

Voice of Grassroots Women at GWIA

June 12-16, 2006, Vancouver, Canada

GWIA: An Introduction



Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) is a formal space where grassroots women leaders from around the world teach and learn from our peers.

While grassroots innovations in development practice are highly valued by international planners and policy makers, grassroots knowledge is easily lost to people outside the practising community. Huairou's Grassroots Academies are designed to change that situation.

While grassroots innovations in development practice are

Introduced in 2000, Grassroots Women's International Academies are intensive teaching/learning workshops which transfer grassroots knowledge, document it, and stimulate policy changes. Their primary goal is to provide an opportunity for grassroots women to exchange development knowledge.

The Academy teaching and learning model draws on techniques developed by GROOTS International and Mother Centers International Network (MINE).

Resilience in the face of natural disaster

GWIA, Vancouver, Canada, June 12-16, 2006



142 grassroots women leaders from 32 countries learnt among themselves who have advanced community development and recovery processes by organizing and mobilizing their communities, negotiating with authorities, restoring livelihoods and

managing and monitoring housing and basic services following devastating natural disasters.

Participants in the Academy drew recommendations from their broad knowledge of what works and what doesn't work in their communities across the globe, develop policy recommendations and dialogue with partners to increase impact and brought these recommendations to the World Urban Forum.

GWIA started with introducing everybody, what they are doing, where are they from etc. The participants made into five groups such as:

- The Housing, Land and Basic Services
- The Policy Change and Advocacy
- The Caring Community Development
- The Resilience in the Face of Natural Disasters
- The Economic Empowerment & Sustainable Livelihoods

Here we present Disaster Group discussions, their experience and learning and the role of women in disasters.

Disaster Groups organized various discussions and dialogues on best practices, community initiatives, challenges, future action etc.

At the end of the day, we drew recommendations from their broad knowledge of what works and what doesn't work in their communities across the globe, and brought these recommendations to the World Urban Forum.

What they says...

Roxana Aching, United Women for a Better for Community - Peru



Our aim is teach women about empowerment, construction practices and to learn leadership skills. We worked with NGO Estrategia (member of GROOTS and ties to UN) on pilot program for urban development strategies - earthquake-resistant construction. In the past, NGOs would come in and get information from the community and not give anything back. This group comes to the communities and gives workshops on leadership and self-esteem workshops.

Grassroots women have economic and housing needs and don't get support from the government and have very real needs. NGO generated employment, improve economic development of the area and their life conditions.

Women came into the network as individuals and how the organization is helping them connect to micro-businesses. Other women who came in were interested in sewing or handicrafts. We were able to connect them and help them form micro-businesses. Every year, they have a conference of women and bring in other women. They are now supporting 700 women and continue to expand.

Our main aim is to improve people's lives, economic development and construction skills. Exchange with community banks is favorable because they want to be self-sustaining (because they have little support from central government). Would like support from our central government to distribute these techniques on a national level. Even without support of central government, have achieved some support from local governments.

We want to learn measures on how to prevent future disasters. We are here to get information from all of you and to use this knowledge to improve our communities. We want to understand the experiences of women, of Kasthuri, I like the work made by the women which highlights them - we need to learn more from them. The most of important of all is to share experiences of each other and solve the problems of earthquakes and housing issues.

"Our role in construction is actual production, we are the ones who produce the blocks. The women are the ones that are also the forewomen, overseeing and constructing. We also have women who have been trained in design, and we have the leader of Estrategia who is an architect who, in place of the NGO exploiting us, we exploit her!" She believes that it is very important to have the knowledge and we are preseverent and this is very important.

Ezhilarasi , Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) - India



Ezhilarasi, a grassroots women from Tamil Nadu, India presented how community organized themselves after tsunami, what was the problem in the initial phase, how ngos/agencies and government responded, what were the strategies

used, innovations and initiatives by community, future course of action, lessons learnt and objectives and mission.

Initially it was difficult to organize women because previously NGOs had come in and provided materials, but not discussed long term sustainability. SSP has a different value and vision, to include women in the development process, providing livelihoods training and local participation and governance (monitoring health and education programs).

After tsunami, SSP organized exchange visits with areas that had prior experience with disasters (Maharashtra and Guj) to learn from their experiences. Brought back information about assessment and temporary shelters, and addressed arenas such as environment and personal hygiene.

