



# Advancing Governance through Peer Learning and Networking - *Lessons learned from Grassroots Women*

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# Advancing Governance through Peer Learning and Networking

## Lessons learned from Grassroots Women

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The last decade marks a growing interest of the development community in good governance as well as a growing awareness of the positive correlation between female participation and good governance.

Studies conducted by the World Bank<sup>1)</sup> have confirmed a strong correlation between low levels of female involvement in public life and high levels of government corruption. Barriers prohibiting women from equal access to jobs, education, public resources and participation in governance, significantly inhibit a nation's economic viability. Gender inequality results in greater poverty, slower economic growth and a lower quality of life. Education, health, productivity, credit and governance, work better when women are involved.

Enhancing women's rights, women's access to resources, female empowerment, participation and leadership, not only benefits women, but benefits communities and societies as a whole.

Grassroots women's groups world-wide are redefining governance and development in their communities. Center staging grassroots women's practices, supporting their leadership and mainstreaming their perspectives are key to sustainable development. What constitutes good urban and rural policies and practices is that they be gender sensitive<sup>2)</sup>

Grassroots women's groups deal with everyday survival issues and the social cohesion of their families and communities. In doing so, they develop the most ingenious solutions to issues like drinking water and sanitation, environmental sustainability, housing, health, responsiveness to natural as well as man made disasters and the eradication of poverty. They hold a valuable knowledge base of first hand knowledge of what works and what does not work on the ground.

In order to learn from this rich reservoir of expertise and to increase the influence of grassroots women's perspectives on public policy, the Huairou Commission with the Support of the LIFE Global Programme of IDG/BDP/UNDP launched the "Our Best Practices Campaign for Local Governance". LIFE/UNDP promotes "local -local" dialogue and action to improve the lives of the poor and influence policies related to participatory local governance. This report is a reflection on the process, results and key lessons of the Huairou Commission campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank Report: Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice, 2001

<sup>2</sup> UNCHS Global Report on Human Settlements, 2001



## **Stages of the Huirou Commission Our Best Practices (OBP) Campaign**

### **January 1999**

First Task Force meeting January 1999 in Bombay, involving representatives from grassroots women's groups as well as partners from academia, media, UN agencies, development agencies, local authorities and foundations. The meeting resulted in best practice indicators, submission guidelines and a reporting format. Hosted by SSP and AWAS.

### **May 1999**

Launching of the Huirou Commission OBP Campaign during the 17th meeting of the Commission on Human Settlements in Nairobi in May 1999.

### **May to December 1999**

Regional meetings by Huirou Commission member networks to identify Best Practices. Regional Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) for Groups from Central and Eastern Europe, Hosted by the German Mother Centers.

### **January 2000**

Second meeting of Our Best Practices Task Force in Prague. Midterm evaluation of the process. Hosted by the Czech Mother Centers National Network

### **March 2000**

50 submissions of grassroots women's groups from 7 world regions are collected, most of which are forwarded to the UNCHS Best Practices and Lessons Learnt year 2000 cycle. The submissions address issues like Health, Safety in Cities, Ecology, Housing, Community Development, Local Governance, Women's leadership, Post Disaster Development, Community Education.

### **June 2000**

Publication of a case studies book illustrating grassroots women's innovations: *Changing Development: A Grassroots Women's North-South Dialogue*. Edited by Sangeetha Purushothaman and Monika Jaeckel on behalf of GROOTS International, Books for Change, Bangalore 2000

### **June - October 2000**

The German Mother Centers produces four Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) during the Expo 2000 in Germany as a series of one week workshops. Here, 42 grassroots groups from around the world present their work in a training format, 20 of which were practices from the Huirou Commission OBP Campaign.

### **May/June 2001**

A Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) designed to extract the policy implications of the grassroots women's practices gathered in the OBP Campaign is conducted by the Huirou Commission and GROOTS during the UNGASS Istanbul plus 5 in New York. It focuses on engendering local governance, women's access to control of and management of land, debunking micro-credit, community education, post disaster development, women's safety and housing.

