



HUIROU COMMISSION
Women, Homes & Community

Grassroots Women and Decentralised Governance

Change through Partnership

*Edited on behalf of
Huirou Commission by*


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Citation: The Huairou Commission. 2010. Grassroots Women and Decentralized Governance: Change Through Partnership, New York, USA. The Huairou Commission.

Cover design by: Sudha Menon, Bangalore, India.
Website: www.sudhamenon.com

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Huairou Commission.

Available from: The Huairou Commission

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is to acknowledge the contributions of all those who have helped shape our thinking on decentralization and local government from grassroots women's perspectives. This publication would not have been possible without the support of UNDP. Most importantly, we would like to thank the authors of the articles. We acknowledge the work of Suranjana Gupta and Rut Kolinsky for their insightful perspectives on partnerships with local government formed by the Czech Mother Centers. Esther Mwaura-Muiru, Violet Shivutse, and Hellen Kimiri have conceptualised and implemented various grassroots' women strategies on HIV/AIDS in partnership with local governments. Through their work, it can be seen how incorporating these strategies made devolved funding mechanisms more effective. Prema Gopalan, Naseem Shaikh and Elizaveta Bozhkova have provided invaluable contributions in contextualizing decentralization vis-a-vis grassroots development and the participation of women's groups. Insights of Carmen Robles Arana, Carmen Sanchez, Ana Paúcar, Lucy Mejía, Aida Reynaga have shown how networking and partnerships with local government have paved the way to effective governance. We would like to thank Sudha Menon whose creativity behind this publication provided the stunning visual effects and for her incredible patience on including all our feedback at very short notice. We would like to thank Natasha for going over the final proof of this document with her usual meticulous eye. Finally, we would like to acknowledge Jan Peterson for the original concept behind this publication.



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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Sangeetha Purushothaman
and Sanjeev Pillay

“Local government is an integral part of the national structures of governance and the level of government closest to the citizens. Therefore, it is in the best position both to involve women in the making of decisions concerning their living conditions and to make use of their knowledge and capabilities in the promotion of sustainable development.”

- United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), (1998)

The decentralization of power and decision making processes from national and state to local bodies has become a major trend globally. Decentralization, being a process that puts in place a structural arrangement for facilitating shared exercise of power among central government, local governments, and local communities, is a wide and complex field allowing for community participation in governance and development. (Kauzya, 2005, p.15).

Centralized decision-making at national or state levels has been proven time and again to be unsuitable to local conditions. The “one size fits all” policy mechanisms have given way to the understanding that policies need to be tailored to the needs of local communities and should reflect the diversity embedded in these communities and



the conditions faced by them. Local government is that arm of the government that lies closest to communities and decentralization of power and resources, thus has the potential of increasing the community's access to the resources.

The grassroots initiatives from five different countries provide insights into the participation of local communities in decentralized decision making and local governance. The active involvement of grassroots women in local governance, in turn,



builds ownership over local development as well as the leadership capacities of women. The examples below cover grassroots women's initiatives from the Czech Republic, India, Kenya, Peru and Russia. Grassroots activities are diverse yet relevant to grassroots movements all over the world. Servicios Educativo El Augustino (SEA) advocates for effective functioning of the decentralization process in Peru, enabling women and the marginalized communities to engage in participatory planning and local governance, through mechanisms such as the Participatory Budget, and the Coalition of Local Councils. The Mother Centers in the Czech Republic show the

“Decentralization is commonly regarded as a process through which powers, functions, responsibilities and resources are transferred from central to local governments... as a way to promote broader values of pluralistic participatory democracy.”

UNESCO (2006)

importance of partnerships and networking with local government and international grassroots organizations for addressing problems faced by working mothers in a patriarchal post-Communist society. Similarly, in Russia, the Information Center for the Independent Women's Forum (ICIWF) works closely with local women in several cities including Petrozavodsk and Putschino, establishing neighborhood groups to influence city policies to improve infrastructure of neighborhoods. GROOTS Kenya works with networks of neighborhood groups on monitoring public services and ensuring better reach for marginalized groups, particularly HIV infected populations and their families. Similarly, Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) in India monitors public services around issues of health, water and sanitation through the formation of Health Governance Groups, ensuring the poor have access to health insurance and health camps.

The afore-mentioned organizations are part of the Huairou Commission (HC), a global coalition of networks, non-governmental and grassroots organizations, institutions and individual professionals that link grassroots women's community development organizations to partners for information sharing, access to resources and political spaces. Established in 1995 at the 4th

INTRODUCTION



World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Huairou Commission members focus on network building, knowledge sharing, and advocacy activities associated with:

- Sustaining grassroots women's leadership in redeveloping families, homes, communities, and economies in crisis situations (disaster, post-conflict, and HIV/ AIDS);
- Local governance and asset-securing approaches that anchor grassroots women's participation;
- Collaborative partnerships that strengthen and upscale grassroots local knowledge and advance alternative development policies.

Through campaigns on governance, community resilience, HIV/AIDS, and land and housing, the Huairou Commission aims to highlight the participation of grassroots women's groups in local planning, implementation, and evaluation as a prerequisite for effective poverty reduction and decentralization.

Grassroots women's initiatives described below illustrate how community based efforts have influenced and shaped local development, from a grassroots women's perspective. While the responsibility for local development lies with every stakeholder, its success lies in building ownership among all of them. These illustrations from the five different countries clearly point out the significant role that citizens play in decentralized governance through collective action, active participation in decision making and service delivery, alongside, and in partnership with, local government bodies.

While each initiative has distinct features globally there are common trends that provide insights into local development and governance including:

- Local development can be made most effective and relevant to local needs when there are active partnerships between local government and mobilized communities.
- The magnitude of problems caused by poverty cannot be solved unilaterally, by any one partner. The partnerships, when principled and equal, can empower both communities and local government to act effectively, through a pooling of human, technical and financial resources.
- Decentralization of power, decision making and resources has strong potential for grassroots communities to access resources and services and hold governments accountable unlike centralized structures.

Kenya

Introduction

In Kenya, grassroots women have established innovative approaches to ensure implementation of a number of affirmative actions as part of the larger ongoing decentralization process. GROOTS Kenya (GK), a network linking thousands of women's self help groups and community organizations in nine Kenyan provinces, was founded in 1995 as a response to the low visibility of grassroots women in development and decision-making forums on issues that directly impact them.

Kenya has a long history of formal cooperative movements involving small farmers. In recent times, grassroots organizations, especially women's organizations, have emerged in rural and urban Kenya. These organizations undertake many activities that include income generation, asset building, commodity marketing, home-based care for people affected by HIV/AIDS, governance, human rights campaigns and advocacy.

Historically, access to and control over public services has been dominated by men in African communities. Women have built a strong grassroots platform over the years to lobby for delivery and access to public services. However, retrogressive cultural practices and poor governance in the public sector have stifled grassroots women's voices and hindered their access to formal education, health care, property ownership and inheritance rights. The greatest threats to the public service access for these women's organizations come from factors such as corruption, poverty, high community expectations, ignorance and illiteracy.

The Role of Organized Grassroots Groups in Influencing Women to Access Public Services

The work of GROOTS, Kenya in the area of health and women's rights

*Esther Mwaura-Muiru,
Violet Shivutse
and Hellen Kimiri*



The Home Based Care Alliance in Gatundu after a training workshop on gender based violence

Engagement with Local Government

As HIV/AIDS emerged as an endemic in the 1990s, major international agencies funded sub-Saharan African governments to establish National AIDS Authorities that would be responsible for developing national AIDS policies, building partnerships and mobilizing resources. To ensure that resources and decision-making power went into the hands of communities, these AIDS authorities were established along decentralized lines. The Kenyan National AIDS Control Council (NACC) is responsible for the implementation of the Kenya National Strategic AIDS Plan through its decentralized bodies – the District and Provincial AIDS Control Committees. The Constituency AIDS Control Committees (CACCs) are community level implementers as well as grant-making bodies, authorized to fund community-driven responses to AIDS. Multiple stakeholders, including those representing community priorities, were involved in defining national AIDS policy to properly reflect community needs. However, it was found that both resources and services often did not reach communities.

Several women's organizations formed spontaneously due to the communities' plight, which took responsibility to care for orphans and vulnerable children, raise awareness and offer home based care for the infected and affected. Women's groups were recreating social networks to support and care for the sick and growing numbers of children orphaned by AIDS. These women leaders not only played care-giver roles but also trained communities on health issues, legal rights and health services. For grassroots women living and coping with HIV/AIDS, this is not simply a health issue, but impacts on all aspects of daily life including access to basic services, livelihoods, food security and governance. Through home-based care, grassroots women are creating a holistic, women-led, community driven response to HIV/AIDS.

Fighting HIV and AIDS as an Alliance

The Shibuye¹ Community Health Workers, members of GROOTS Kenya, have provided care for HIV-positive

community members since 1999 and have led the process of federating care-giving groups to form the Home-Based Care Alliance in Kenya's Western Province. The idea of forming an alliance of home-based caregivers emerged during the 2003 International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections held in Nairobi, Kenya. Here, the home-based caregivers shared their experiences and asked donors to channel resources directly to grassroots organizations. Representatives of the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in the conference



claimed that it was impossible to locate grassroots groups, which they characterized as marginal, small-scale and working in isolation. To counter these perceptions and raise the visibility of home-based caregivers' responses, in 2005, GROOTS Kenya launched the Kenyan Home-Based Care Alliance with three clear objectives: build home-based caregivers' capacities through peer learning; serve as a platform for collective livelihoods; and shift resources and decision-making into the hands of grassroots women who were responsible for fighting AIDS in their communities.

The Alliance provides an eye into the community, collecting statistics and information on vulnerabilities as well as tracking and overseeing indigenous responses organized by caregivers. Using data gathered during the

¹ Shibuye is a location (an administrative unit similar to a town) within Shinyalu division of the Kakamega District.



Creating awareness during a national meeting

The Home Based Care Alliance

In Shibuye, the Home Based Care Alliance was organized through an action research and mapping process to build relationships and to collect and compile local data on existing caregiving groups in regions where members are located. Through the mapping process, grassroots leaders mobilized 17 new groups (1,812 caregivers) to join the Alliance and found out that by federating the group, collectively they provided care for 2,276 people living with HIV and AIDS, 6,000 orphans, 2,000 widows and 4,000 other needy people (GROOTS Kenya, 2006). The mapping process enabled the Shibuye community to clearly articulate to local authorities and other stakeholders the issues for the management of HIV/AIDS and impact on the community such as the unavailability of necessary drugs at the local dispensary and the lack of resources to support weak patients who are not able to take care of their daily needs like food and decent shelter. The home based care givers had to fill these gaps by bringing together the contributions of their collective as external funding was difficult to access.

mapping process, the Shibuye Community Health Workers began engaging the community and local leaders both formally and informally. Informally, they regularly arranged face-to-face meetings with local chiefs and CACC Officers to share information on

inheritance issues of widows and orphans, domestic violence and home based care of those marginalized communities who are outside the reach of public services.