The identification of Health Guides from the local community to work with them provided a space for the entire village to take initiatives in development process. The health guides were promptly trained by medical doctor on various illness especially women related health issues, environmental and personal hygiene. They also identified various illness and causes among women and children.

As the next step we identified ASHAA Groups (Aarogya Sakhi for Health Awareness & Action) with 12-20 members in each village who are voluntary work to motivate and guide villagers to take part in health and sanitation initiatives. Formation of ASHAA Groups has changed the way of women in the village. Now they are actively participating in community development initiatives such as health, hygiene and sanitation. Health Guides provides training to ASHAA members who give awareness building to community women.

They have organized exchanges with CCD to learn about herbal gardens and herbal medicines. Then they came to SSP and trained how to organize the women and start the gardens in their own households. This is a way to reduce health expenses and improve environment, and improve women's self-sufficiency.

They are now in discussion with local doctors and hospitals to create a hospital network, to link to the village women, to bring the consultation to the villages and get the consultation at reduced rates (the community could). At this point there is only one doctor per village.

The women have approached SSP to build community centers in their villages. The space will be used for getting information from the government, livelihood

activities, conducting medical camps, activities of the self-help group and other community needs.

Linking health, water and sanitation to an integrated approach to community development started yielding results. Solid waste management is another area they started with 600 households is already expanded to other villages as well.

Ezhil Arasi also participated at World Urban Forum Networking event "Building Back Better" on 17th June and presented her community's view on women's initiatives and their role in disasters.

Kasturi Chandrasekaran, - Covenant Centre for Development (CCD) - India



Kasturi Chandrasekaran from CCD, India briefed about how they organized Women's Federation, forming companies, creating livelihood opportunities covering more than 12,000 families in Tamil Nadu.

In 1991 we started our work with women and noticed there was high migration of families to cities for work. We are now in 4 districts and have 16 federations and I am a president of a federation. We started our own community bank for women as neither banks nor government provided credit for women. We have now saved and given loans worth 3 million rupees and leveraged over 10 times the amount from local banks. We noticed that most loans were to address the health problems at home so we started kitchen gardens to grow herbs. Women became healers and promoted a green health program. About 1600 families were benefited by this programme. In Johannesburg, 2002 we\$ were given a best practice award for our work on herbal medicines. We began seeing that gatherers need to be organized and this effort resulted in a company which supplies 600 tonnes of semi processed herbs. It was then that the federations decided that the herbs should also benefit the community. Now herbal medicines are sold through the SHGs. All federations need to be united in their efforts. I thank everyone for this opportunity to scale up the work of GROOTS and grassroots women in all countries.

Carmen Griffiths, Construction Resource Development Centre - Jamaica



CRDC works in Sanitation, women's empowerment and disasters. After several hurricanes that hit Jamaica from 2000-2005, she has worked mobilizing women from several parishes. Looking at how women assess their vulnerabilities by mapping their vulnerabilities. She is here to learn about what

other groups have done and how to leverage resources to beef up the resilience of women.

The areas that they work are low-income and poor, they are centered on marginal lands and the housing infrastructure is not high quality. These are people who have had to provide their own housing solutions because the formal sector housing that has been provided is not affordable. During the initial hurricanes they lost a large portion of their housing (formal and informal) because regulations and designs weren't taken into account.

Prior to the disaster they already had an organization that trained women to do construction. They were trained on how to make disaster resistant housing. After the hurricane they went to communities to assess who had been hit the hardest and to build the capacities of women to ensure they were building disaster resistant housing. They trained women to 1) build and construct themselves and 2) gave them knowledge to know what a resistant house was (produced a booklet that provided step-by step what you house is made up of, what you had to look for).

In the beginning of 2000 we had an active season (working then in St. Thomas). Before we were dealing with roofing but now we have started to address flooding as well. We have formed Women in Disaster Working Group to look at the vulnerability of the community. *Women in Disaster Group* started with a small group 10-20 in each community, they do the vulnerability assessment, which ensures that the communities themselves are in the mode of preparation. The data is collected within the community and stays there, so when a disaster

strikes, they know which houses were damaged, the elderly in the community. They are working in participatory methodology to train the communities. If everything in the community is inter-related, then you must take an active role in your community. This is an awakening for many women, to recognize the knowledge they told. They use several tools:

- Get community to map the 'lay of the land'
 - History of disasters over time in the community
 - Environmental Degradation (erosions, land slippage - this leads to advocacy against mining and other extractive practices that make the community more vulnerable)
 - Where are the risks, to the roofs, the infrastructure, etc.
 - How is the community itself contributing to vulnerability (where you are constructing houses, agricultural practices)
 - Produce a map, showing in red where the danger zones are
 - Use Sistren Theatre Collective to communicate the issues through drama.
- In addition the map is another tool that the community can use.

