

Launch of "South Asian Network of Grassroots Women's Leaders for Community Resilience" Kathmandu, Nepal

There are things to be learned in all that we hear. We'll stay in touch as we go through the year we'll keep telling our stories when we are done for the day, your lives and achievements will show us the way. Language and distance won't stop us. In fact, your courage and wisdom inspire us to act. - Leela Rajesh Jadhav, SSP



A South Asian network of grassroots women's leaders for community resilience, and a national grassroots women's network in Nepal were launched last week in Kathmandu following a four day workshop on advancing and supporting the leadership of grassroots women in sustaining and scaling up their capacity to reduce risks and vulnerabilities in their communities and build a culture of resilience.

This workshop, **"Advancing Grassroots Women's Leadership in Community Resilience, was held by the Huairou Commission, generously hosted by Lumanti, and sponsored by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, held from February 8- 11, 2010 in Kathmandu, Nepal.** Over 30 participants from 13 organizations based in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, India and Nepal gathered to exchange lessons learned on resilience, support one another as grassroots leaders and build an action plan for the coming year.

The launch of the two networks -- the South Asian grassroots women's network, and the launch of a National Nepal grassroots women's network-- is a result of a series of initiatives undertaken by the by the Huairou Commission with the support of GROOTS International throughout the last year, including, the grassroots Academy in Cebu City, an exchange in India with Nepal and Bangladesh grassroots women's leaders, the action research Hyogo Framework for Action and the training of trainers network.



Throughout the week grassroots women exchanged lessons learned on resilience and climate change adaptation, supported one another as grassroots leaders and built an action plan for the coming year. The South Asian grassroots women's network was unanimously created to bring grassroots women together to share and transfer their strategies, and set priorities and actions on advancing grassroots leadership while building resilience to disasters and climate change.

When we have seen each other's work we learned the value of different work and further understood the roles of women in disasters and communities and how to strengthen their leadership-- C. Kasthuri, CCD.

The core group of leaders of the South Asian network includes Godavari Dange Bhimashankar (SSP), Gita Bohora (Himawanti Nepal), Menuka Prasai (Jyoti Nagar disaster management committee representative), Razia Rezaie (STARS), Renuka Kukule Kankanamge (Resource Center for the Urban Poor), and Pramoda Bardh (Lumanti).



Several grassroots leaders stated, that "this network will help us to understand each other's problems so that we can support each other for developing solutions (we can teach and train one another to solve problems." Grassroots women identified at least 50 practices that they have initiated in their communities ranging from emergency preparedness and response in rural and urban settlements, to long term resilience building strategies such as, reducing health risks, changing cropping patterns to ensure incomes and food security and improving access to basic services and local infrastructure. Specifically though, based on the expectations of the women present, the

network would encourage the exchange of:

Community Markets:

We cannot obtain our goals individually-- we need to work jointly in a network for advocacy and community based work. " -Reunka Kukule Kankanamge, Resource Center for Urban Poor, - Sri Lanka.

One of the practices that most groups wanted to learn more about was the RCUP's Community Markets. Organized in five districts of Colombo with 25 small women's groups, 1000 women connect to each other through microenterprise and sell their products (including crafts, mats, household items, and food products from their urban kitchen program) at a monthly market bazaar organized by the federation. Any surplus is sold to the market vendors. Well publicized, and items sold below market price, these five markets generate enough income to contribute to savings (20% of net income) and loans (20% of net income) programs that invest in settlement funds and distribute loans for small businesses and relief. The banks accounts are in women names, and yearly women can collect the accumulated savings (average is 50,000 Sri Lankan Rupees). Because the root causes of disaster vulnerability lie in development failures, this community market and saving and credit's cooperative reconfigures social relationships to generate and protect equitable access to resources through credit and increases the economic empowerment of women.