In a more formal process, the Shibuye Community Health Workers conducted Local-to-Local Dialogues, a platform for public dialogues between grassroots caregivers and local leaders to share caregivers' perspectives, to discuss challenges within the community and develop collaborative solutions. Before these dialogues, the Alliance consulted the community to identify major issues faced by them and also educate them on the National AIDS Control Council (NACC) Strategic Plan. For the community, the main issue was that the CACC was an inaccessible, non-transparent entity whose programs were not sustainable. To change this, the group approached CACC officers, the Provincial Administrators, Kakamega district officers and local chiefs. In the meeting, the community demonstrated their knowledge of the NACC Strategic Plan. They expressed a willingness to track resources available, identify existing groups in the area, and look at existing coordinating structures of the CACC. Consequently, the Alliance was recognized as integral to the process of information dissemination and planning.

Impact on Service Delivery

The relationship between organized home-based caregivers and the government is now collaborative instead of operating autonomously without knowledge of each other's work. Through the Shibuye community leadership, the Kakamega District Home-Based Care Alliance now has official partnership status with the Shinyalu division CACC Office. The formal partnership between the Alliance and Kakamega District office gives the group authority to intervene officially on issues such as domestic violence, and land and property disputes. The District Officer, in particular, sees this as a strategic partnership simplifying the government's work and

The Local to Local Dialogues

Originally piloted in 2002 by six Huairou Commission members, including GROOTS Kenya, Local to Local Dialogues are locally designed strategies whereby grassroots women's groups initiate and engage in ongoing dialogues with local authorities to negotiate a range of development issues to influence policies, plans and programs in ways that address women's priorities. Dialogues are convened by grassroots women and used to change the terms of negotiation between communities and their local authorities. For further information, read "Local to Local Dialogue: A Grassroots Women's Perspective on Good Governance" at <http://www.huairou.org/knowledge/resource.html>

enabling chiefs and sub-chiefs to work hand-in-hand with local communities to address community problems. For the Alliance, this partnership ensures them a voice within the District decision-making structures which enables them to access resources and protect their rights. As a result of their work, several cases of land grabbing and illegal land sales have been prevented, and several cases of child and wife abuse have been redressed.

The Kakamega District Home-Based Care Alliance has directly and successfully dealt with many of the common challenges of decentralization. Caregivers have been able to fill the gap between established administrative structures and the communities. This has increased transparency, accountability and the flow of information between communities and officials. In Kakamega, the groups are undertaking an intensive campaign for registration of births and death. The aim is to ensure that children and women have legal documentation for easy identification for future inheritance claims. They have convinced the notoriously "rigid" Department of Registrar of Persons to send their professional staff to the communities to provide registration services at minimal or no cost. They are able to track previously non transparent CACC funds. In Gatundu district for example, they

have influenced the staffing and stocking of medicines at local dispensaries. They have improved access to local officials by facilitating fora where district agriculture extension offices and government officials in other departments educate the public on government policies and resources. Thus, the community is empowered to take issues affecting them to the relevant government officers without fear of reprisal.



Strategies

GROOTS Kenya and its sister organizations adopt strategies that broadly encompass the development of partnerships with local government, building capacities of local organizations through awareness raising on disinheritance and women's rights, and liaisoning with government to access entitlements. These include:

- Mobilization of communities in the form of watch dog groups and the home based care alliance which brings together care providers, local government and development agent officials to better respond to community needs and reduce corruption.
- Capacity building of Provincial Administrators, Constituency AIDS Control Committees, elders, police and church leaders to engage with communities through community watch dog groups.
- Building partnerships through the home-based care alliance by the Kakamega community with public service providers, NGOs and home based care workers. A parallel strategy to build partnerships was the Local to Local dialogues organized by the Kahawa



Youth care givers during first aid training

Community Watchdog Groups

Community Watchdog Groups, a systematic, community-based tool to safeguard the land and property rights of women, orphans and vulnerable children, were formed in 2005 to link community members and vulnerable local leaders with the power to intervene. Each Watchdog Group includes a Provincial Authority, community elders, community-based paralegals (trained by national or local legal organizations), police, church leaders and concerned individuals (both men and women) who have combined their will, expertise and time to deal with property grabbing of women and orphans. Watchdog Groups, replicated in 20 communities, provide institutional and participatory protection to prevent evictions and property-grabbing, monitor and report on cases of property dispossession, and represent an advocacy platform for grassroots women to access governance institutions and influence legal structures.

Soweto community to ensure women leaders get into decision making committees, monitor funds and play a management role in service provision.

Other strategies around service delivery include:

- Providing information (through radio listening groups, community dialogues, forums and workshops) for disinherited women and children concerning legal documentation, legal rights and appropriate channels for intervention through paralegal support.

- Providing access to services that allow for direct investigation and determining cases of disinheritance and dispossession, in collaboration with local chiefs and persons of influence within that particular community.
- Financially supporting poor widows and orphaned girls through collective contributions toward resolving disinheritance cases.

Challenges to Women's Access to Public Services

In most cases, grassroots organizations offer their services for free or subsidized rates to support government to address basic needs of the communities. The situation is made worse by the fact that government resources are not channeled through grassroots organizations since they are not officially recognized as part of the government's mainstream implementation infrastructure. Also, the relation between grassroots women delivering actual services or influencing the delivery systems and their government officials is highly dependent on good will. Once new elections and transfers takes place, women have to start all over again and struggle to be listened to and recognized as stakeholders by new officers.

Lessons Learnt on Decentralization and Grassroots Organizing

Despite the attempts of decentralization to devolve funds to the local level and create structures for community access, in reality these mechanisms were not accessible to poor communities. By conducting a survey on decentralization, GROOTS Kenya was able to identify gaps in service delivery and the solutions to close these gaps. Principles of good governance at the local levels were repeatedly stated by respondents as the key ingredients for long-term success for women to access public services. Others are, training of more

Kenya

women to organize effectively, education of girls beyond primary school level, unequal representation of women in public institutions and organizations. In addition, majority of women are ignorant of their rights to demand and access public services and their ability to break away from retrogressive cultures.

By making communities aware of resources available and the governance mechanisms to access these resources, communities then began to track and monitor them. Through the intervention of the Alliance in Kakamega, an increasing amount of public funds now



Members during a consultation meeting

directly reaches the community, rather than being diverted to a select few or being mismanaged by unscrupulous officials. Caregivers continue to educate local authorities on community needs and means of improving the effectiveness of their programs. In addition to forming direct links between the community and the local administration, caregivers are also at the forefront of bringing recognition to grassroots women as key stakeholders in AIDS responses.

It is evident that grassroots women, despite being mired in poverty can create spontaneous, sustainable, effective infrastructure for the state and donors to deliver services particularly to poor communities. It is important to commission community led research to further understand the role that grassroots groups



Youth caregivers group photo during a strengthening and cohesion session

“So many people knew that the CACC was ineffective, but they had no way to address the issues. So we thought if we could find a way to mobilize the community to come together and discuss together, it would be a good idea. Now, the CACC members recognize us as knowledgeable people.”

- Violet Shivuse, Founder of the Kakamega District Home-Based Care Alliance.

should formally play in decentralized systems that result in women's empowerment.

The state must formally recognize the important role grassroots groups are currently playing in service delivery. Advocacy on decentralization policies should disaggregate resources and programs vis-à-vis all actors and support their roles. Poor communities cannot continue to subsidize government in delivering basic services. Investment needs to be directed to organized grassroots groups to support community led innovative strategies. Further, exchange programs among different communities can help concrete and effective strategies to be replicated and scaled up.

Peru

Decentralization laws aim to redistribute political power by strengthening local and regional governments and to establish new relationships between state and civil society by promoting local governance. For these laws to be effective and for citizen participation to be enhanced, conditions must be created that strengthen their participation and that of social organizations in decentralization processes. In the case of Peru, decentralization has created opportunities to increase women's engagement, particularly in the written laws that include citizen protection and mandates for participation. However, women are still challenged to realize these opportunities in practice.

The case of Servicios Educativo El Agustino (SEA) and the communities of El Agustino and Quinta Francia provide examples of how women's organizing and networking can ensure that decentralization processes work to deliver good quality basic services to communities, increase women's political participation and enable citizens to monitor government progress.

Decentralization through Women's Grassroots organizations and Networking

The case of Servicios Educativo El Agustino, Peru

Carmen Robles Arana,
Carmen Sanchez,
Ana Paúcar,
Lucy Mejía,
Aida Reynaga and
Sarah Silliman



The Network of Women's Organizations El Agustino, taking part in the march on the International Day of Non-Violence Against Women, November 25, 2009

Background and Context of Decentralization in Peru

Decentralization laws in Peru are designed to provide conditions to improve well-being of women, youth and children without any discrimination of class, gender, generation or race. For example, the Law on Equal Opportunities contains the objective "to ensure women and men exercise their rights to equality, dignity, self-development and self-wellness, preventing discrimination in all spheres of life, public and private, which have not achieved adequate dissemination and implementation strategies at national, regional and local levels."

In addition, Peruvian decentralization laws include mandates on citizen participation in which "regional and local governments are obliged to promote citizen participation in the formulation, discussion and conclusion of their development plans, budgets, and public governance." To implement this, they must "ensure access to public information, and the establishment and operation of spaces and mechanisms for consultation, coordination, monitoring, evaluation and accountability"¹.

A framework has been created through municipal and budgetary laws and plans² which outline municipal and local mandates to implement these laws. The Organic Law of Municipalities³ states that the major function of municipalities is to represent the neighborhood, ensure adequate provision of local public services and promote concerted and sustained development in its jurisdiction. Mechanisms (participation, consultation and monitoring) have been established at the national, regional and local levels to implement these mandates. Among those are the *Local and Regional Community Coordination Councils and Concerted Development Plans*.

Regional Community Coordination Councils

Decentralization laws are implemented through 24 regional government departments. To increase efficient



A workshop organized by The Network of Women's Organizations, El Agustino, with the local authorities of Lima East on women's issues and rights

implementation of decentralization processes, a proposal was made to consolidate the regional departments into eight units. Consultations with the population were required to confirm the consolidation of departments. These consultations resulted in the creation of participatory mechanisms for decision-making at the departmental levels. For example, the participatory budget process has resulted in the creation of Community Coordination Councils, comprised of *regidores*, or local council members, and civil society representatives. The Coordination Council functions as an institutionalized decision-making space coordinated by civil society and local government. While the Councils have established a precedent for citizen participation, the power of those on the Council shifts according to the number and balance of council members to civil society representatives.

Concerted Development Plans

All districts must create Development Plans to frame the district agenda which includes strategies and steps for implementation for each region. A participatory planning process, which includes a participatory budgeting process, has been established to create these Development Plans. These processes provide a greater opportunity for women to influence and design regional plans in contrast to previous methods of consultations

¹ Article 17.1. Ley de bases de la descentralización N.27783 (Peruvian Decentralization Law N.27783), 2002.

