

Grassroots Women Define Resilience at Asian Academy in Delhi, India

September 13-15, 2010



Grassroots women defining resilience was a principle theme of a three-day regional Asian Academy on the Community Disaster Resilience Fund (CDRF) held in New Delhi. The women attending the Academy have a successful track record as leaders and activists responding to disaster, having pioneered innovative work on savings and credit, enterprise, food security, water and sanitation and health in their own communities, but they had not previously been able to develop a

shared framework from which to operate collectively. This forum provided an opportunity for grassroots women to develop a concerted approach to resilience. The groups defined resilience as the ability to prevent the impact of natural disasters in communities combined with the ability to quickly recover from disaster. Women understood resilience as ways in which they were moving from an emergency response framework to one that protects and sustains development assets, changes public roles, promotes leadership and focuses on political organizing as a means to build an active citizenry that redresses development failures.

The meeting built on momentum from an earlier GROOTS India Leadership event designed to promote women as initiating and sustaining resilience in their communities. The group made the most of the opportunity to develop a shared understanding of resilience at the community level, explore and make action plans on the CDRF, and situate advocacy initiatives within the launch of the UNISDR Community Practitioner's Platform for local implementation of the Hyogo Framework of Action. Bringing together over 30 grassroots women from across Asia from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal and 5 states in India, the session was organized by the Huairou Commission and GROOTS, and sponsored by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch Ministry's Millennium Development Goal Fund (MDG3), UNISDR and Cordaid. The meeting was facilitated by Swayam Shikshan Prayog and GROOTS International.



Concrete gains made by organized grassroots women:

Grassroots leaders gave concrete examples of ways in which they were taking action to build resilience through:

- Changing power dynamics: Women's groups, through the community-based organization KPRM in Indonesia, mobilized a constituency of 70,000 urban poor in the 2008 Makassar election to leverage partnerships with the local government. This action resulted in the Mayor of Makassar signing a political contract at a public meeting to make DRR budgeted funds available to activities and priorities of grassroots women's organization.
- Action networks, advocacy and budget allocation: As a result of advocacy (and support from other groups in GROOTS India network), women's groups in Maharashtra

succeeded in getting the District Collector to allocate Rs 7 crore (US\$ 1.4 million) from the district budget to repair two bridges and construct a canal water system for irrigation through the Government of India NAREGS program. In Bihar, as a result of sustained advocacy, local government departments changed the location of a bridge that allowed the construction and accompanying roads to serve as a barrier against future floods and waterlogged fields.

- Reducing vulnerabilities and protecting resources: Women in Assam, India through the CDRF community groups, created grain banks to protect food security from recurring floods (24 grain banks in 24 villages). Any grain unused at year-end is sold, and money is put into a revolving loan fund. To date, the communities have raised 10 lakh (approximately \$22,450 USD) to invest in health, education and livelihoods in their communities.



Grassroots leaders unanimously agreed that the portrayal of women as passive victims and beneficiaries through the disaster risk-reduction paradigm had run its course. Leaders insisted it was necessary to replace the current top-down paradigm of DRR that sees women as powerless victims with a holistic approach that links social, economic, political and environmental issues into a single framework. This shift would place the onus for resilient development in the hands of community women. As Wardah Hadfiz, Director of UPLINKS stated, "We should believe that it is our era of

women. This is our time. We have to bring the expertise and power of community women to the forefront and make it a force within our movement."

The shift in approach is perhaps best understood through the lens of the Community Disaster Resilience Fund (CDRF), launched in 2007. An initiative of the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International in partnership with the Alliance for Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (AADRR) in India, and endorsed by the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) in India, the CDRF channels resources directly to at-risk communities, particularly grassroots women's groups, to reduce vulnerabilities and scale-up effective pro-poor DRR practices through collaboration with local and national governments. The Fund recognizes that community-based groups cannot access development funds and challenges the current assumptions that community-based groups are not engaged in resilience-building activities, or that they don't deliver and cannot manage funds. Gaining momentum and support, the CDRF is now active in eight states in India and 12 countries globally, and is a mechanism of the UNISDR Community Practitioner's Platform.

To orient the other member networks in the Huairou Commission's Campaign on Global Resilience on the process of the CDRF, facilitators described the 5-point interconnected star of the Fund as:

1. Creating an understanding of risk and resilience (through hazard-risk mapping)
2. Reducing vulnerabilities through the actions of grassroots women
3. Advancing grassroots women's leadership
4. Building action and learning networks to demonstrate that grassroots women's work can adapt the scale at which they work
5. Initiating partnerships and linkages between grassroots groups and national and local government bodies.