The Community Action Plan is another innovative practice that is well established by the Sri Lankans. Resource Center for the Urban Poor (RCUP) in partnership with NGO, Sevenatha, has been working with the municipal government for the last 5 years to assess the community's needs, and act on their priorities involving infrastructure and basic services. Governments do not invest in informal settlement's basic services, and the impacts of disasters increase in magnitude-- the CAP program however address these issues by working in partnership with the communities to address their needs and priorities.

The Municipal government has contracted women's groups (present at the meeting) to pave roads, construct drainage systems, and build an electric system which links all the houses (52) in the settlement. The contracts from the government (a value of 600,000 rupees each) are licensed and managed to the women in RCUP who employ and contribute labor to the projects. Interestingly, in addition to the amount given by the government, the RCUP also collects 500 rupees from each home or one days labor to ensure that there is community ownership in the projects. As is well documented, when communities are invested in public infrastructure, crime rates go down and living standards increase. Not only has the government publically awarded RCUP with distinctions for making their settlements safer, but says Renuka, "previously my husband would not allow me to work, but as a result of all the success, he's now doing work for me!"

Community Disaster Resilience Fund (CDRF)



The CDRF, which is an initiative of GROOTS and the Huairou Commission, recognizes that women from self-help groups do not receive untied funds for development or disaster management work, and thus, the CDRF channels small funds to grassroots women's groups for them to identify their priorities and capacity for DRR. Established in 2008, activities include livelihood and asset strengthening, protection of natural resources, and hazard mapping as a basis for planning and dialogue with authorities.

Communities from Bihar, every year faced the same problem. A series of floods would wipe out all their crops (which was not only a source of food but livelihoods) and because of the damage they were forced to camp out on the highway for months at a time. Recognizing the level of unpreparedness, the women's saving and credit cooperatives took initiative. Forming a committee- Kanchan Seva Ashram-(that includes grassroots women, bank officials, and farmer's club members) they used this process to form a task force, create sub groups to create awareness about the impact of disasters. They selected 5 villages in the district that are most affected each year and distributed 5000 rupees --*only to women*-- to do community risk mapping, create a revolving fund for livelihood generation, making it clear that the CDRF was not for emergency relief but for preparedness. Groups purchased rice and vegetable seeds, and rather than plant it in an open field susceptible to flash floods, they created roof top gardens to protect their livelihoods long term. The bank official (on the committee) also contributed a loan for vegetable cultivation. This has increased the diversity in food production for families in the community, and income generation by selling their produce at the local markets.

The groups rotate the fund twice a year and have leveraged 500,000 rupees to invest in further income generating activities, community plans on resilience and women's leadership and capacity.

As a result of this presentation, the national grassroots women's network of Nepal plans to replicate a version of the CDRF. Each group pledged 5000 NR, with a total of 35,000 NR of seed monies for the fund. Bindu Shrestha, one of the leaders of the cooperative networks, affirmed that by July all the women's cooperatives (20) in Kathmandu would have relief funds based on the ideas she learned at the workshop.

Women's Saving and Credit Cooperatives



Bankers used to look at groups badly-they were never interested in linking with us. When we started forming groups and ensuring that the accounts were well kept, we went to the bank and negotiated with them, telling them 'if you can't give money to women you shouldn't be running a bank.' As a result we were given a 50,000 rupee loan and have formed a federation with 5000 women.-- Godavari Dange Bhimashankar from SSP

To participate effectively in reducing the vulnerability and impact of disaster the greatest strength of women is their organization, network and their unity-effective components of DRR. Different types of women's saving and credit cooperatives were explained in the

workshop, but Razia Rezaie a grassroots leader from Afghanistan indicated that she would like to learn more about Nepal's model.

The savings and credit cooperatives in Kathmandu are supported by Lumanti. In the last five years, the original 6 cooperatives have increased to 20 cooperatives with more than 10,000 members and 300 women in leadership roles. Bindu Shrestha explained that typically the culture of Nepalese women's work is to be involved in agriculture production. Yet the location of the slums and an increase in flooding has resulted in lower levels of food production. These cooperatives account for that by providing skills development and enterprise training in alternative livelihoods. Cooperatives are an essential part of DRR as they are not only focused on savings and credit but improving their community through investments in infrastructure and basic services, including but not limited to, constructing roads, retaining walls, toilets, retrofitting houses, water harvesting and constructing drainage systems.