² These laws include: Organic Law of Regions, Law No. 27867; Code of the Decentralization Law No. 27783; Organic Law of Municipalities Law No. 27972; Participatory Budget Framework Law No. 28056; The National Accord (eighth line); Equal Opportunities Plan 2007-2010

³ Created in 2002, the Law of Organic Municipalities is a set of national laws that apply to each level of government including the state, regional and municipal governments. The Laws were developed through consultative processes with associations of municipalities and a variety of civil society organizations representing different regions of the country. The laws had originally been implemented through 24 departments, or macro-regions. This political and geographical structure had made implementation hard, so the current focus is on reorganizing into 8 simple regions or departments.

and presentation of ordinances, which were traditionally dominated by local government or private sector.

Networking for Stronger Political Influence in the District of El Agustino

El Agustino, in Lima Este district, hosts several grassroots organizations and networks. The networks have expanded their participation in and monitoring of local management processes through the decentralization mechanisms outlined above. The district consultation process now includes diverse constituents including women, youth, local government, grassroots organizations and NGOs. This is an outcome of the willingness of political actors and the effective engagement of social organizations. Civil society was able to effectively hold governments accountable to written decentralization laws, making the ideas of such documents a reality using the following strategies and mechanisms:

- **Signing of Governance Agreements:** Candidates and community-based civil society organizations, like the El Agustino group, sign agreements before the election to honor the Local Agenda already prioritized in previous district and zonal events. After elections, the process depends on the political will of the local management to uphold the agreements. Through monitoring and surveillance from an organized working group, with advice from Educational Services El Agustino (SEA), the district municipality has also conducted public hearings on accountability.
- **Developing the Concerted Development Plan (2004):** This plan was developed using a participatory political and technical process with the support of a group of institutions (SEA, CENCO and OSCAR Peru). People's participation was ensured through zonal and district workshops. Based on the results of this process, the district formulated its development vision, strategic objectives and created priority projects for the ten year period 2004-2014.
- **Participatory Budgets:** In budgets formulated every year, greater participation is sought from residents. Community based organizations have increased their capacity to make proposals and amendments to the budgets through support and interventions from civil



The Network of Women's Organizations, El Agustino at a workshop on the district planning agenda in Lima Este.

- **society organizations.** SEA provides training to those involved in information management and tools to facilitate effective participation. SEA also advises the Committees of Supervision of Participatory Budgeting whose task is to monitor compliance with agreements and to inform the public of its findings and recommendations. Since 2006, participatory budgeting has been included under the local government's Women Entrepreneurs Project to support economic initiatives for women.
- **Local Coordinating Council (LCC):** There has been a widening public participation in the LCC. In accordance with the law, El Agustino has a quota for five civil society representatives, a minority within the Council which also includes local authorities and private sector representatives. The current municipal administration has expanded that number to 14, so that different segments of the population are represented: women, youth, children, and neighborhood organizations. Grassroots organizations of women (self-managed canteens, mother clubs and committees, *Vaso de Leche*) have three seats.

Grassroots organizations like CONOMOVIDI, Vaso de Leche, and a micro-business network are currently functioning in the Local Coordinating Council of El Agustino along with some youth organizations. The law is well written but in practice there are fluctuations and, often, limited participation. SEA's role is therefore to ensure that civil society is capacitated to actively participate.

With the women's organizations and networks in the five districts that SEA works, relationships between groups and local authorities have improved. They are now being invited to ceremonies, to coordinate the reforestation program, and are working together with the *regidores*, or local council representatives, who are

visiting the lands. Engagement at the local level, hosting of the Grassroots Women's Academy⁴, and partnerships with GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission have increased the legitimacy, visibility and recognition of grassroots women's organizations and NGOs in the region.

Increasing Access to Safe Water in the Community of Quinta Francia

In cities, lack of basic services including water, health, recreation and education affects the integrity, security and ability of all, especially women, to fully exercise their rights. A 2006 Peruvian study conducted in eight locations found that 87 percent of the population consumes water unfit for human consumption. This is also true of the Housing Association Quinta Francia which started in 1945. There are no legal title deeds for private ownership of land and hence water is supplied by delivery vehicles which lack the necessary equipment for water purification, resulting in a series of social, economic and environmental problems within the community.

In the district of El Agustino, despite the length of time that the community of Quinta Francia has existed, a significant amount of residents lack access to safe drinking water. From the community count: a total of 1,326 sections within the community, and over 7,956 residents lack access to safe water. Of these, 959 sections are supplied by *pilones*, or water trucks, 66 by artificial lakes and 301 by water vehicles, and almost all of them have sanitation problems that violate the legal norms and affects quality of life.

SEA designed a strategy for women in Lima Este to press for improvement and accessibility of basic services to the community. First, a water committee was organized which comprised mostly of women since they were most severely affected by the lack of services and who had the most ideas on how to solve problems together. SEA conducted participatory training on treating water as a natural, but finite resource, as a human right, as a basic commodity that has high impact on community health and on water quality management. The water committees of East Lima were invited to share experiences, successes and difficulties



Members of the Network of Women's Organizations of El Agustino at Jornada, working on the five year strategic plan in 2009

faced. Each group presented their management strategies, which had worked and had not, so that the new committees starting their management process could explore other alternatives. These meetings and exchanges brought the Human Right to Water from El Agustino and the Network for the Defense of Water and Life in the East Area of Lima together as a Network for increased negotiating powers, improved management and better proposals.

The committees underwent training for monitoring water quality supplied by water vehicles; proper delivery and storage in homes until supply services are regularized. Committees were advised to monitor the quality of water through campaigns. To ensure the issue was included on local agenda, the committees organized forums, seminars, and marches on the right to water involving local authorities, public and private institutions. This increased the visibility and legitimacy of the committees and the Network's proposals. Finally, the committees conducted working meetings and met with the Network, local government, the health sector and SEDAPAL (Company for Water and Sewage of Lima) to establish a common agreement on water supply.

As a result of mobilizing the community of Quinta Francia, health and hygiene has improved due to better water quality and pollution has decreased. In addition, monitoring committees are now coordinating with the municipality, police and health centers to ensure water quality. After protracted negotiations, titles for the families of Quinta Francia have yet to be awarded, however the council has provided records of

Peru

The Grassroots Women's Academy⁴

The Grassroots Women's Academy in 2007 developed a number of proposals in response to problems and experiences shared among women's organizations in Lima. Proposals, that are now part of districts agendas, were identified through trainings and workshops



The mayor of El Agustino, Víctor Salcedo Ríos, with the Network of Women's Organisations at a public meeting in Lima Este.

which included development issues, discussion on political, economic and social contexts at the local and national levels and stakeholder analysis in the districts of Lima Este, El Agustino, Santa Anita, Chaclacayo and Ate Chosica. Using these proposals, SEA formed the Network of Women

Organizing Lima East, comprising a number of district networks⁵, as a way of uniting and networking women's social organizations to influence local and national authorities on demands leading to improved living conditions of their communities. The Network's responsibilities are to raise awareness about the situation of women, promote gender equity, monitor the status of programs and monitor the implementation of the Law of the Plan for Equal Opportunities in the district of El Agustino. The Network also develops proposals and participates in different district, regional, national and international work to make an impact on women's priorities. In the short time the Network has been working, they have advanced the capacity of the organization. Most importantly, the Network has identified women leaders and brought together different organizations with a commitment to work for a common agenda of health (TB, HIV/AIDS and SIS), political participation and capacity building. The Network has managed to review, identify and prioritize this agenda. However, some challenges still remain including intermittent meeting attendance due to economic priorities, lack of resources to develop all activities proposed even with the support of partner institutions, restrictions on proposals that can be presented to the Participatory Budgets. There remains a need to strengthen the capacities of the leaders of the Network for better impacts.

⁴ Organized in partnership with GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission, several Peruvian women's organizations hosted women leaders across Latin America to discuss and debate issues affecting their lives and communities. A regional plan of action and several organizing processes were launched as a result.

⁵ The network consists of 17 organizations: Comedores Populares Autogestionarios, Clubes de Madres, Vaso de Leche, Central de Bancos Comunales El Agustino, Red de Prevención de la Violencia Familiar PVF Corazones Solidarios, Red de PVF Uniendo Familias, Red de PVF CREJUSPA, Comités de Gestión Distrital, Seguridad Ciudadana, WAWA WASI, CODEVIDA, Casa de la Mujer El Agustino, Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos, S. Gral de AH Ancieta Alta, S. Gral de AH Independiente, S. Gral de V Francia

Peru

ownership, which have been processed by SEDAPAL resulting in the granting of water services delivery to the community. The community successfully incorporated their on-going activities in the district Participatory Budget process which will allow them to sustain their work in this area.

Conclusions on Decentralization

Decentralization provides opportunities for marginalized groups to voice their priorities to achieve better living conditions and access to basic services. However, centralist, authoritarian and parochial interests of local authorities impedes proper articulation of needs by citizens. In addition, local and regional governments have limited capacities. Accountability and transparency in management remains low, and a persistent level of corruption continues at different levels of the government. These barriers limit the ability of public agencies to address citizens' needs. This was the context in which decentralization in Peru evolved. Starting with a legal framework that calls for participation and equal access, district administration has been empowered with implementing decentralization through engagement and inclusion of its constituency. Participatory mechanisms in Peru such as the Concerted Plan, the Participatory Budget, and the Coalition of Local Councils have allowed women's organizations to partner with local government in a new way. As a result, community leadership has developed and local government is more responsive to community needs, priorities and solutions.

While the government has made efforts to support participation, civil society has a strong role to play in ensuring women's voices are heard. Each year, in the participatory budget process, the Minister of Finance initiates a preparatory phase where the municipality conducts courses to educate citizens on the process of formulating plans. To compliment these information sessions, civil society organizations including NGOs and churches provide capacity-building programs to ensure quality participation. SEA in Lima Este has developed various programs on citizen monitoring and facilitated skills for participation. In 2009, they developed a leadership training certificate program with the University of Antonio Luiz de Montoya to create an integrated approach for women to participate more



A presentation of a workshop on the problems and achievements of The Network of Women's Organizations, El Agustino

holistically in planning for local development.

Despite limitations, the process of decentralization in Peru has provided grassroots women the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge and ability to influence local decision-making processes, thereby ensuring more democratic development and improving quality of life of the citizenry. As a result of organizing and gains made, women now actively take part in the decisions of local management and contribute to policy proposals and projects that reflect their needs. In addition, women's organizations have been able to demand greater transparency and accountability in allocation of public resources. Finally, women's groups act as local government monitors, utilizing agreements made in participatory processes.

For SEA, decentralization is a national policy indispensable for the development of the country which helps bridge the yawning gap between the core and the periphery comprised of the vulnerable sections of the population. Decentralization can be strengthened through effective monitoring mechanisms such as public participation law to ensure accountability of local officials.