In 2005 CRDC went to Honduras and trained women in reconstruction and roof work (roof straps).

Kala Pieris, Siyath Foundation - Sri Lanka



Siyath Foundation is an accredited international organization and extends to eight districts. Its purpose is to provide safety and to create access to markets.

Recent tsunami caused severe damages in Sri Lanka. We have lost 76 women community leaders immediately after the disaster. Our field coordination center was affected by loss of life, infrastructure and buildings. Our concerns were for the social security of women at grassroots level. Loss of lives, infrastructure left with disorganization and no resources for disaster and no contingency plans or funds.

We have used community-driven initiatives throughout our history. Even people in different camps worked together. Identified priorities, such as \$temporary shelters, drinking water, disabled, psycho-social relief.

Communities buy and re-sell raw materials in bulk. If you are a producer and have to buy raw materials at retail prices, you are being ripped off.

Sri Lanka has not followed minimum standards of reconstruction. Empowerment meant questioning the strategies for rebuilding and governance.

People-centered change management plans. Look especially at women as decision-makers and monitors. Look at what was there before the tsunami – sociological history of the community, the space, infrastructure, power dynamics. Then examine where the houses should be reconstructed. Community owns/controls the data. Then they start monitoring the data and determining what community should supply and what should be imported from outside. Particular interest in healthcare centers, childcare centers, roads, protection centers because domestic violence is very high (determine schools, roads, etc.)

We had a situation where we have about 6,000 families they were working with and they generated community participation for distribution of goods. They post all decisions made, showing what has been distributed, what the value was, and who got it. They have vouchers and approval from the communities.

Hasna Pabbi, JUB - Indonesia



What is the success story? The successes go back to the villages. There was a policy of the government to evict people two kilometers from the coast. There was a project for people to return. Now they are working in 24 villages, building 3,500 houses which were built by themselves. They do all the construction, planning, and monitoring. Because the policy of the government was to give money

to those architects and contractors that weren't from the area (from Java), they, the grassroots groups, used recycled materials and rebuilt their communities themselves. Strategy they use is to meet every few weeks, evaluating, monitoring and planning for their work. They use a common kitchen and prayer house to gather and organize the people. The organizing and advocacy work was supported by Uplink (international). In the first phase, where the reconstruction was done, it was all done by men. There were many problems;

corruption, time, and poor quality. The women then protested and in the second phase, they participated in the construction.

Marcia Christian, Construction Resource Development Centre (CRDC) - Jamaica



CRDC focused on a lot of disaster Gilbert, Mitch, Ivan. We focus on mobilizing communities right after they have suffered from disasters. 60-65% of women head households, so you are looking at this portion of the population that has been affected by disaster.

Water, Sanitation and Environment is also another area that they are working in. One of the programs we are working on is with the Women's Construction Collective to be aware and trained on disaster resilient and safe constructions. For the disaster group they are focusing on training women to do the construction themselves, or trained on how it should be done. We are also looking at how to map within the community the vulnerabilities of the communities where the safe areas and where the danger zones are. Women really get excited about this process because it equips them with data and knowledge.

When you talk about Set-backs, most people have come into the communities with promises but haven't come back. This takes a lot of time, commitment and patience to mobilize the community. In addition the resources are very limited, so they need community commitment. For example, one program was with women doing reconstruction, but most women wanted the livelihoods part, but there weren't the resources. She feels very stretched and strapped to be able to do the work that is necessary; it means it is out of pocket. It's OK, but sometimes it is really draining to do the work that you want to and need to. Internally we are lacking resources. They would like to employ more people, but can't. We would like the disaster group to be able to assess the vulnerabilities in each impoverished community of Jamaica. At the minimum they would be able to mitigate against future disasters.

Swarna Ehamayake, EMACE - Sri Lanka



EMACE is working in 7 districts in Sri Lanka. We have a livelihood program benefiting 600 women. We stabilize their income, as they are typically involved in informal sector activities such as selling vegetables, dried fish, fish processing. Their

second project is raising awareness about laws and human rights of women. The income-generation activities happen in small groups, registered each council leader with the local authorities. This is part of a system in Sri Lanka where the communities are mandated to participate in the bodies and in community planning. Community-level elected and registered with the local authorities. Final project is a solar project which benefits 300 women. Our main issues are inadequate funds, training, etc.

