



LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN PROMOTE RESILIENCE THROUGH GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING & DEVELOPMENT

March 14th, Antigua Guatemala

More than 50 leaders representing 25 grassroots and indigenous organizations concluded a three day experience sharing workshop entitled "The Role and Power of Grassroots and Indigenous Women's Groups in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)" today by launching a regional networking platform to publicize women's good practices and ensure public representation in disaster related policy and local decision making. Collectively representing more than 30,000 citizens living in disaster prone communities, the women's groups from 10 Latin American and Caribbean countries¹ issued recommendations after harvesting their five to twenty-five years of experience working in disaster-prone communities in the workshop. GROOTS International, supported by the Pro-Vention Consortium, convened and facilitated these local experts in a 'pre forum' workshop to draw upon and amplify the knowledge and skills they have gained from coping with the short and long-term impacts of floods, droughts, hurricanes, tropical storms, frosts, earthquakes, and erosion of natural resources as the result of climate change.

Fundacion Guatemala organized Guatemalan grassroots leaders to participate, managed local logistics, and arranged the Spanish International Cooperation Agency's Antigua regional training centre for the meeting.

The consultation brought together women living in diverse situations—spanning rural or coastal communities that are isolated and/or marginalized from government by geography and cultural/ethnic identity, to urban and semi urban communities, who live in informal settlements with limited basic services. Explaining and debating their approaches for recovering or reducing their vulnerability to damage from natural disaster, environmental degradation and climate change, participants demonstrated a wealth of knowledge and experience including:

Immediate response, recovery, and reconstruction practices such as:

- running community kitchens & emergency food distribution programs and distributing emergency supplies,
- disseminating information on entitlements and other government programs (via community radio and public meetings), and
- taking the lead on constructing affordable disaster resistant housing, to long-term mitigation, resilience building and community development.

Community-led preparedness and resilience building practices where:

- women undertake risk and asset mapping and surveys, raise community awareness of the issues and lead in establishing community contingency plans,
- community vulnerability to disaster is reduced via: rain water harvesting, reinforcing river embankments, promoting food security through organic agriculture and systematic crop rotation, safeguarding indigenous seeds, scaling up community tool and seed banks in indigenous communities, and community monitoring of environmental changes.

Cutting across the practice sharing was the clear reality that most participants represented communities living in poverty, reinforcing the need for development approaches that foster women's public (not household) participation as well as sustainable, risk reducing approaches to housing, agriculture, infrastructure and other investments. The predominance of indigenous and Afro-descendant women's groups in the practice sharing also concretized and underscored the importance of respecting and resourcing cultural knowledge and value systems as a cornerstone of community appropriate risk reduction and resilience building programs. In so doing, experience sharing established guidelines that move gender equality and cultural inclusive mandates beyond rhetoric into real implementation.

Participant countries included: Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru (plus India and the US).

Fostering Community-Government Links

Institutional representatives and community leaders also came together during the workshop to examine the policy frameworks mandating integrated locally managed disaster risk reduction approaches (including the Hyogo Framework in 2005 and the Guatemala Declaration of 1999 and the establishment of CEPREDENAC in the region). In their opening remarks, Angel Marcos, Spanish Cooperation and Alejandro Maldonado, Director of CONRED acknowledged the strategic importance of involving large numbers of women-led community based organizations in implementing these priorities in a gender and culturally inclusive manner and re-enforced the importance of local governments partnering with civil society actors.

“Any conscious effort to reduce risk and manage disasters must be participatory.... I am very glad to see such a large participation of women in this issue. Throughout history women have been the engine of development in their communities, therefore it is important to show the role of women in disaster risk management. These types of events are crucial because it allows us to share experiences and solutions and take them back to our communities. The challenge is [to ensure] the things discussed here are implemented.” – Alejandro Maldonado, Director CONRED

Action Points to Scale Up & Link Grassroots and Indigenous Women’s Groups in Disaster Risk Management

Grassroots women leaders, riveted by policy information previously unavailable to them, used their discussions to pin-point the knowledge, skills and constituencies they could pledge to assist governments in responding to and reducing the risk and impact of disasters. They saw enormous potential in their ability to use their organized groups and social networks as a platform for information collection, dissemination and planning associated with disaster risk reduction. While noting they would need to develop certain capacities to strengthen their involvement (hazard mapping, contingency planning, etc), participants underscored how playing these roles could publicly legitimate women’s groups and promote gender and cultural equity by reducing their subordination in male led decision making processes.

In the spirit of mainstreaming their involvement in disaster reduction work, grassroots participants **called for development and mitigation programs and investments that would:**

1. Support the transfer and strengthening of indigenous knowledge and practices – community banks, indigenous seed banks, soil conservation, rainwater harvesting and reading nature’s early warning signals – that have been critical to the survival of at risk communities.
2. Rapidly disseminate effective practices by implementing grassroots led training programs that allow advanced women’s groups to transfer their skills and knowledge.
3. Directly resource grassroots women’s networks to undertake community research, surveys, and risk mapping to identify and prioritize risks and create resource directories to assist them to collaborate with key actors to reduce risk in their communities.
4. Create community and culturally accessible communication systems - such as community radio networks - that reach out to rural and indigenous groups in indigenous languages.

To foster government-community partnerships that can protect and secure vulnerable communities by establishing coordinated responses and contingency plans for disasters, community access to public information on resources, entitlements and decision making and citizens acting for public accountability, participants suggested the following concrete actions to promote equitable representation and participation in disaster risk reduction decision-making (local-national, regional-global):

1. Formal acknowledgement by government officials and policymakers of:
 - a) the diverse and sizeable constituencies represented by grassroots and indigenous women’s organizations and the range of contributions and public roles these groups play (and can play) in responding to disasters and reducing disaster risk in their communities;



b) the importance of establishing (and adhering to) gender and culturally inclusive/equitable standards in DRR policy and practice and implementing them via community-driven, development programming.

2. Creation and implementation of public policy mandates and decision making mechanisms that facilitate grassroots and indigenous women's organizations and networks participation in public decision making processes associated with designing, operationalizing and monitoring disaster response and risk reduction programs.

3. Inclusion of grassroots and indigenous women's networks in regional and national DRR coordination platforms such as CEPREDENAC and CONRED (Guatemala)

A delegation of Honduran, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Jamaican representatives of the consultation were appointed to represent the insights and recommendations at the April ProVention 2008 Consortium Forum in Panama City April 8-10 focusing on People-Centered Disaster Risk Reduction.

For more information on the details of this event, or to see the full report, please visit www.groots.org, or contact Sarah Silliman at silliman.sarah@gmail.com