The Network of women organizations in Peru strongly extols the process of decentralization for increasing the scope of women's participation in public affairs. Decentralization has paved the way for women to play a larger role in Local Coordinating Councils (LCCs) and in vigilance and monitoring committees. Projects like Casa de la Mujer (Women's Home) have been pivotal in addressing women's issues like domestic violence and the fair allocation of resources to women. The problems of decentralization in Peru notwithstanding, the spirit of cooperation and joint efforts by both the communities and the local government to engage in meaningful dialogue has unleashed a wave of multi-pronged collaborations ensuring the percolation of powers through local governance.

India

Background

Most families in poor rural Maharashtra spend approximately a fourth of their monthly incomes on health care. They suffer from alarmingly high rates of disease that are mainly rooted in the lack of poor sanitation, inadequate diets and lack of health awareness. The government has provided Primary Health Centers (PHC) that are designed to serve a population of 30,000 with one medical officer and two health assistants and Sub-centers with one female and one male multipurpose health worker for a population of 5,000. However, these centers are often poorly equipped and not visited by a doctor for long stretches of time. There is a general mistrust of the Primary Health Centers (PHCs) among rural communities who prefer the more expensive private practitioners, who are not necessarily competent. Often, poor communities, particularly women, avoid seeking medical care altogether since these private facilities are too costly.

Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) facilitated the formation of a working partnership between grassroots women, district level health officials and health service providers to ensure better access to healthcare services for the poor. SSP is a learning and development organization based in Mumbai, India, whose goal is to move poor women and communities from the margin to the mainstream of development. Today, SSP's combined operations in ten of the most disaster prone districts of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu reach out to over 300,000 families. After the destructive earthquake of 1993 in Maharashtra, SSP mobilized grassroots women's groups, called Self Help Groups (SHGs), around reconstruction and local governance issues. Ever since, SSP has worked with these SHGs to build the capacities of women as grassroots advocates to engage with the government service providers and ensure accountability.

The Role of Grassroots Women in the Delivery of Public Services

*Swayam Shikshan
Prayog's drive to
increase demand and
access to governance
and health in
Maharashtra, India*

*Prema Gopalan and
Naseem Shaikh*



Health Monitors

From 'Beneficiaries' to 'Partners'

In 2003, SSP piloted their community health program in Maharashtra by raising awareness of women on how to access available resources and educating the community on hygiene and nutrition to prevent common illnesses. Through initial facilitation, women met the service providers to gain more information on health, including information on how to access existing programs and facilities. Empowered with such information and increased capacity to voice their needs, the women soon started demanding better services. Such interactions also focused on building relationships with government health service providers, particularly PHCs, as they are necessary for both improving community health and reducing health related expenditure. To further strengthen the collaboration, a district workshop was organized through which three hundred SHG women learnt from the district officer of the range of services offered and means to access them. This knowledge was, in turn, disseminated across the community through SHG meetings. The workshop helped build SHG capacities to act as pressure groups for local government to ensure reliable PHC services. Consequently, SHGs launched a campaign to promote PHC services. The women were recognized as community monitors and were given identity cards by the government, who got regular reports from them if the PHC staff failed to deliver services or if the communities ceased to access them. Regular dialogues and workshops strengthened the relationship between grassroots communities and government representatives like PHC doctors, PHC medical officers, and district health officers.

SSP started building community ownership by training the community monitors and a few other SHG women as health educators, called Arogya Sakhis. The Arogya Sakhis provide basic health education and services, follow up visits and act as referrals. They have developed a relationship with the PHCs, as well as district level health officials which allows them to stay informed of government schemes, programs, and public health concerns. Using the same peer education method and by strengthening existing channels of communication, information is spread by these health educators to the community through SHGs.

When the epidemic of Chickungunya spread in the Osmanabad district of Maharashtra, the government took the help of these Arogya Sakhis to reach out to the communities. One objective of the government's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) is to identify and train community health leaders at the village level. Grassroots women can apply to become government sponsored community health leaders through their Gram Panchayat (local level government), which appoints leaders based on criteria such as education, family support and experience working in health. Fifty



Mother and child in Osmanabad Hospital

of the eighty five Arogya Sakhis in Osmanabad are now government sponsored community health leaders who receive free government training and an identity card that gives them recognition at local hospitals.

Tackling the Chickungunya Epidemic

In May 2007, a six-month Chickungunya epidemic hit Osmanabad district causing many fatalities, especially among children. Afraid, many villagers sought expensive, ineffective treatment from private health practitioners. The state government found itself under-staffed and ill-equipped to respond to the onslaught of the epidemic. The government took the help of the



Health promotion meeting at Latur District

150 Arogya Sakhis training them to disseminate information on prevention and treatment of Chickungunya to the community. Along with village health officials, the Arogya Sakhis organized meetings to educate villagers on the disease and encourage them to use PHCs instead of private doctors. They also arranged health camps where villagers could receive treatment at subsidized rates. Within a month and half, there was a noticeable decrease in new cases and the epidemic began to subside.

Forming Health Governance Groups

SSP organized an exposure visit of SHGs in Maharashtra to meet the women in Tamil Nadu who were affected by the tsunami in 2004 to learn about the effectiveness of working as a health collective to lobby local authorities to meet community needs. They saw the work of health collectives called ASHAA (Arogya Sakhis for Health Awareness and Action) or Health Governance Groups (HGGs). Community women organized themselves into Health Governance Groups, each consisting of 15-20 women aimed at linking communities to government programs, as well as, building accountability of the service providers. In July 2008, the SHGs of Osmanabad decided to adopt aspects of the ASHAA model and have since formed 30 HGGs.



Asha training in Solapur

Role of Health Governance Groups

- Strengthen partnerships with village PHCs
- Handle the administrative responsibilities of community based Health Mutual Fund (HMF)
- Organize regular village health check-up, camps and hospital referrals
- Conduct workshops on nutrition and healthy living involving all members of the community
- Work with government officials to effectively implement government health programs
- Encourage institutional delivery for women and immunization
- Implement community 'trainers team' to transfer knowledge and skills of ASHAAs
- Maintain village cleanliness and encourage waste segregation and disposal

ASHAA representatives attend weekly PHC planning meetings through which they raise awareness on government health schemes in their communities. PHCs use datasheets prepared by HGGs on common illnesses in the village to plan their interventions. Interactions with PHCs have helped disseminate information on government subsidies on toilets, the schedule of PHC activities like village visits of nurses and health workers and also the government mandated role of the PHCs. ASHAA members work with village health nurses on pregnancy related issues and accompany them on their visits which resulted in increased institutional deliveries.

“Before the tsunami, there were only two to three deliveries in a month. Now, deliveries have increased to around 30 a month. This is because of the work done by ASHAA leaders.”

Rajendran, Health Inspector, Thiruvangad PHC, Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu

SHGs are traditionally seen as microcredit groups. However, with the formation of HGGs, the community has started recognizing them as groups devoted to community welfare. HGGs are better positioned to meet community health demands, expand on the work of the Arogya Sakhis as a group and have the kind of outreach and impact that a single individual alone cannot achieve. HGGs organize community health check-up camps at the PHCs and community centers which are attended by a doctor, laboratory staff and assistant. In the past two years, grassroots women have organized more than 25 camps, covering over 100 villages. The women have taken initiative and negotiated subsidized fees with the doctor and staff to make the camps affordable.

Insuring Community Health

SHG women often access loans mainly for health related expenditure. Despite the many interventions, many households still bear the burden of expensive treatment. In February 2006, the Sakhi Mutual Fund was launched to protect rural communities from unexpected health expenditures. The SHG Federations have tied up with a network of hospitals and clinics to ensure accessible and affordable treatment for all. Private hospitals are also included in the Sakhi Health Mutual fund hospital network to maximize convenience in emergencies. However, special incentives to use government health facilities were designed wherever possible. For example, better reimbursement on claims is offered for treatment at public hospitals. Since, patients are wary of public services, the Arogya Sakhis accompany them to public hospitals and PHCs. As of March 2009, Osmanabad and Solapur districts of Maharashtra have more than 13,000 policy holders under the Sakhi health mutual funds. Each policy member pays Rs. 100 per year for this health insurance. They receive a report card which details the health condition of the member, amount saved at clinics due to the membership and claims status, and serves as an identity card. The card can be referred to for a list of recognized doctors and hospitals, which assures members of quality treatment at a time of need.

Impact

In Maharashtra, through the network of around 4,500

SHGs, SSP's Community Health Program with a strength of over 52,000 grassroots women, has empowered them to demand better health, water and sanitation and make the public health system more accountable. Women act as planners and monitors, assuming responsibility for the effectiveness of local facilities. They are instrumental in establishing and maintaining a relationship with service providers and the communities.



Exchange visit from Gujarat team at Indira Nagar Village

The Importance of Awareness Camps: The Story of Sajeda

Sajeda, a peer educator in Lohara block, Osmanabad, trains women on the transmission of HIV/AIDS and motivates them, especially pregnant women, to get tested for the virus. Sajeda is aware that local women are generally hesitant to openly discuss the disease. Sajeda has found a way to encourage pregnant women to undergo an HIV test, who are usually reluctant to get tested for HIV. She says, "When I visit these women, I talk about the government schemes for pregnant women, the care available to them and incentives offered for institutional delivery. This gets them interested. Then I introduce HIV as being part of the routine tests for pregnant



Tsunami - Rasapettai Village

women, emphasizing the importance of knowing one's status of the disease, the risk of transmission and the positive effects of antiretroviral treatment". Sajeda organizes several HIV testing camps for all women including pregnant women in Lohara block, a process which has helped strengthen her relationship with local doctors and rural hospitals. "They now think of me as a member of their staff!" Sajeda laughs.

New avenues of partnership between the community and local government have opened up. SHGs have partnered with village governments to stop open defecation, a prevalent practice leading to poor health in India. They design community plans for safe drinking water and sanitation, actively mobilize resources and lobby the Gram Panchayat to include women in the Village Water and Sanitation committees and see these plans into action. This has already influenced the lives of more than 275,000 households in Maharashtra. The HGGs disseminate information to community members in Gram Sabhas (Village level meetings with Gram Panchayat) on all activities, important decisions taken, health and sanitation, which increases demand for better health services.

Partnerships were sought at every level, including Anganwadi Centers (government child care centers),



Health Training

responsible for maternal and child health. Community women acting as peer educators collaborated with them to identify HIV infected pregnant women and access HIV care services. They follow on advice given by doctors on family planning, nutrition, formula feeding and also provide them with counseling.

Making PHCs More Effective

Katgoan is a large village, with a population of over 10,000 inhabitants. The facilities at the village PHC were inadequate - the appointed doctor was not active and unpaid electricity bills led to the power supply being cut off. With no government health services, people were forced to seek medical treatment in Solapur, which is 30 kilometers away. The village Arogya Sakhi group and the Gram Panchayat appealed to the District Health Official to invest in the facilities. Through the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) Rs. 2,000,000 was accessed for the construction of a new PHC built in the center of town on land generously donated by a local farmer.

The site for the new PHC is surrounded by trees for which funds were raised from the village: "One of the contractors on the site was particularly environmentally conscious and proposed planting saplings and shrubs on the plot. We all cooperated with the construction and planting. We have also established a strong relationship with the new doctors, Dr Govind Bilabatt and his wife Dr Vidya Gurude. This has given us a sense of ownership and loyalty to our new PHC," said Suresh Dushetti, a Gram Panchayat member.