### **June 2001**

Exhibits of OBP practices at UNGASS exhibit at UN New York headquarters entrance hall.

Publication of case studies illustrating grassroots women's initiatives for cross-fertilisation in local governance and sustainable human settlements development, commissioned by UNDP: *Engendering Development and Governance: Grassroots Women's Our Best Practices*. Edited by Sangeetha Purushothaman and Monika Jaeckel on behalf of the Huirou Commission, Books for Change, Bangalore 2001

## II. The Huairou Commission Our Best Practices Campaign

### Tapping into a reservoir of knowledge

Many development projects go wrong or are limited in their effectivity, because it has been neglected to gather an authentic picture of the situation, by listening to the people on the ground. Grassroots women's groups are important and resourceful partners, because of the simple fact that they often really know what is going on in human settlements. There is immense wisdom and know-how to be found in the daily survival strategies of grassroots women. Women's resourcefulness, although not highly profiled in public culture, has been keeping cities and villages alive.

Much of this wisdom stays local or has been held in places so disperse, it has been difficult for others to access. This expertise often enters the public channels of decision making very insufficiently. There is a schism between on the ground knowledge and public knowledge; a culture and power gap between grassroots expertise and public decision making.



The task at hand, to which the Huairou Commission is committed, is to enhance methodologies and processes, with which to gather the accumulated wisdom on the ground, in a way that it can enter into governance and inform policy makers.



The Our Best Practices Campaign was launched as a formal process and tool to identify and document grassroots solutions, in such a manner that they can transform policies. It is a means to strengthen the flow of ideas and innovations from grassroots to policy makers, to expand the development of options through sharing grassroots knowledge and experience, to make the work of grassroots women both visible and influential in public policy. It is a way to overcome the gap between government commitments and implementation, a strategy for mainstreaming community priorities and a way to keep the focus on what governments are doing to meet grassroots concerns and priorities.

### **Our Best Practices Indicators**

At the Huairou Commission Our Best Practices Task Force meeting in India in January 1999, a key portion of the meeting was dedicated to developing indicators. The resulting twenty indicators identified best practices from the perspective of and as relevant to grassroots women's groups:

- ♦ Practices that empower women,
- ♦ Practices where grassroots women take on leadership roles in the development of communities,
- ♦ Practices which recognise everyday experiences of grassroots women as expertise,
- ♦ Practices that incorporate seeds of change and transformation of the status quo,
- ♦ Practices that contribute to a redistribution and rechanneling of resources to the grassroots level,
- ♦ Practices that allow grassroots women's collectives to own the ideas they have developed as well as the tools by which they are disseminated,
- ♦ Practices which contribute to centre staging grassroots women in the community,
- ♦ Practices which create solutions that strengthen the entire community,
- ♦ Practices which advance women's participation and leadership in decision making and governance,
- ♦ Practices which claim space and resources for women,
- ♦ Practices that have the potential for replicability,
- ♦ Practices which sustain transformation,
- ♦ Practices that build win-win partnerships with institutional actors,
- ♦ Practices that support grassroots culture and support systems,
- ♦ Practices that engage in building horizontal alliances and developing a critical mass of actors who can impact policies and local development agendas,
- ♦ Practices that break social and political barriers, creating new spaces and rules, and transforming vertical structures,
- ♦ Practices that create a supportive culture of learning among grassroots women,
- ♦ Practices that contribute to re-educating mainstream,
- ♦ Practices that validate female values and the culture of care,
- ♦ Practices that validate local heritage.

### **Enriching the Process around Best Practices**

The Huairou Commission Our Best Practices Campaign is not primarily about creating data for a data base, it is about creating a process where documenting and disseminating best practices becomes an empowerment tool for grassroots women's groups. It is about creating a framework for peer learning and networking. It is about building partnerships across sectors in order for grassroots women's best practices to become influential. Only by increasing the negotiation power of groups on the ground through peer learning and networking and through engaging in partnerships with mainstream actors, can the momentum be built to make real impact, to turn around top down procedures into bottom up processes, to reallocate resources to reach the grassroots level, to engender decision making.

