

Sparks of Hope: Grassroots Women organize Self Help efforts to restore communities after the Haiti disaster

Groots International

Six months after the January 12th earthquake in Haiti, We were present in the tent camps in Port au Prince and Leogane to listen to women in affected communities, on their evaluation of their daily lives and the involvement of institutional actors –government and relief/aid agencies. Two decades of experience in post earthquake recovery by Groots International members in Turkey, India, Jamaica and Peru to mention a few, show that women are not merely first responders. Involving women as key stakeholders in relief and long term planning hastens the pace of recovery while ensuring that entitlements, information and services reach households and communities.



Women's market food

The only signs of community gatherings were around market stalls serviced by women. Stalls were set up in the only open spaces that were left around the tents. Every morning and evening women prepared and sold fresh home-cooked food and snacks. "It's a service for all the women who have to leave their homes to work in the neighbourhood" said Selby who ran her mother's shop in the Petonville Camp.

In all the tent camps we visited, we heard stories of extraordinary courage from ordinary women who had survived the disaster, lost everything they had; but felt a sense of duty to help others. In every camp, we

learnt from our meetings, there were the Sparks of Hope - self help collectives that had sprouted after the disaster.

Shining Star, Valiant Women, Vigilant Women, Femme Democrat & Women of Courage – "We have kept these names for our women's organizations as they are meant to inspire women. We believe women are the pillars of society". After the earthquake, women had fallen and we need to lift women and organize from new values, taking leadership with men in rebuilding our communities" said Elsie from the groups.

Presently the work done by women's groups is informal and unrecognized. Women went to explain that they had organized immediately to set up community kitchens, provide first aid and care for the sick children and orphans. When relief was being distributed, agencies enlisted help of male leaders. This led to a lot of violence, disruption, stoppage of aid and unrest in several communities. At some point, several aid agencies reversed this trend, by relying on women. They trained women as camp organizers and charged them with relief distribution and later, appointed them to maintain facilities. Now, that the women are organized, they are the first ones to be approached by outsiders and the men complain of neglect.

Six months on, women's groups were engaged to make health water and sanitation services functional, form self protection cadres to fight violence and organize health and education centers for children etc.

Our big questions were -what support have these ordinary women received until now? And what nudges them to work selflessly and courageously for their families and communities and what is their hope for the future? And how can we as Groots International & Huairou Commission bring in experiences from and expertise of grassroots women networks with previous experience, to ensure a better recovery & build long term resilience.

Where do people live?

We met with women who lived with their families in tent camps. People are living in sites on encroached land. They range from stadiums, private parks, grounds opposite the Presidential Palace, golf grounds, etc. Their camps were rows of makeshift tents or tin sheds on a land that housed from 200 families to even as large as 60,000 people living together. All basic services were still being provided by international organizations whether it be public water points, toilets or waste disposal facilities.

Walking or wading through the camps, we could not believe that people could survive the heavy downpours with no visible roads and live in tents which lacked any privacy.

Apparently the Government was encouraging/forcing people to go back to their original locations as the lands they were settled on belonged to private landlords. Our immediate need is decent shelter. Living in tents is not viable as the soft soil and flooding create impossible conditions. They expected better conditions before the rains in June. Women in camps felt not much has changed, since they moved into camps. They were very unsure of their future, as they have no information and knowledge on what their government plans for them were.

We met women who had set up shelters on the medians on big roads and highways. They were unable to protect their homes or assets or take care of children. They lacked access to basic infrastructure and essential services.

We met many others, who could not make it to tent camps. Many homeowners/renters, who lost their homes, lived in makeshift tents in yards and now had no access to rental places either. They struggle to pay for food, education and as they have lost both their jobs and homes.



Makeshift homes at a camp site

They were most worried on being left out of the government housing /reconstruction plans.

Florianne, is 23 years old, she was a renter and is now living in the camp in Leogane. She is a renter had a lease on her house till April, and earthquake took place in Jan 2010. The owner has no plans to compensate them. Earning is through selling second hand clothes. Mother sold 2nd hand clothes. She spent all the money on illness of children. She lived with her mother who has lost husband and her own mother. Their pressing need is money to re -start business. But they have no permanent housing, no incomes to pay rent, not able to return to jobs.