The new center was awarded a prize in 2005 as a 'best practice' in Maharashtra, and has seen a

India

remarkable decline in the infant mortality rate: “When we arrived, there were only 6 institutional deliveries in our first year and the infant mortality rate was 23. We are now delivering 160 babies per year at the center, which is about 83% of all births. We have also reduced the infant mortality rate to 11. Our maternal mortality rate is negligible, and all women are coming forward for family planning services and immunization, preferring to use the PHC rather than a private hospital”, said Dr Bilabatt, doctor, Katgoan PHC

Lessons Learnt on Service Delivery and Decentralization

Health awareness camps are generally cost-effective and have succeeded in effective outreach to communities on government health schemes. Over the years, SSP has recognized the significance of partnerships with government officials for accessing critical information. Decentralization has opened up avenues for women's participation in local development. Prior to decentralization, community participation was taking place in a vacuum. Decentralization has given meaning to citizens, especially women, to act as part of the community, part of decision making bodies and as resources. In India, policies and programs have devolved resources and decentralized management to the local level, including the provision of basic services. Over time, greater decentralization of decision making has taken place, but not so with the devolution of resources. Today, there is a framework and institutional system for decentralization. Women have benefitted from decentralization more in the form of participation, especially locally. Leverages can be monitored. Women can be effective if they are on agenda making committees, provided they are also part of organized women's groups. Yet, the role of women's groups in the agenda setting committees is not formalized nor are their roles as key leaders recognized. Being part of a



Village cleaning by Ashas in Tamil Nadu

SHG, has helped women to spot avenues for participation and capitalize on these opportunities to access basic services. However their role in the public arena as of now remains undefined. Therefore, till such participation is formalized, SHGs cannot easily act as resources. As seen in Osmanabad, SHGs and women's groups like HGGs were able to develop innovative solutions to solve local problems as certain pre-conditions were in place, namely partnerships with local governments and access to resources. It is important for women to be paid for their efforts, like the Arogya Sakhis who were sponsored by government as Community Health workers, without which these women are further burdened with the development work of the community. Grassroots women have strong relations based on trust with the community are able to deliver services and can act as resources. Just as the private sector has recognized this and entered into collaboration with SHGs from SSP, it is equally important that advocates of decentralized governance recognize the key role women can play in service delivery.

Czech Republic

Context and Background

The emergence of new civil society movements in the Czech Republic must be understood in this context of the dramatic political, social and economic changes that followed the collapse of the communist regime and the rise of a market economy. Among them, the western feminist movement, which laid emphasis on empowerment through participation in the work-force, was unappealing to the Czech women. Rather, they related more to the concept of entwining family responsibilities with that of work. Earlier, under the socialist state, Czech women were entitled to social security provisions. Mothers were allowed to leave their children under the care of state-run nurseries and kindergartens. The new policy initiated by the government after the Velvet Revolution provided for the well being of pre-school children through a family allowance. The policy underlined the necessity of the mother to stay at home for the child for a period of four years, the violation of which would result in a loss in the family allowance. The traditional Czech values perceive women, especially mothers to remain in the private domain rather than working. Young mothers found it difficult to re-enter the job market as employers were hesitant to hire them. This has resulted in Czech mothers experiencing a sense of both exclusion and impoverishment.

Decentralization and the growth of civil society movements in the Czech Republic needs to be also understood in the context of a post communist country where democratic processes are relatively new and still evolving. In this context, decentralization has generated demands from grassroots women for family friendly policies where dialogues to bring family concerns into the public arena became the focus. Secondly, there was a move towards self help where each local mother center reflected the local talents, needs and capacities of women who ran them. This provided a unique model for local development and participation which decentralized governance can link to and capitalize on.

A New Wave of Women's Movements in the Czech Republic

A glimpse into the working of Mother Centers¹

*Suranjana Gupta
and Rut Kolinsky*



Annual meeting of the Czech Mother Centers in 2006

¹Adapted from an article written by Suranjana Gupta for the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID's) Building Feminist Organizations and Movements Initiative, 2009

Czech Republic

The Genesis of the Mother Centers Movement

The abrupt transition to capitalism and the inability to relate to the western concept of feminism led Czech women to explore new avenues to demonstrate how childcare and motherhood, traditionally considered to be in the private domain, can be brought into the public sphere. This led to the birth of the Mother Centers movement. In 1992, a small group of Czech women, inspired by the German model, started the first Czech Mother Center in Prague. For the first time in the Czech Republic, a public space for mothers was created where they could collectively fulfill their maternal responsibilities. Bringing issues of childcare and motherhood into the public sphere highlighted the gaps in the prevailing policies which leave mothers socially and economically isolated. By creating platforms that enable “ordinary” women to participate in public decision-making processes, women were, thus, being empowered to act as citizens and agents of change. Pamphlets, books and posters were used to publicize their work. The handbook of the German Mother Centers was translated to disseminate the Mother Center concept. Workshops were conducted for women to set up their own centers in their neighborhoods.

Growth of Mother Centers

The success of the first Mother Center had a spill-over effect in the Czech Republic as within a decade, both individual centers grew across the Czech Republic as did the nation-wide network of 315 Mother Centers. Mothers began to voice their perspectives on policies and development that would balance parenting and employment by becoming active partners in municipal planning processes. By active lobbying, the mothers urged the government to create child-friendly public facilities, working conditions and policies. The formation of a network helped women across the country support and mentor each other in running these centers. Common concerns and experiences helped likeminded women mobilize and organize activities for both children and women, and develop fund-raising strategies for the centers. The women would identify and claim public spaces for setting up

centers. They would negotiate with local authorities for community space which would be rented out to them for a small fee. The rapid expansion of the individual Mother Centers gave impetus to demands for community development of public parks, playgrounds, and cultural centers.

Campaigns and Activities

The network of Mother Centers raises awareness of the social contribution of mothers and parenting



A creative workshop organized for children by Mother Centers in 2007

through campaigns such as Family-Friendly Societies, Living with Prams, Local to Local Dialogues, City for Children and My Daddy Rocks. Such campaigns seek to bring parenting and child-rearing into the public domain by acknowledging the valid contributions women make towards fulfilling family responsibilities.

Local to Local Dialogues

The Local to Local Dialogues provide an opportunity for the Czech Mother Centers to advance the priorities of women through dialogues with local government. Through these dialogue mechanisms, the network provided spaces for women to develop strategies for negotiations with government and work collectively towards common concerns such as equal opportunities in the workplace and flexible jobs. The idea of ordinary citizens entering into dialogue with government on



Czech Mother Center members sit together in one of the meetings



Fathers in a workshop, as part of the Mother Centers campaign 'My Daddy Rocks'

community issues such as child-care and health was alien to Czech women. It instilled confidence in women to advocate for their rights. For instance, in the town of Breznice, the women used the campaign to facilitate a process of negotiations and dialogues between local authorities, schools and corporations around setting up a playground for children. The Local to Local Dialogues have been up-scaled to the next level to a series of regional Roundtable Dialogues by the Czech Mother Centers. This is an engagement strategy to strengthen the relationship between the Mother Centers and local officials to promote planning and effective implementation of family-friendly public services. The dialogues have enabled women to chalk out their own solutions and strategies, reducing their dependence on local authorities.

Family-Friendly Society and its Activities

The campaign for a “family-friendly” society in 2004 has been one of the most effective strategies of the Czech Mother centers. Through this campaign, women suggested measures to the government to promote safety of women and children, flexible jobs, and child-friendly public facilities and services. The campaign won the tacit support of the government initially but later on the government openly declared its full support to the programs of the Family Friendly campaign. In 2006, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) declared the legitimization of the centers by “drafting several amendments to the social policies to support the concerns of the families.” The ministry expressed its

commitment to develop itself as a “family-friendly institution” and create children’s corners in public places such as in job centers, the MoLSA and the Czech Social Security Administration. “*The family,*” declared the ministry, “*is an absolute essential unit of our society.*”² In 2008, the Regional Family Friendly policy was inaugurated by the Mother Centers taking the Family-Friendly campaign to the regional level.

My Daddy Rocks

One of the campaigns, known as 'My Daddy Rocks', revolves around delegating family responsibilities between the mother and the father. The traditional Czech society view fathers as providers of the family whereas mothers bear the sole responsibility in parenting and rearing children. Mother Centers, through 'My Daddy Rocks', advocate fathers to take up an active role in parenting and child-care, thereby challenging traditional notions on the role of the father in the family. The campaign emphasizes that the Mother Centers movement is not just for mothers but addresses family concerns on parenting as a whole. The objective of the campaign has been to showcase to Czech society the dual role of the father in the workplace and in the family, thereby thwarting patriarchal norms.

Partnership with the Government

The collaboration between the Mother Centers and the government was achieved after a long struggle. Earlier, these centers were categorized by the authorities as

² Kolinska, R. “Removing Barriers: History of Lobbying Approaches of the Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic” GROOTS International and Huairou Commission, 2007

Czech Republic

“child-care facilities,” which threatened the survival of the entire network and legal access to family allowances. The reluctance of the government to recognize the voluntary efforts of the Czech mothers made the Mother Centers realize the need for a systematic advocacy strategy to negotiate for the legitimacy of the institutions. This paved the way for the formation of an autonomous body called the 'Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic' at the annual assembly of Czech Mothers Centers in 2001. The national network of Mother Centers became a platform for sharing lessons and experiences, as well as, influencing national and city policies and programs.

The first Mother Center Congress in 1997 witnessed attempts by the government to accept the concept of Mother Centers. Prominent women Members of Parliament and the State Vice-Minister were invited for the Congress; a sign of improving relations with the Mother Centers and the Czech government. The partnership with the government was further strengthened with a bus trip to Stuttgart, Germany in 1999 accompanied by national and local government officials. The idea behind this trip was to showcase to the Czech delegates the Baden Wurttemberg regional network of the German Mother Centers which was supported by the local and national government. The visit to the German Mother Centers was a turning point in the partnership with the Czech government as it helped persuade Czech politicians at all levels of the Mother Center concept and harnessed political support. Rut Kolinsky, one of the founders of the Czech Mother Centers said the trip was an eye-opener as the Czech politicians witnessed “the reality of open support espoused by their German counterparts to the German Mother Centers.”³

Global Partnerships and Networking

In 1999, the Czech Mother Centers joined GROOTS International⁴, a network of grassroots women's organization, and the Huairou Commission. Being part of the global network and joining a struggle beyond their own neighborhood and country helped the Czech

Mother Centers realize that such linkages with members of the international community could amplify impact in their own country.