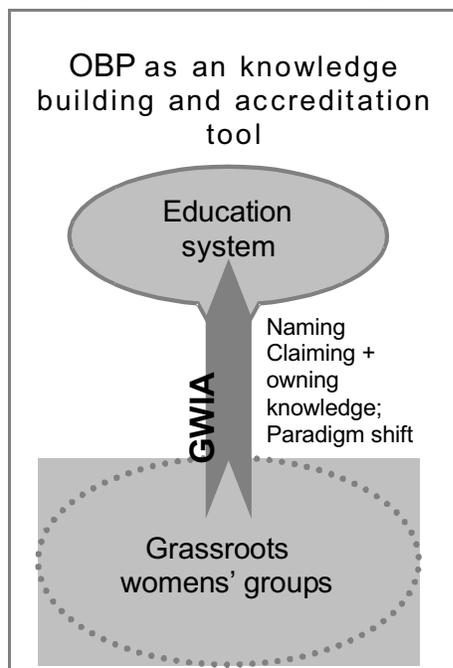
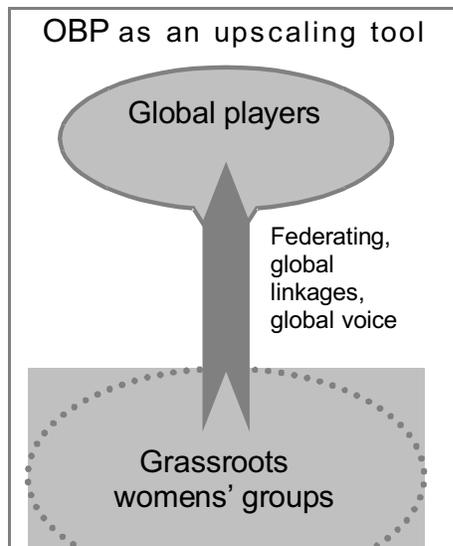
What is unique in the Huairou Commission campaign, is that the identification, documentation and dissemination of grassroots women's practices is directly linked to the ownership of the grassroots women's groups of the whole process. This is crucial to making the link from local to global, to bridging grassroots and public cultures, to changing the status quo.

What often happens in mainstream programs, is that grassroots groups are seen as beneficiaries of change, rather than as the initiators. If their experience is taken into consideration at all, it tends to get processed and repackaged in professional channels, with no further linking to the originating groups. This way, the power of grassroots experience and knowledge tends to get lost in the process.

Best practice processes are a tool to identify and document lessons from experience in a manner that they can inform policies. They are a means of gathering knowledge on solutions to problems. But the question is who owns this information? Who has access to it and how is it used? Frequently it is those who articulate experiences and have the tools to disseminate them, rather than the innovators, who become the owners of ideas. When grassroots women's collectives and community groups take ownership of the information and ideas that they have created, they are recognised as experts both within and outside their communities. It is then an expertise that becomes their most valuable bargaining chip, the basis of successful advocacy and of partnerships with mainstream actors.

The Huairou Commission Our Best Practices Campaign is more than a narrative, more than something to file and gather dust. It is a tool for empowering communities and reshaping interventions in habitat, the world over. It is a strategy to enhance the political clout and negotiating power of grassroots women to increase their visibility influence and recognition

