

# **An Instrument of Catalytic Change to Building Resilient Development: The Community Practitioner's Platform Launch in New Delhi, India**

*September 16, 2010*

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Community Practitioner's Platform to discuss effective mechanisms of pro-poor development and identify the critical gaps that remain.

While considerable attention has been given to disaster management policies - especially in light of the increase in natural disasters worldwide- how these translate into local realities remains to be seen. At present, national policy and programming does not reward or recognize the innovative work that communities are doing to safeguard themselves against natural disasters and other vulnerabilities. In order to bridge this disconnect, community practitioners, government officials, and institutional partners gathered in New Delhi to launch the UNISDR

Invited by UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction in 2009 to design and lead the Community Practitioners' Platform for Resilience, GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission launched this exciting initiative in partnership with the Alliance for Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (AADRR) and supported by UNISDR and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This formal UN networking and advocacy space represents a unique opportunity for community level representatives living and working in poor communities affected by disaster and climate change to play a key role in agenda-setting, and influence ISDR's strategic plans and implement the Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA). The recent assessment of the HFA, a global blueprint for disaster risk reduction, points to Priority 1, "Ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation," as lagging behind all other four priorities.

Recognizing the urgent need to design a set of strategic actions, many different kinds of stakeholders came together to analyze and share locally-focused pro-poor mechanisms to advance climate resilient development and prepare recommendations to be advocated at the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction to be convened by the UNISDR in Geneva in May 2011.

The recent Asian Grassroots Women's Academy on the CDRF in New Delhi brought in concrete recommendations to the forum. To demonstrate good practices of community led development, sessions focused on innovative mechanisms to feed into the design of the Platform and facilitate collaborative partnerships to scale up community led practices. Among those models discussed were the:

1. **Community Disaster Resilience Fund:** Small funds given directly to grassroots women's organizations for demonstrating their capacities to reduce community vulnerability to disaster
2. **Learning and action networks:** Grassroots networks for transferring and scaling up community innovations.

**3. Partnerships for mainstreaming DRR/climate adaptation into development programs:** Multi stakeholder partnerships that promote pro poor and climate resilient development by re-designing and shifting allocations within existing poverty reduction, development, adaptation and DRR programs.



Professor Vinod Chandra Menon, member of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) of India, and partner of GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission was a keynote speaker and facilitator at the launch, validating the role of community in resilience building and the Platform as a powerful instrument of advocacy. We know the innovative work that community initiatives are doing- through self help groups and grassroots women's organizations, but how do we string them all together [in a way] that is powerful enough that the global humanitarian organizations sit up and listen?" He suggested the Community Disaster Resilience Fund (CDRF) as a successful model to bring global attention to the good practices that women and communities are doing. Reaffirming NDMA's support for the CDRF he described how

it challenges the myth that women are vulnerable and victims of disasters. He illustrated how the CDRF increases the capacity of communities, and noted the need to scale it up across India. Professor Menon called grassroots women involved in the fund the "change agents of development" and extended his solidarity in supporting their efforts.

The experience sharing of Community Platform mechanisms began with a strong panel of grassroots women from Assam, Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Nepal and Indonesia, all of whom highlighted the concrete actions they were taking to reduce vulnerabilities in their communities as a result of increasing disasters, climate change and food insecurity.



Representative of the concrete steps women were taking to make their communities safer, grassroots leader Ms. Bharti Doley from Assam noted how recent climatic and infrastructure development had brought unprecedented changes to the region. Extensive dam construction on the Brahmaputra and a cloud burst in Arunachal Pradesh have caused severe and unexpected flash floods in Assam. She was leader in implementing the CDRF, which included over 26 villages in Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. She helped to create local Disaster Management Taskforces to allow

community-led mitigation activities during disasters and created an early warning network bringing together local government authorities and other stakeholders. She described how they used the CDRF as a revolving fund in 14 villages, targeting the poorest Self-Help Groups (SHGs) first to enhance their livelihood activities and gradually scale up to other areas. The CDRF led to the creation of a community emergency fund with contributions from each family and a grain bank with a surplus emergency 7-day food supply. They were also able to introduce a model for raised handpumps, which has been replicated in three districts by the State Public Health and Engineering Departments. Ms. Bharti demanded that government should come forward to scale up these initiatives across the country.

The practices described highlight the holistic models that grassroots women have taken to making their communities safer. Sandy Schilen, Global Facilitator of GROOTS International,

affirmed the scale at which grassroots women are operating. In Maharashtra, there is a federation that works with 5,000 women, through 510 self help groups, working across 123 villages, and in Tamil Nadu women have increased their leadership from 500 to 2000 women in their federation. Despite the clearly articulated and in depth experiences of the grassroots women present, Schilen noted that there are challenges in the field of development, silos within the field, which do not promote or reward these holistic approaches. Too often, investments in communities are questioned to a degree that planners, architects and professionals are not subjected to: *Can these projects go to scale? Are they sustainable? How do you monitor and evaluate the projects?*



The depth of grassroots women's experiences was a demonstration of synergies between government and communities to scale-up such initiatives, to allow communities in determining and addressing their vulnerabilities, promoting practices of sustainable agriculture and improving nutritional standards, creating new infrastructure and linking to existing government programs implemented by local

Panchayat Institutions, challenging the typical development programming which labels women as mere beneficiaries. It is a myth that community based groups are grant seekers and squanders of resources as the groups in attendance have been working in community development for the past 5-15 years.

As an illustrative example of collaborative partnerships that facilitate pro poor climate resilient development and underwrite the presentations made, Mr. Saurabh Dani, Disaster Risk Management Specialist from the World Bank (WB) announced the launch of "Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery South-South Cooperation Program Grant for Facilitating Women's Leadership and Forging Partnerships to Drive the Demand for Local Implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action," as a means "to bring community champions to the global dialogue." This South-South Cooperation involves Swayam Shikshan Prayog, Fundacion Guatemala and Comite de Emergencia Garifuna de Honduras, with support from GROOTS International. He noted how lessons could be learned from the grassroots organizations sharing their experiences of community-led activities designed from within, following bottom-up, easy and replicable solutions, to cross fertilize across countries facing similar problems and socio-economic contexts.

This forum gave an excellent overview of the practices that women were already taking to build resilience to disasters and climate change. Recognizing the benefits of such an advocacy space, all the stakeholders present at the dialogue agreed to sign up to the Platform-to become "champions of resilient development." This is the first of many launches of the Community Practitioner's Platform throughout India, Asia and globally. Moving towards the Global Platform launch in May of 2011 this meeting provided a launching pad for catalytic action between all stakeholders to design and implement collaborative programs that work for the poor.

Grassroots Organizations Involved:

Urban Poor Consortium  
UPLINK, Indonesia  
Siyath Foundation, Sri Lanka  
Woldview, Sri Lanka  
DMC Butwal Nepal  
Cooperative Forum, Nepal

Himawanti - Nepal  
Lumanti Support group for Shelter, Nepal  
Rural Volunteers Centre, Assam  
Kancha Seva Ashram Muzapur, Bihar  
Swayam Shikshan Prayog  
Mahakalsm Federation, Madurai  
Knowledge Links, India  
CCD, Tamilnadu

- Huairou Commission, October 2010