistics", which our imaginative facilitators seemed to turn in to an affair with laughter with the "Safe sex dance".

Nevertheless the focus on the details was not lost. The staff helped the delegates on a range of issues from transportation, lost baggage to dress code for the events planned ahead for them.

3. The final topic for the day was "Booth set up".

Sean Southey was in charge of helping the delegates set up their organizations' display areas within the larger communal space to highlight their work. Sean wasted no time in getting everyone back on their feet and running around to begin work on their personal booths. The atmosphere began to take shape immediately, both in its form and its function: Small groupings and impromptu discussions started around the room as people began to place their posters up. Cooperation and relationship building were evident with the delegates as they circulated amongst each other.

(During the entire day's proceedings there were translators at all times to assist the delegates.)

In the evening, the entire Gii Maa Moob Min community attended a rehearsal for their participation in Sunday evening's Opening Ceremony.

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