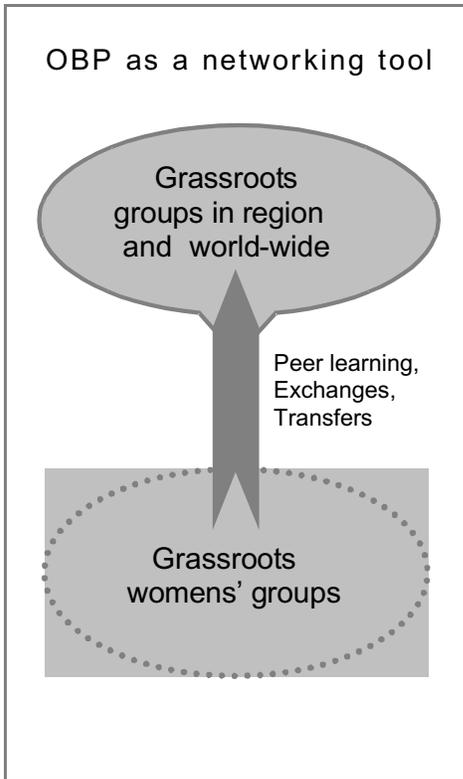
and to broaden the base of support for their issues and their work. Grassroots groups world wide have understood the importance of claiming their knowledge, of monitoring and controlling the implementation and of mainstreaming of their successes. They network and federate in order to sustain their practices and to gain influence. While grassroots practices are local, their learning and growth, as well as their impact, need to be global. As institutions increasingly de-link grassroots knowledge and development, there is a need for a collective linked response. By documenting and owning their knowledge, by exchanging and linking across cities, countries and regions, by leveraging multiple sites of local politics, grassroots movements become a global player while staying rooted in the local.



The Our Best Practices (OBP) campaign is conducted as a reflection and capacity building tool for grassroots women's groups, a dissemination and networking tool, an income generating and marketing tool. It is a process that builds leadership as well as partnership, a tool to extract policy implications as well as a tool to analyse conditions for mainstreaming, replication and transfer.

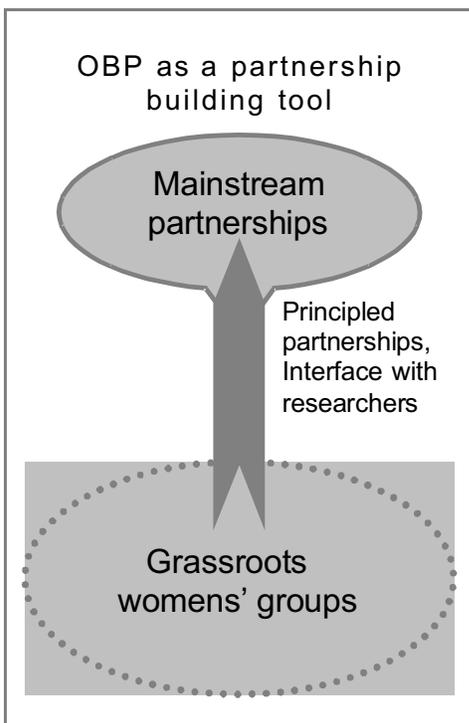
As a first step in this initiative, the Huairou Commission organised an international Task Force to come up with ways of documenting and disseminating experiences of women's collectives as a way of peer learning, of networking and of leveraging political power. In this process grassroots women's groups drew up the criteria to reflect and benchmark their practices.

This debate was linked to other actors: partners in academia, media, local government, global agencies and foundations. This was done in order to debate principles and processes of partnerships in documenting and disseminating grassroots women's work, in a way that respects grassroots ownership.



By involving grassroots groups in identifying and defining why they are a best practice and why they have something of value to share the best practice process becomes a capacity building tool. It offers reflection and ownership over the expertise incorporated in their practices. Creating space for questions, analysis and self monitored reflection of own experiences, is a basic requirement for ownership and empowerment.

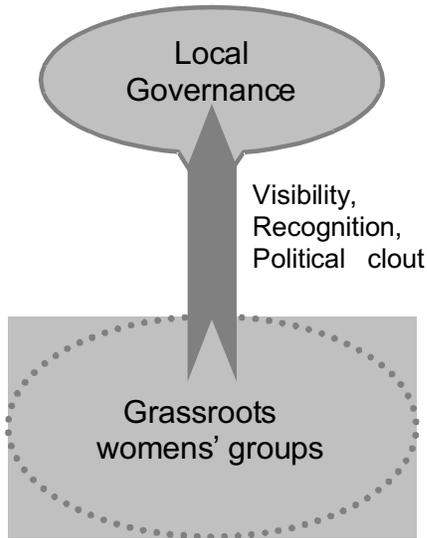
By engaging in outreach to universities and academia to help in writing up and documenting their practice, best practices becomes a tool for action research and for building partnerships between grassroots groups and academic institutions.