While on one hand, the Czech Mother Centers were collaborating with international networks, on the other hand, it was equally important to establish a formal Czech network to share experiences and influence national and local policies. The Network was formally registered with the Ministry of the Interior in 2001. Apart from this linkage, the Mother Centers developed



A mother talking to a member of the Czech Ministry of Social Welfare

sustainable partnerships with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Agriculture, the Department of Human Rights and Gender Equality. The mother centers consider government agencies, especially at the municipal level, to be important grassroots partners for consultation on issues ranging from the role of the family in civil society to reform of the school and education system. A Czech municipal officer said, “public authorities are slowly realizing what a positive thing it is, when citizens become active, and are beginning to support grassroots groups.” He appreciated the role of the Mother Centers as places where the concept of self-help works and where friendly relations are formed⁵.

³ Interview with Rut Kolinsky, 4 February, 2010

⁴ GROOTS International is a global network comprised of grassroots women's organizations and networks focused on advancing grassroots women's development priorities in the areas of Community Resilience; Governance; HIV and AIDS and Livelihoods. It is a founding member of the Huairou Commission.

⁵ “Mother Centers in the Czech Republic”, Monika Jaekel in *Engendering Governance and Development: Grassroots Women's Best Practices*, edited by Sangeetha Purushothaman and Monika Jaekel, Books for Change, Bangalore, 2001, p.58.



Inauguration ceremony of a new Mother Center in 2006

Impact

Czech women have expressed that their increased confidence levels, derived from the centers, have offered them a space to share and learn from each other's experiences. "The mother centers are often able to find flexible and non-bureaucratic solutions and support systems" without the help of which "women would have fallen through the social fabric."⁶ The Mother Center has often been described as a space where women have not just developed new skills but have discovered talents they were unaware of. This, in turn, has boosted their morale.

The repressive communist regime forbade free association, forcing people into passivity and blind obedience. The post-socialist society in the Czech Republic struggled to accept democratic institutions. The rapid spread of Mother Centers across the country has contributed to the process of fostering democracy by encouraging participatory activities, tolerance and pluralism. The Mother Centers found the way for the citizens to learn the procedures required to form an association. According to one of the members of the Mother Centers, the entire process was like "learning democracy in practice."⁷

The 315 Mother Centers currently federated and formalized as a network across villages, towns and cities of the Czech Republic constitutes a movement with a shared identity, clearly articulated principles and values, and a shared political and social vision of the changes they want to bring about. The many Mother Centers



Children from different communities and cultures are a part of the Mother Centers

can thus act in unison, aggregate their impact, and steadily press local authorities, government, and businesses to operate in ways that address their concerns. The rapidly expanding network indicates the large number of women across the country that are eager to run centers through voluntary efforts, claim public spaces, and sign up to the priorities, principles and values represented by the Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic. Of the currently members of the Network, 70 centers signed up in the last year alone, indicating a growing momentum. The efforts of the Mother Centers have created spaces for women to undertake childcare collectively, access child-friendly infrastructure in their neighborhoods, and influence legislation on social policy. Significantly, in 2007, the national government amended the law on allowances to permit families to use childcare facilities for five days a month.

A mother recounted her first experience at a Mother Center:

"That the Mother Center was not a service provider was astonishing to me when I first started coming to the center. That we were actually invited to participate in the running of the center was a real challenge. I noticed reluctance coming from my unwillingness to be part of any organization which I carry from times of totalitarian society when membership in various unions and parties were imposed on us... I needed to learn how to participate, how to be active in the center. I feared not to contradict someone else's competencies. Gradually, we learnt that work can be divided, that everybody can take a bit of responsibility for running the center and that every contribution is important."

⁶ i.b.i.d. p.50 ⁷ i.b.i.d. p.57

Czech Republic

The centers have enabled the women to challenge traditional notions and seek alternatives. The Mother Centers have shown women an alternative means of living, with fewer resources, rather than be carried away by the consumerist culture promoted by the market economy. This kind of role modeling urges families to lead a simple life, which is a feature of the Mother Centers that distinguishes it from the media and corporate institutions. Alternative health care and ecological measures are another focus of the centers' activities.

"We became active in our local hospital, challenging the notion that there is only one right position for giving birth. Now women have more choices concerning childbirth. We also have made it possible for women to stay overnight with their children who are in the hospital. This was the result of discussions we had in a group on women and health at our center.⁸"

- according to one of the Czech mothers

In the Centers, women have learnt both to make and be responsible for their own decisions and also to "live together with others and take the take responsibility of the whole."⁹ It was equally important to listen to the opinions of others and learn to accept the differences in ideas. Due to its recent history, the citizens of the Czech Republic felt intimidated to approach the bureaucracy.

Strategies

The unfavorable political and social environment in which the Mother Centers were established demanded appropriate measures by the Mother Center leaders to ensure legitimacy and acceptance. Active collaboration across government and corporate departments was aimed at alleviating the hostile approach of the government towards the centers. A variety of professional partnerships were necessary for the centers to be acknowledged as an integral part of the society. The concept of providing a space for citizens to engage into dialogue with the government generates allowing an effective alternative to bureaucratic strategies.

The very nature of governance has been redefined by bringing a new level of transparency and accountability. Women from Mother Centers have participated in municipal elections and have been elected to influence the government from within. There are funding and legislative issues that need to be addressed by the mother centers. Several mother center leaders became active in municipal planning processes, within which they lobbied the government to create child-friendly public facilities, policies and working conditions. They are actively representing the movement in the local



Sensitising children on the environment at a workshop organized by Mother Centers

parliament and municipal councils in departments concerning youth welfare, development and family policy. The centers advocated changes in the parental leave legislation which makes cuts in the monthly family allowances if children attend any form of public childcare. The Centers have vigorously pursued for effective changes in the legislation by organizing petitions, holding public debates and writing in the media.

The lessons learnt from the Mother Centers

The importance of collaborating and working alongside international networks of grassroots women cannot be ignored as this helps in sharing effective strategies for influencing the policy-makers on gender issues. Being

⁸ i.b.i.d. p.52 ⁹ i.b.i.d. p.55



Mother Center members seen with children of an orphanage in 2008

influencing the policy-makers on gender issues. Being part of such far-reaching networks has also increased their credibility and impact on social and economic policies. The voluntary efforts of the Mother Centers have rejected the compulsory collectivism advocated by the communist state and the commercialization that occurred due to the country's rapid march towards capitalism. Besides establishing international networks, the Mother Centers have learnt the importance of working in partnership with the government, both at the national and local levels to receive financial aid and overall support of its programs.

The conflict of interest between the local and the national government at Prague often affects the continuation of the programs of the Mother Centers. A change in the government, either at the national or regional level hampers the activities of the Centers as the family-friendly policies pursued by the predecessor might be reversed by the new party in power. This necessitates the Mother Centers to initiate cordial relations with politicians across party lines for ensuring political non-interference in their activities. Often, the social policies imposed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) are not conducive for the Mother Centers at the regional level. This problem demands decentralization to be restructured to ensure adequate devolution of powers within the regional and local governments.

The MoLSA has emphasized the need to include professionals in the Mother Centers and convert the



Minister of Work and Social Affairs at the 2007 Congress of Mother Centre

Mother Center into a professional entity. Most of the members of the Mother Centers are opposed to the Ministry's proposal as it could destroy the spirit of the Mother Centers: a bottom-up grassroots movement. Through the valuable lesson of partnership with the government, the Mother Centers have shown the way to bridge the differences between them and the government. It is only through dialogue at the state level that the Mother Centers can ensure equitable family policies. Dialogue is also necessary with the Czech companies who deny flexible or part-time jobs to working mothers. The Mother Centers in collaboration with the Czech companies explore possibilities to enable the working Czech mothers to engage in work and attend to her parental duties at the same time.

The work of the Mother Centers in the near future rests in the area of supporting fledgling Mother Centers across the Czech Republic and bringing them within the fold of the network. The Mother Center movement in the Czech Republic envisions incorporating family issues in the areas of child-care, parenting and flexible employment opportunities within the European state policies.

Women's Grassroots Initiatives for Good Governance in Russian Cities

*A look into the
working of
Information Center
for the Independent
Women's Forum in
Petrozavodsk and
Putchino*

Elizaveta Bozhkova

With the fall of Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the ushering in of democracy, Russia witnessed the rise of citizens' groups and active community based initiatives. This period can be marked as one with growing women's activities, uniting women's groups and organizations, getting new public experience and women's organizations and NGOs in Russia holding seminars, internationally, nationally and locally. The Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing, China gave women organizations in Russia new approaches and contacts and was instrumental in shaping the agenda of the women's movement in Russia. In the middle of 1990s, the woman's agenda was incorporated in national and local policies.

Even with the emergence of different political parties, democratic institutions and norms, state policies were hardly gender sensitive. While at its origin in 1995, ICIWF focused initially on the empowerment of women and the institutionalization of the women's movement in Russia, in time its goals expanded to include inclusion of women in the development of local self-governance, development of local communities, partnership on the territories and engendering municipal and local policies. Since 2000, ICIWF has been



Opening Session of a seminar in Putchino



Women from neighborhood communities meeting the Mayor of Putschino

largely organizing neighborhood communities on issues related to improving public spaces.

Voicing and solving the issues of the neighborhood in Petrozavodsk

At the end of the 1990s, women's organizations from 10 cities in Russia were involved in self-governance and in the development of neighborhood communities. For example, in Petrozavodsk, ICIWF worked closely with local women to develop the 'neighborhood communities'. The neighborhood communities consist of 250-400 people organized with the goal of helping the community improve the quality of life and encouraging community members to be involved in the process of engagement with local authorities and influence the policies of the municipality.

In Petrozavodsk, problems of alcoholism and drug use in public places have plagued community members for long. There were also rampant incidents of violence at home and outside, mainly due to alcoholism. Public safety became a major issue for women, especially due to the lack of police support. In 1995, ICIWF began working in Petrozavodsk by hosting a series of seminars in partnership with an organization specializing in gender studies to sensitize the local government and authorities towards the needs of the community.

In 2000, 13 neighborhood groups were formed by ICIWF with residents of the same building or territory to make decisions on their immediate environment.



In front of the Family Center at Putschino

One of these neighborhood communities focused on keeping the space clean, maintaining the grounds, planting flowers and building a playground. What used to be seen as a dirty space before was soon known to be a good living space throughout the city. This particular neighborhood community is now renowned across the city of Petrozavodsk. It was important not just for the common spaces to be clean and neighborhoods beautified, but also for the environment to be friendly for women, children, the disabled and the elderly.

A few women leaders emerged from the neighborhood groups of Petrozavodsk and created a resource center called, "citizen and house". The resource center was a place where people could come together to solve their problems collectively, culturally, uncommon in Russia. Through these groups, ICIWF organized seminars for local dialogues, where local authorities, police, the Department of Social Affairs, the Department of Consumer Affairs, business representatives and citizens came together to share issues faced, developmental needs and build a vision and plan for the city. Typically, seminars are restricted to experts who are distant from ground realities and may not have in depth knowledge of issues faced by people. With multiple stakeholders including the community coming together, problems were described and understood better and collective solutions were suggested. These seminars brought those who are 'at the bottom', the voices of the women and others that are typically silenced, to the decision-making table. Having faced the issues, citizens responded with the wisdom of experience that helped in drawing a more effective city plan. For example, when the neighbors submitted a plan of a yard, it was more detailed and realistic than that of the professional architects who submitted a generic plan that was locally

inappropriate. This way, the neighborhood communities were also recognized for their work.