Suzanne Shende, Comite de Emergencia de Garifuna - Honduras



Our community in Honduras confronted Hurricane Mitch in 1998, caused mass-destruction, communities were afro-indigenous. The government stayed in the capital city and didn't get involved and so the community had to

generate the response. "Sometimes our communities have to be trained to respond to disasters because they are the only ones that are going to be there." Women began carrying food, nailing down roves, distributing goods. Because of the flow of resources, they needed to get out the information of who was in need and where. They began preparing, denouncing corruption, becoming pro-active

and building housing w/teams of women. They found the experience through the processes.

Our successes include building houses, helping recover agriculture pdn, and giving people hope after disaster. Aims to recover from disaster, support community development, defend secure land tenure and other human rights. We also won Ashoka Prize and finalists for UNDP EQI prize. Strategies have been to organize at the village level and remain accountable to the local.

Two set backs have been that while they have gained recognition internationally and within the community, they still aren't recognized by the national government. Governments and rich developers are taking advantage of disasters when the community is vulnerable. In 3 years they would like to be more effective in influencing government policy and sharing and working with other grassroots groups.

On mobilizing communities, listen to what communities identify as their own needs, including in a transparent way, who is the most needy in the community. We can't be the marionettes of the donors, and pass up monies when they aren't for the projects we want to do.

Even still, donations aren't the way to sustainable projects. They work in agriculture, but many young people don't want to work that hard, so they started micro-enterprise development. They use their culture as a strength, taking into account wisdom of elders, incorporating technology with traditional knowledge.

Another important strategy is to develop strong community structures. Not just getting goods to people, but making communities stronger. For example we have tool banks for farmers to borrow and distribute tools. The women, who mostly work in agriculture, are empowered because they have control of these banks.

Communities are vulnerable to disasters in Honduras. Some of the areas are also vulnerable because of only one crop, so they are trying to integrate environmental protection with disaster prevention practices. They haven't done too much with commercializing, but this is something that they would like to know. They have documented traditional knowledge and they have published a book and have distributed it freely to the schools.

On principles, the community must be who defines the future and the development projects and how to proceed. Outside agencies can offer things, but the communities should decide what they want. For example, many

agencies are coming in with ideas such as land titling, but this takes away from communal lands. They want to be more than simply be social service providers, they want to be more.

They want to learn more about coconut fiber production. They also organize exchanges and learnt from Jamaican women.

While they have forged partnerships and have been recognized by international groups, but remained outside the government system. Now they have been invited to participate in the National Emergency Response, but they want to learn how they will keep their integrity while participating in this 'inside' space. They have also won representation in the city councils and as the Minister of Ethnicity, but this person doesn't have the constituents, so they want training on how to maintain elected office and support those that are in to represent them.

In terms of preparedness, they want to make sure that they are distributing information, have a plan for shelter, and have learned from SSP about training women to be the monitors of government services and housing, but need to learn how to formalize this.

As we shared our knowledge and experience with each others, we learnt a lot like how they organize communities, providing specific livelihood initiatives, working with government on various programmes, challenges and problems we faced, etc.

Workshop on Disaster Reduction, June 17



June 17th a workshop being organized on Disaster Reduction. Ian Davis, Visiting Professor, Cranefield University facilitated the workshop. Women leaders from Sri Lanka, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Honduras, Jamaica, Indonesia and India attended the meeting. Discussions were held on the disaster risk,

reduction and the involvement of community with examples from Jamaica on village mapping and protection by community during flood situation. Later

participants were divided into five groups and they come up with strategies to reduce disaster using local knowledge and materials. At the end of the workshop all the participants were agreed to work together to reduce the risk and mitigate the disaster.

In addition to their accomplishments at the Academy, the grassroots organizations in the delegation bring home concrete wins from their networking at WUF3. : funds were leveraged for their work on AIDS, follow-up meetings with policy-makers will soon be convened, and dialogues with partner institutions on disaster management are in the planning. Grassroots leaders developed new relationships with national ministers on housing and other areas, as a result of their visibility at the WUF3.



At the end of the day at GWIA, we formulated Action Plan and Recommendation to be presented to World Urban Forum-3.

- Disaster Watch, July 2006. www.disasterwatch.net