Lumanti, hosted a field visit to Narayan Tol, an informal settlement in Kathmandu, which further affirmed that women's cooperatives and resilience are interwoven, as women - through their saving and credit cooperative- have built a retaining wall to provide flooding in their community, constructed a drainage system, bio-filter sewage treatment unit, toilets and community kitchens.

As a result, the district government has awarded their cooperative with the highest distinction among all the cooperatives in the district. Wanting to increase the programs the cooperatives offer, Bindu,

discussed how upon hearing SSP's health mutual model she would like the cooperatives to launch a similar fund.

Health Mutual Community Based Fund

"We never talk about insurance, just better health" --Nasim, SSP



Grassroots women leaders are the driving force behind the Community Based Health Mutual Fund in India which was launched in 2006 to hold health providers accountable, raise awareness, and address the health needs of the community. Working collectively together, by helping women access public and private health care, this program provides low cost services and preventive health measures for more than 15,000 members.

Grassroots women's leaders must mobilize members in the community to participate in the fund (through education and awareness raising) and work with health care providers (both public and private) for them to provide health care at cost to members who are part of the fund. Members pay 100 rupees (2USD) per year, which entitles them to up to 80% reimbursement of hospital costs, discounted services within the network of service providers and 24/7 referral services from Arogya Sakhis (community health workers). Membership in the fund has reduced household health expenditures through discounted services, claim reimbursement for emergency hospitalization, preventative health camps and education and a community run health referral system. This fund is a solidarity effort, improving resilience by empowering women to take proactive control over the health of themselves and their families, while institutionalizing partnerships with government officials to ensure that resource mobilization is improved and accessible to members of the communities involved.

Practice sharing affirmed that women are already actively engaged in monitoring and improving access to basic services; negotiating for safe and secure housing; connecting families and communities to government entitlements and poverty reduction programs; and pioneering sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management approaches to improve the resilience in their community. Embedded in these practices is the idea that while helping communities to withstand the onslaught of natural disasters, women are also empowering themselves and advancing their leadership. "Whenever a disaster comes, it breaks all the barriers that exist in a community because women come together as a network. The most important message I am taking from this meeting, and from my experience, is that when women organize they can reduce the risks and vulnerabilities in their communities and build capacity to scale up their work. As a result of forming a committee in my community, we are more informed and in the event of a flood we can direct officials and NGOs where the vulnerable people and places are, how many people are located in the area. ***Instead of someone telling us what to do we are telling them.***"

Networking, Partnership and Policy

Despite all the successes that organized groups of grassroots women have had it became clear throughout the sessions that they cannot do it alone. That is, partnerships, with NGOs, local, national and regional governments, help them to gain recognition, scale up and support the work that grassroots women are already doing to invest in long term development. Specific criteria listed by the women for multi stakeholder relationships included, coordination, resource mobilization, technical support, policy advocacy, transfer practices, visibility of their work. By generating effective and sustainable partnerships with local authorities and disaster management authorities it informs and reduces the vulnerability of poor communities and ensures that local stakeholder platforms bring grassroots women's priorities and practices to the forefront of national DRR and poverty reduction policy and programming.

The South Asian grassroots women's network on resilience will serve as a sub-regional hub in the UNISDR's Community Practitioner's Platform led by GROOTS and the Huairou Commission. This platform is intended to convene community based experts and practitioners, who live and work in poor, disaster prone communities, to represent their own advocacy priorities, including pressing for the formalizing and resourcing of community and grassroots women's roles in policies and programs that advance pro-poor, community-driven resilient development. Grassroots women in this sub regional network have developed advanced and innovative practices to reduce the vulnerability of their communities to disaster and climate change in South Asia and as such, will be key stakeholders in this policy platform.