Community-led neighborhood revitalization in Putchino

Like in Petrozavodsk, organizing seminars for local dialogues helped another Russian city create a more community sensitive city plan. The fall of the Soviet Union saw most of its cities go through one of the worst financial crisis. This was also true for the biological research capital of Russia, Putchino, with its buildings, entrances, territories and roads demanding attention from both the authorities and the citizens. Galina Pavlovna Sapozhnikova joined ICIWF in 2003, aiming to solve many of the developmental issues of Putchino and initiated an innovative project of separate collection of organic wastes with participation of schoolchildren, teachers and neighborhood residents. As early as 2004, Local to Local Dialogues were organized with representatives from the administration, local council deputies, young scientists, students, members of trade unions, psychologists, ecologist, citizens, teachers and NGOs coming together to discuss the needs of their city. The goal of these dialogues was to bring together socially active people to design solutions to problems faced and form a common vision for the city. Soon, it was found that if the citizens could see a tangible change in their own surroundings, they would feel a sense of accomplishment and take more ownership over the development of their neighborhood. ICIWF also organized seminars to equip the residents of Putchino with social project writing skills so that they could submit projects and gain financial support. The residents of Putchino, upon submission of a proposal won a joint city project because of a holistic approach to solve the city's waste problem. The project involved schoolchildren, teachers, businessmen, scientists, the local Council of Deputy and residents which resulted in the decrease of wastes carried to city's dump, leading to lower costs.

The neighborhood groups in Putchino worked on issues related to public spaces including solid waste

management, energy, state of housing, municipal improvement, and on children's playgrounds.

Schoolchildren were mobilized to monitor the door-halls and worked towards maintaining the flats of the elderly, especially war and labor veterans. In 2005-2006, schoolchildren, children from a shelter home and teachers took on another city improvement initiative. They started cleaning and maintaining badly kept public spaces, painting the refuse bins and banisters in order to keep make their city clean and by doing little things like



In the Public Family Center at Putchino

painting ecological pictures on the walls, making sand boxes and benches. This became a space for people to come together to do collective work in their spare time. This new public place bought together multiple generations creating a new form of intimacy. A club called 'Young Family' was organized which conducted courses for young parents. In 2006, during the inauguration of a public playground for children, built with active participation of neighborhood groups, the Mayor and Chairman of Council of Deputies recognized the value of the work done by the citizens of Putchino.

Partnerships

The neighborhood communities of Petrozavodsk have been recognized by local government for their work through invitations by the Mayor and Vice Mayor to



A playground in Puchino

share their experience at weekly municipal seminars. In the past, these weekly meetings included heads of departments, private sector but no citizen representation. It was difficult for the common person to voice their grievances to the local government authorities as they were not accessible, with even their phone calls going unanswered. Now the neighbors are able to speak directly from their experiences and contextualize their issues at these seminars. In addition, the women leaders in particular are taking the floor in these meetings and presenting a women's perspective on issues discussed. This activity was widely supported by local women journalists through local radio and newspapers.

Neighborhood communities are now engaged with the police on various social issues and crime prevention work requiring a common understanding on dynamics between people. In Russia, the police are trained in universities but gain no real practical experience during their training. Hence, collaborations with neighborhood communities have helped in understanding the subtle dynamics of the social context in which the crime is taking place. The work of neighborhood communities has been recognized by law keepers and the businessmen within the community. Recently, the businessmen have provided space along with telephones to the neighborhood community groups for an office. They have also provided funding for more seminars and workshops to discuss safety issues.



Window before repair in Petrozavodsk



Window after repair in Petrozavodsk

Impact

Post communist Russia has witnessed the emergence of a new culture and democratic tradition of community through the creation of neighborhood groups. Over time, more neighborhood groups have been mobilized and their capacities built for local self-governance. United, these groups have collectively solved many local problems regarding public spaces, housing, parks and so on. Increased solidarity among neighbors through the groups, built ownership over common spaces and on the solutions being implemented. Solutions were designed based on new common values, and a culture which promotes dialogue, interaction, collaborative partnerships and emphasizes communities taking responsibility. Women are involved in the city's political process and they have been able to forge partnerships with different political actors of the city. Groups started approaching authorities as a collective and got better responses, even from the police, infamous for being unresponsive. Through seminars, all stakeholders came together to create solutions that are gender sensitive

Russia

and reflected the situation of the community as a whole. The immediate space and living conditions of more than 2,000 persons improved, as did the values and the culture. Maintenance of the common spaces was ensured by dividing responsibility amongst members of groups ensuring sustainability of solutions. Entrances of public housing buildings were secured resulting in a significant decline in crime rates. Strong attention is paid to safety with the police being integrally involved and asked by groups to provide data on the crimes committed in the area. Among other successes, a decrease in domestic violence and alcoholism transpired as problems became more transparent. As a solution a shelter homes for abuse victims was built. There has been increased recognition from government and improved access to government officials.

Due to the Housing and Public Service Reforms implemented in Russia in 1994, the development of local self-governance was made possible, yet local authorities had limited possibilities to realize them. Through decentralization processes many of the responsibilities and social benefits once held at the state level are now being shifted to the local government level and, in turn, to the citizen. This is creating an impasse as the citizens are unable to afford their housing and the local government is unable to implement the regulations required for lack of budgetary support. One example of this situation is reflected by the 2005 state Housing Code, adopted to address current housing issues. In the soviet period, 60 percent of the municipal budget was allocated for communal services (meaning housing). The state

government wants the citizens to pay all of their social services themselves amounting to \$100 per apartment but people on pension only receive about \$100 per month. Originally the rent was very small and was subsidized by the government and only had to pay about 10 percent of the pension, now they are asking for the citizen to pay the full 100 percent. This situation has resulted in multiple challenges for residents. There is no money for building maintenance. Due to citizens' movements and demands, the government has agreed



A creative workshop organized at the family center at Putchino

to divide the city and state budgets more equitably.

Partnerships between the local groups and the maintenance companies go way back to 2004. In Petrozavodsk, the local groups are actively involved in the selection of maintenance companies, which is a mechanism emphasized by ICIWF. The strong

Strategies

The main strategies that ICIWF and the neighborhood communities have used are:

- Mobilization and capacity building of groups to organize themselves into neighborhood groups
- Capacity building of partners to engage with communities,
- Building partnerships with local government, academia and the private sector
- Creating dialogue through seminars and raising awareness on issues



Park before renovation in Petrozavodsk

partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs has helped ICIWF to have their concerns on women's safety addressed with the heads of the ministry. The Public Relations Department have strongly supported the endeavors of ICIWF to build cordial and constructive relations with the citizens for effective solutions to their grievances by ensuring their officials attend ICIWF's training events. Seminars were conducted with professionals of housing maintenance companies and police to enhance the levels of interaction between them and neighborhood groups. Safety for women has been deliberated in the seminars for the police that have benefited the police officers, helping them to be more articulate and capable in tackling violence and domestic abuse against women.

Future plans

For the neighborhood communities and the ICIWF, there are new issues coming up due to policies that are hurting the residents. The costs of communal services are permanently raised without public control, but inhabitants become poorer. As a result the gap between rich and poor become more and more significant. Public service reform, initiated by the central government, has shifted a significant amount of responsibility for community maintenance from central government to the locality without passing on any resources. Privatization of communal services has started without educational and professional support. Together with the neighborhood groups, ICIWF is now



Families enjoying the renovated park at Putschino

focused on solving these issues of housing and public service reform in Petrozavodsk.

Lessons learnt

The citizens must be encouraged to participate in the local governance as they are the main partners and are the most affected. For example, after the neighborhood communities of Russia shared the responsibility of housing and maintenance with their local governments, problems concerning the maintenance and repair of elevators and pipes have been addressed. The local community has been able to negotiate with local entrepreneurs for setting up businesses in the area on their terms including timings and contributions to the community.

Decentralization is effective for curbing corruption as the administration is accountable to the people. The process of decentralization that had begun since the early 1990s provided the mandate for popular participation in local governance. With the distribution of power, civil society is emerging as an alternative voice to that of the government to address common community concerns.

In the area of housing, decentralization in Russia has shifted housing reform from a state responsibility to the local level, transferring the responsibility and burden, in turn, to citizens. If local government is to be empowered and if citizen participation in local governance is to succeed then a transfer of financial powers should parallel administrative responsibility. While currently there is a sharing of resources between neighborhood groups and local government which allows for maintenance issues to be addressed, in the long term, this will only be sustainable with commensurate resources being made available.

Conclusions on Decentralized Local Governance

Sangeetha Purushothaman
and Sanjeev Pillay

“In the last 20 years decentralization has established itself as a political and institutional phenomenon in most countries around the world.”

United Cities and Local Government (UCLG), 2008

Decentralization, as a global trend, has evolved hand-in-hand with two equally important global developments, namely citizen participation and democratization. In these developments, local government can play a vital role, as with combating poverty and inequality. “Local governments have a front line position in the battle against poverty, through social inclusion, access to basic services, and participation.” For local governments to be effective in this battle, citizens' participation and more importantly, grassroots women's engagement needs to be center-staged. The foundation of grassroots women's movements rests in Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) which play a pivotal role in harnessing women's participation in sustainable development. Apart from providing a platform to influence governance, women can utilize opportunities provided by decentralization and the concurrent restructuring of local government, to shape the local development agenda.

The primary requisites for effective engagement between grassroots women and local government include mobilization of women into organized groups; capacitating and resourcing



¹ These conclusions are based on the article “From Beneficiaries To Stakeholders: Grassroots Women's Groups Drive the Demand for Good Governance through Pro-Poor Development”, Draft Discussion Paper for the DFGG Learning Summit, written by Prema Gopalan, Suranjana Gupta, Shannon Hayes and Birte Scholz, 2008 and interviews with Prema Gopalan, Rut Kolinsky, Elizaveta Bozhkova and Carmen Robles Arana.

² *Decentralization and local democracy in the world: First Global report by United Cities and Local Government*, Co-published by the World Bank and United Cities and Local Governments, Barcelona, 2008, p.301.

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“For grassroots women, governance is not an abstract concept; it is part of their daily lives. Governance is about who gets what, who does what and who decides who gets what. In other words, governance is about rights, responsibilities, and resource allocations, and the processes by which these are decided upon.”

Srilatha Batliwala, Harvard University

these groups to engage with local government and formalizing women's public roles in setting agendas, innovating solutions and institutionalizing them. These requirements are based on the assumption that women, being the most impacted by poverty, should also be the ones in the fore front of solving them. This would require repositioning women away from the stereotypes of beneficiaries into citizens and agents of change, in the eyes of all development actors.

