

Executive Summary

An historical and empowering moment occurred when nearly 100 grassroots women leaders from across Latin America and the Caribbean came together to share their best practices and forge stronger relationships and networking among them to increase their collective power. From August 1 – 4, 2007, they met in Lima, Peru in an event planned and led by a multi country team of grassroots leaders. This summary describes the impetus and objectives of the Academy, the structure of the event, the successful relationship-building, practice-sharing and analysis that occurred, and the regional organizing and network activities it launched

The Idea

The women that led the planning and facilitation of this regional Grassroots Academy developed the idea based on interests they developed during a *global* Grassroots Academy (sponsored by GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission)held as a pre-event to the World Urban Forum III, in June, 2006, in Vancouver, Canada. During the global Academy, the women from Latin America and the Caribbean talked together about wanting to continue strengthening their relationships. They identified skills and practices for community development to share and exchange at the regional level. Further, they expressed an interest in exploring how to strengthen regional organizing, such as benchmarking the level of collective organization grassroots women’s groups have achieved and unpacking the relationships between grassroots leaders and professional women from NGOs that support them. Leaving Canada, they had set forth a plan for some preliminary activities, and for a Grassroots Academy of their own.

A Regional Committee of grassroots leaders that had participated in Vancouver formed to plan the Latin American and Caribbean Grassroots Academy. They debated and agreed upon what they hoped to achieve.

Goals and Objectives for the Grassroots Academy

Developmental Goal

To strengthen and expand networking among grassroots women’s organizations from existing networks in Latin America and the Caribbean

Objectives

- To communicate, transfer and increase the knowledge and skills of grassroots women’s organizations in the region. It will focus on, but not be limited to the following themes:
 - Engaging with local and national governments in order to secure rights and access to property and basic services
 - Economic empowerment through communal banks, home-building schemes and small businesses
 - Sustainable agriculture practices
 - Community organizing methods
 - Safer Cities
- Analyze and debate the accomplishments and challenges of innovative women’s groups in the context of local and national housing and land policies, decentralization of government and access to credit.
- Develop a two-year regional plan of Peer Exchanges for the continued transfer of skills and knowledge and implementation of practices.

The planning process in the Regional Committee not only helped to clarify and program ways to achieve these goals, but it also set standards and precedents for ways of relating among grassroots

and NGO representatives that would carry over into the Academy. Over a period of nine months, the committee worked with the global office to make planning decisions. Collectively, through email and conference calls, they discussed the participants to invite, fundraising, use of funds and content for the Academy. They ensured a diverse group of participants representing indigenous communities, Afro-Latino communities and both rural and urban communities. A Local Committee formed in Lima, Peru to carry out the local planning process and to strengthen their local relationships.

The Event

The Grassroots Academy took place over four days, accomplishing an agenda of:

- Presentations of the networks through which the participants are connected
- Thematic practice sharing in small groups
- Plenary discussions
- Presentations on strategies for and lessons learned from engaging with local and national government,
- Planning for regional activities
- Visits to development projects and practices of the groups in the Local Committee.

Ninety participants from sixteen countries attended the Academy, representing approximately thirty organizations. Grassroots leaders represented local organizations and networks of self-help groups, such as farmers' cooperatives, popular housing rights groups, communal banks, popular kitchens, cultural clubs and mothers' clubs. Professional NGOs that work closely with communities and carry out community-based projects were also present. A holistic way of working on various community development issues from the perspective and leadership of community women served as the common thread among the diverse groups.

Achieving the Objectives

The completion of the objectives depended not only on the Academy itself, but on the relationships, plans and principles the participants developed there, creating a way forward after the Academy. The objectives were to network, transfer practices, analyze the context of these practices, and design a path forward.

The overall developmental goal of strengthening and expanding networking among the representatives of different groups and networks was evident throughout the Academy. Women took advantage of every moment to get to know one another and their organizations – during breaks as well as structured time. At meal times, participants held informal meetings of the networks present to strengthen relationships within networks. The opening of the Academy gave a significant amount of time to introducing everybody to the different networks and how they can connect and coordinate through the Huairou Commission. This introduction also explained to the participants how their groups can apply to join the Member Networks of the Huairou Commission. These introductions, as well as the overall structure of the Academy, contributed to relating across networks. In the final discussion of the two-year regional plan, participants prioritized the need for improved communications to maintain their relationships. They decided to form a regional coordinating committee to ensure the implementation of the plan, and they recognized the value of strengthening their relationships and their existing networks within the global structure of the Huairou Commission.

Another successful objective that the Academy accomplished was discussing and transferring the knowledge and skills of grassroots women's organizations. The thematic workshops provided an opportunity to compare different models of similar practices. For example, they shared various strategies for carrying out savings and credit schemes and for avoiding exploitation by intermediaries in agricultural production. Using critical thinking, they identified important questions and concerns about the different models. They also considered how they could replicate the models in their own communities.

In addition to sharing practices, the workshops and presentations provided a space for participants to complete the objective of analyzing the ways in which their organizations influence land and housing policy and gain access to resources by engaging with local and national governments. Participants emphasized the need to be persistent, strategic and creative when breaking past barriers to meeting with local authorities. Groups also shared the need to advocate at national levels for the distributive policies that provide land ownership opportunities for women. These experiences illustrated how they are increasingly participating in and creating structures for ongoing partnerships with government. Together with their work in agriculture and economic empowerment, their political work showed how securing assets and improving farming methods empower them.

Completing the final objective, a two year plan of continued exchanging of skills and practices was defined through a participatory process. Debated in small groups and in plenary, the plan represents a consensus on a way forward for the groups at the Academy to continue collaborating with each other, their partners and other grassroots women's groups that did not directly participate in the Academy.

The Way Forward

Academy participants organized the regional plan around processes and principles, reflecting the diverse nature of development approaches used by grassroots women's organizations.

The way forward began immediately after the event. The Regional Committee continues to meet through conference calls and will soon make the transition to a new committee. Phone conversations among the facilitators of the thematic groups served to flesh out the next steps in areas where the plan lacked sufficient detail, and participants began implementation in their communities. One participating organization started two communal banks within two weeks of returning home, and two others began using the leadership support group method in her organization. A delegation of women visited Sao Paolo and Pernambuco, Brazil, in December to learn popular housing construction in a Peer Exchange and to form a political "solidarity watch" with landless women, as a result of the Academy. Funding has also been leveraged for a follow-up meeting in March.

Although the Academy divided into themes, the regional plan is organized around the processes to be used, rather than themes. Participants decided to organize it this way because of the diversity of the activities and approaches, and to avoid creating a new thematic framework, in addition to the existing thematic frameworks of participating networks. The main processes of Communication, Peer Exchanges, Advocacy and Support to Leaders ensure relationship-building, grassroots knowledge sharing through grassroots processes and a political angle. The numerous activities around agriculture, influencing national policy, economic empowerment activities, health, etc. have been grouped in this procedural framework that puts grassroots women at the center.

The plan represents a way forward that draws on the variety of approaches that grassroots women use in their communities. In a period where development actors debate which approach will most empower communities and promote equitable, sustainable development, the women from the Academy show that communities are already succeeding at development. They use a combination of approaches including assets, livelihoods, rights-based and citizenship approaches. Regionally, the women will continue to support each other to work from their own vision and approaches, rather than conform to the approaches advocated by development institutions.