Water points at the camp

Attention Points

Basic services: Inadequate water, sanitation and health services. Aid stoppage is creating food insecurity and leading to malnutrition. Individuals and families have been unable to restore income and livelihood activities.

Violence

Violence and sexual assaults are prevalent in the camps and there are few to no safe spaces. Women have formed camp committees to link to police to reduce violence, still women are not safe.

Government Plans, information and participation

Women leaders felt, they do exert influence, in their local communities, with the work they have done. But felt they have a situation – where no one is reaching them – government, business or NGOs. There has been no public information made available or engagement with the government or INGO's on relief and recovery plans (including entitlement and transitional housing).

In despair, Frances a leader who had organized women renters said, "Haiti our country is like a sick child with many diseases". We have heard this million times. After the earthquake, we have no concrete solutions in front of us. Our government is deaf, dumb and blind. They don't believe in delivering on promises. If the government is serious – they should find land and relocate people.

What are Women's groups working towards?

There are organizations identifying problems and working on issues of housing, livelihoods, health and access to information and participation. Collective Self-help activities are community kitchens, multi-family feeding programs, distributing aid and supplies (food, clothes, etc), managing water distribution, taking leadership in camp committees & organizing other residents and cleaning camp/tent sites and community toilets.

Women are taking action on enhancing safety and livelihoods restoration. They are promoting women's safety and to stop violence and rape in the temporary settlements through police outreach, camp lighting, watchdog groups and education of teenage girls.

To illustrate, Shining Star, A Network of grassroots women in Leogane, declared, "our goal is to have an information centre for women. We believe networking is important, and hope we can meet other women. Shining Star works with many organizations and trains women leaders in the camps to take leadership and to start organizations. Leaders are then trained in livelihoods skills, health and to give training to each group in the camps. In what follows, is a sampling of activities:



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- Distribution of aid to the affected communities
- Managing water distribution to the houses, camps and sites
- Organize prayers to motivate women and families
- Health & sex education with young women
- Discussions on nutrition issues in meetings
- Distributed solar lanterns to families.
- Managed to build a school in the camp
- Recreational activities with women, children and youth
- Cleaning the environment

- Do vegetable farming to get incomes to be independent of men
- Collected profile of leaders, business women and educated young girls
- Taking care of orphans

What can Women's groups do in the future?

In our meetings women's groups identified key roles that they want to play in recovery and reconstruction in their communities that include:

- Organizing and mobilizing women for informed participation
- Demand support for self help collective solutions around housing and livelihoods
- Committees on entitlements in transition housing
- Identify and map disaster/climate related risks and vulnerabilities
- Enlist women's self help / collective initiatives that promote community resilience
- Enumerate housing status, family size, losses and social and economic needs of settlement residents
- Organize women's networks and assemblies to debate concerns, build consensus plan on housing, water and sanitation services, livelihoods and food security.
- Promote savings, credit, access to finance and markets and training
- Mobilize and address the issues of water and sanitation
- Assess local markets and start small businesses



Meeting with women leaders

What support do women groups need?

Women need:

- ❖ Opportunities and resources to function as information providers, communicators, problem solvers, and monitors.
- ❖ Formal recognition and incentives for women's groups' and leaders to represent and negotiate gender issues and needs within community structures for planning and monitoring implementation.
- ❖ Recognition as Resource Teams to transfer approaches and replicate processes in neighboring clusters
- ❖ Training to act as enumerators, organizers and social facilitators
- ❖ Empowered to act as 'advocates' on behalf of their communities to flow resources
- ❖ Opportunities to facilitate conflict resolution and processes that redress grievances
- ❖ Recognized by municipal and other government officials as formal, effective partners in post earthquake recovery
- ❖ Reconstruction and recovery programs:
 - Tailored to women's particular and varied needs re: housing, land titles, livelihood restoration, access to credit (housing & small business),
 - Encouraging women's groups to be involved in construction and monitoring of the use of disaster resistant techniques and materials in replacement of housing.