What distinguishes grassroots women's movements are the ways in which they engage with government and other social and political actors, namely through inclusive partnerships, through celebrating diversity and transforming relations alongside collaboration. An important distinguishing feature here is their ability to create and demonstrate practical, sustainable solutions to meet basic needs which they bring to the bargaining table. Therefore grassroots women's groups can play a vital role to address a crucial gap in actual delivery of services and meeting of the basic needs. Examples in this publication demonstrate a range of innovative solutions that women have implemented across the world. What remains now, is for local governments to recognize grassroots women as equal partners in development.

Grassroots Women's Strategies on Governance and Development

Activities of grassroots organizations do not revolve round a single strategy. They involve the inter-play of a range of strategies used creatively including peer learning among women within communities, or alternatively, the use of national or international exchanges to establish greater legitimacy with local

government, capacity building of women and their local government counterparts to engage with each other and finally the claiming of public space.

Mobilization is a common entry level strategy starting at the grassroots for all organizations. Several initiatives used community mapping as a means of mobilization as well as to create a community owned knowledge base, an important resource that women can use during negotiations. All these organizations established principled partnerships with local, regional and national governments to help communities access resources, shape local development agendas and hold governments accountable. The claiming of public space is a strategy by which community ownership is built over public services and service providers. Peer learning is another important strategy by which knowledge is transmitted horizontally among grassroots communities. Mobilization and horizontal exchanges also take place at national and international levels through networks for advocacy and peer learning, such as Huairou Commission and the Grassroots Women's International Academies.

Capacity Building

Enhancing local capacity has been an important strategy for organizations to build effective partnerships and shape development as planners, monitors and implementers. Capacity building entails identification of problems, raising awareness on solutions and accessing different government services and resources available. For example, SSP in India raised awareness among citizens on health and sanitation and simultaneously on services available with health service providers. GROOTS Kenya acts a key information resource center providing paralegal support to disinherited women and children to claim their rights. Often times, capacities of local government and agencies such as the police have to be built to interact with neighborhood groups, like in the case of ICIWF, Russia. For the Czech Republic where the idea of communities dialoguing with

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government was non-existent, Mother Centers built capacities and confidence of women to engage in dialogues with local authorities. In Peru, SEA is one of the forerunners in capacity building on decentralized governance processes, such as participatory planning and participatory budgeting.

Building Principled Partnerships

Partnerships with local government has come from the recognition by government that the developmental work, including service delivery, is both effective and relevant to local needs, only through community participation. In several cases, government has not only recognized the value of community driven initiatives, but often times, even financially supported the work women have done. Such recognition takes the form of providing institutional space for the CBOs to actually funding their activities. An important precedent for example, was set by the Unemployment Department of the Czech Republic which funded jobs at the Mother Centers (Jaeckel, 2001). Such partnerships also play a crucial role in creating a nexus between governmental and non governmental work, without communities losing their identity and still retaining the right to monitor the work of local authorities.

Joint planning initiatives with CBOs and government help both recognize each other's strengths. Planning is no more seen as the forte of professional and technical experts, and citizens' understanding of local needs are better accepted and acknowledged. This was clearly demonstrated in the case of the municipality plan of Petrozavodsk, where community participation in preparing such plans significantly improved their effectiveness, and their plans for a local playground were recognized as better than that of professional architects. Similarly, interactive fora between local government and citizens helped the Shibuye Community Health Workers and GROOTS Kenya to address the fundamental problem faced by local communities, namely that of inaccessibility of local authorities like the CACC, perceived by communities to be an inaccessible, non-transparent entity.

Claiming Public Space

In the Czech Republic, Mother Centers were able to

negotiate with local government for public space to set up new centers. Often, local authorities helped the Centers by providing them a room to hold meetings and workshops at a nominal fee. ICIWF members have claimed ownership over public space by creating an environment that is friendlier and safer for women, the disabled, elderly and children in public housing buildings and neighborhood parks. They have created a resource center where local citizens can collectively voice and solve common problems, thereby challenging traditional norms in Russia where community action of this kind is



a rarity. SEA, Peru has claimed decision making space in local coordinating councils where grassroots organizations in El Agustino have managed to get three seats resulting in two governance agreements being signed and three grassroots organizations being able to develop the Concerted Development Plan in 2004. SSP, through the strategy of Health Governance Groups and positioning SHG members as monitors, claimed community ownership over public health centers and local hospitals.

Peer learning

Peer learning is a core strategy used to spearhead the work of grassroots organizations, both locally and internationally. In fact, the very birth of the Czech Mother Centers' movement, now 315 centers in strength, emerged through peer exchanges between

the German Mother Centers and Czech mothers. Sharing experiences facilitate exchange of ideas and innovations and in some cases can even harness political support. This was clearly illustrated during the bus ride to Stuttgart by Mother Center delegates and Czech politicians where the strong collaboration between German Mother Centers and the German local government influenced the Czech government counterparts to emulate the same model. The Local to Local Dialogues Global Initiative of the Huairou Commission has shown the way for most grassroots communities to engage in effective negotiations with the local administration through international exchanges across countries with grassroots organizations grounded in locally based initiatives. In Russia, the local administration, police, government departments and the community members are part of the Local to Local Dialogues deliberated by the ICIWF to address vital developmental concerns in the community neighborhoods. In most of the case-studies, the distinguishing feature of the Local to Local Dialogues has been creation of a niche for women grassroots workers to bring forth their own strategies to counter neighborhood problems, be it those relating to sanitation, health, participatory governance or development.

Peer learning also takes place locally, based on the assumption that learning at the grassroots is quickest when it is directly from each other. The mapping process conducted by SSP and GROOTS Kenya is one form of horizontal learning where communities collectively map their resources, understand problems and brainstorm solutions together. For instance, in Maharashtra, women proved to be excellent peer educators where Arogya Sakhis helped the district government of Osmanabad disseminate information through sanghas throughout the communities about an epidemic (Chickungunya) in May, 2007, which was causing fatalities among children and creating fear in the villages. In Peru as well, water committees constituted mostly by grassroots women came together to share experiences and strategies to help the new water committees get a head-start in negotiating with local government on the proposals developed through the participatory budgeting process.



participatory budgeting process.

What has Decentralization Meant for Grassroots Women Organizations

Decentralization, including financial devolution, is seen as a prerequisite for democratization of development processes, without which community participation occurs in a vacuum. For grassroots organizations, decentralization has enabled women to play a proactive role in local governance. As a result of decentralization and the devolution of decision making powers and responsibilities to local bodies, grassroots organizations have innovated new strategies which, on the one hand, are collaborative, designed mainly to empower local government and on the other hand, challenge local bodies to ensure their accountability to local communities.

In the case of post-socialist countries with a history of repressive governance, decentralization and community participation together have set the stage for these countries to establish the first set of democratic organizations, norms and practices. The Czech Mother Centers have created a channel for people in former communist countries to learn democratic behavior and engender democratic processes. Here, and in other countries, grassroots women's organizations represent a new type of civil society, one which is community-based, non-hierarchical and women-led.

The experiences of grassroots women's organizations with decentralized governance have been mixed. Not only has the sharing of powers helped grassroots women participate in local governance, decentralization has enabled the larger community to monitor and advocate for basic services. However, both in Russia and the Czech Republic, decentralization has not been accompanied by the transfer of financial powers to the local government. In general, financial devolution to the local authorities has been uneven both across and within countries. Also in all the cases, corruption

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remains a barrier to transparency and good governance. Furthermore, conflict of interests between different levels of government remains an obstacle to real bottom-up planning and decision making processes. Nonetheless there have been several positive outcomes of grassroots women's engagement with decentralized governance.

In all instances, the most visible outcome has been that of *increased participation of women* in agenda setting and decision making at the local level. Participation has also gone a step further in the form of sharing of responsibilities of development work as in the case of ICIWF, Russia where women have collaborated with local government on housing maintenance problems and funding of grassroots initiatives in the case of SSP, India.

Strategic partnerships with government have been instrumental in *addressing basic needs* and community based problems. For example in Kenya, these partnerships have created redressal mechanisms for land-grabbing, illegal land sales and child and women abuse. In SSP, India women have accessed public health services and obtained health insurance. In both Kenya and India, this access has been achieved through community mapping strategies which created an information base for negotiations with government. In Kenya, the mapping process has enabled grassroots leaders to mobilize local communities and provide data on the problems faced by the community to the local administration. Likewise, SSP utilized the mapping process to demand accountability from the public health system in meeting community health needs. Monitoring service delivery, along with dissemination of information on entitlements to government services, has increased the demand for public services, improving efficiency of service delivery, along with the additional outcome of reducing corruption.

"One of the signal features of decentralization, and one of its bright spots, is the renewed connection between citizens and government."

- United Cities and Local Government (UCLG), 2008, p. 294.



While the roles of grassroots women have been recognized by government mainly in participation and monitoring, this role has not been formalized to the point where women's groups are being resourced for their work. In fact, there are numerous examples to show that women, when provided resources through supportive partnerships, have been able to innovate and demonstrate viable, practical solutions to local problems. However, often women have to work for free or subsidize the work of local governments and for long term sustainability, their contributions need to be recognized, legitimized and formally resourced. SEA, in Peru has set a precedent through the participatory budgeting process by which funding for women's on going activities has been lobbied for.

Finally, advocacy with local and national governments has helped reshape legislation on gender sensitive and child friendly policies, as witnessed in the case of the Czech Mother Centers. In the Czech Republic the national government amended the law on allowances permitting families to use childcare facilities for five days a month, while in Kenya, GROOTS Kenya helped influence the adoption of land policy in 2009.

The five global cases thus, underline the significance of decentralization in providing grassroots women's organizations a larger space for participation in local governance. The main lesson learnt from these, along with other organizations across the Huairou Commission, are that local development can be made most effective and relevant to local needs only when there are active and principled partnerships between local government and mobilized communities. Decentralization therefore, by shifting power, resources and basic service delivery to the arm of government closest to the community, has the potential of placing access to these resources into the hands of the community. Despite challenges to decentralization, grassroots women groups, being innovators and problem-solvers across local communities, are able to creatively utilize this space to redefine, engender and breathe new life into local governance.

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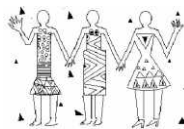
GLOSSARY

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
ASHAA	Arogya Sakhis for Health Awareness and Action
CACC	Constituency AIDS Control Committees
CBO	Community-Based Organization
GROOTS	Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood
GK	GROOTS, Kenya
HC	Huairou Commission
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HGG	Health Governance Group
HMF	Health Mutual Fund
ICWF	Information Center for the Independent Women's Forum
LCC	Local Coordinating Council
MoLSA	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
NACC	National AIDS Control Council
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRHM	National Rural Health Mission
PHC	Public Health Center
SEA	Servicios Educativo El Agustino
SEDAPAL	Company for Water and Sewage of Lima
SHG	Self-Help Group
SSP	Swayam Shikshan Prayog
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Program



This booklet is published as part of the Huairou Commission Governance Campaign through the support of UNDP. It is part of a series of tools, publications and resource support that the Huairou Commission has developed to promote horizontal learning amongst grassroots women's groups and to document and share their strategies and lessons with policy making and development institutions. For more information, please visit the Huairou Commission website, www.huairou.org

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