Indian leaders from Maharashtra, Assam, Bihar and Tamil Nadu described the work they have been doing since 2007 as a result of their involvement in the first round of the Community Disaster Resilience Fund. It is important to note that these groups had never previously received untied funds to focus on preventative measures. The groups chose to use the fund in a variety of ways depending on their communities' situational context, but all groups used the money as either a revolving fund or a fund to leverage government programs. Focusing their efforts on agro-based production, grain banks and seed banks, health and sanitation funds, group vegetable cultivation, and coastal plantation, women conducted hazard mapping, formed disaster task forces, created women's markets, improved infrastructure, and strengthened relationships with government authorities to create a critical mass of champions (horizontally and vertically).

To further develop a shared regional framework on the CDRF, Indian grassroots leaders linked their actions through the Fund to the 5-point framework. An example that reflects the depth and scale at which women are working is in Maharashtra:

- Creating a shared understanding of risk - In Maharashtra, women were given support from the Huairou Commission to assess their food insecurity. In doing so they mapped food supply chains – noting increased costs of vegetables and depleting nutritional levels in families. With an intention to mitigate the impact of changing climate patterns and food security issues brought on by an over-reliance of cash crops in local agriculture, women realized this was not sustainable.
- Taking action to reduce vulnerabilities to food insecurity through networks - To provide immediate food for their families and communities, grassroots women became vegetable producers by learning techniques from older knowledge-holders in a nearby village (through the support of GROOTS India). Godavari Dange Bhimashankar, from SSP explained, “We have defied gender norms that prevent women from owning land or keeping the income from the products they farmed. We have been able to negotiate with our husbands for 1 acre of land per plot to farm vegetables.”
- Partnerships with government authorities - Their success with farming has led to the agricultural department of India (KVK) agreeing for the first time both at the district and village levels to train women with innovative techniques for vegetable farming (including testing soil etc.)
- Advancing leadership and organizing Ms. Jayashree Kadam, Federation Leader stated, “The big change is that women are now working together, deciding the prices to sell the crops and sharing the profits. This never would have been the case before.”
- Building learning and action networks-Women farmers have expanded the joint organic vegetable farming groups to include 550 women in 35 villages through GROOTS India.

A meeting that produces results

These practices clearly demonstrate that in undertaking multiple, diverse roles, women are being empowered to shape the processes that affect their lives. It is no small feat that women are creating consultation mechanisms and funds through saving and credit groups. This allows them to reconfigure social relationships to generate and protect equitable access to resources at a time when governments are focused on transient approaches and “quick fixes.” Women are playing creative roles to safeguard their communities and build partnerships with government and institutional actors to do so.

From these presentations, the leaders from Nepal, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka asserted that they understood the CDRF to be an effective mechanism that will enable them to pilot innovative practices to:

- Demonstrate women's capacity to address community resilience priorities by putting money and decision making directly in women's hands;
- Disseminate the lessons learned across action and learning networks;
- Scale up grassroots led initiatives to advocate to government and policy makers for pro-poor DRR programming/ planning.

As a result, all the groups were eager to design concrete action plans to implement the CDRF. Perhaps most exciting was the announcement from the Nepalese groups. They launched a National Resilience Network of 7 groups (as a result of attending the HC South Asian meeting in February 2010). Remarkably, they pledged their own resources (5000 Rupees each) from their saving and credit groups to the Fund to operate in 10 risk prone communities thematically on issues related to resilience (health, sanitation, landslides, and food insecurity).

Some women raised the issue of isolation (villages being in remote areas) and how being part of the Huairou Commission and GROOTS networks is seen as a support system, highlighting the importance of investing in horizontal networking. By linking their work together through a collective approach, grassroots leaders reasoned that they were part of a movement for building community resilience. Groups also understood that the work they were doing to safeguard development assets could be scaled up institutionally through the Community Practitioner's Platform, which is being designed by the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International at the behest of UNISDR to convene community leaders and innovators to advocate for policies and programs that advance pro-poor, climate resilient development within the UN system.

The discussions throughout the week culminated in the launch of the Indian Community Practitioner's Platform in New Delhi. All the groups at the meeting agreed to be part of the network of community based organizations and grassroots women recognized as stakeholders and advisors to the UNISDR in advancing the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action.

- Huairou Commission, October 2010