By organising regional meetings to identify and analyse best practices collectively, and by organising peer exchanges based on best practices, the best practices process becomes a peer learning, transfer and networking tool.

By being able to name the expertise and knowledge and by linking it to mainstream debates best practices become the basis for partnership and negotiation with mainstream actors. Best Practices in this way become a negotiation tool.

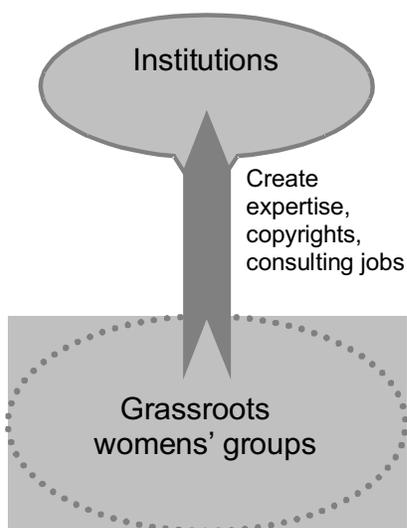
OBP as an advocacy tool



By drawing out the leadership potential and processes involved in the practice documenting best practices becomes a leadership generating tool

By constructing peer learning and training formats like the Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) that foster learning systems and knowledge transfer where ownership and copyright stay in the hands of the grassroots groups best practices become a tool for up-scaling and for advocacy.

OBP as an income generating tool



Initiating formats in which grassroots groups are the ones who teach, who design trainings, who offer capacity building both to each other as well as to mainstream actors, creates a paradigm shift at the core of institutional information, knowledge and power systems. Ownership of knowledge is also an income generating tool. When claimed by grassroots as expertise it can be marketed into consulting, trainings, books, and curricula to a wide spread audience.



## **Engendering the UNCHS <sup>1)</sup> Best Practices and Lessons Learnt (BPLL) Program**

The Huairou Commission joined the Steering Committee of the UNCHS BPLL Program in 1998. In reviewing the 1998 cycle and again in 2000 it came to the conclusion that the program was not generating a critical mass of engendered practices. Also, the Technical Advisory Committee and Jury for the Dubai International Awards were not sufficiently operating in a gender sensitive way, so as to ensure adequate representation of grassroots women's practices. There seemed to be a bias towards large-scale infrastructural initiatives, rather than programs that show how the priorities of poor communities have made a difference.

In letters to the Steering Committee Members as well as to UNCHS and at the 2001 BPLL Steering Committee meetings in New York and Florianopolis the Huairou Commission intervened to draw attention to this issue. The Huairou Commission offered the following suggestions to engender the UNCHS BPLL Program:

1. Include gender awareness as selection criteria for award winning best practices
2. Review and update the guidelines for submissions for a more gender sensitive write up
3. Include a specific box on gender in the reporting format
4. Provide a simple handbook on gender awareness including a checklist to be used for gender evaluation by the Technical Advisory Committee and the Jury. It would also guide Best Practice submitters in their written submissions, as well as oral presentations of their practices in learning and dissemination events.
5. Provide general orientation and terms of reference for Technical Advisory Committee and Jury on gender mainstreaming
6. Provide technical support and feed back on gender awareness to submitters
7. Increase efforts by all Steering Committee Partners in identifying and submitting engendered practices
8. Promote thematic workshops and conferences among Best Practices and publish case study books, focusing on lessons learned and policy implications for gender mainstreaming
9. Fund study tours and peer learning exchanges on gender mainstreaming issues

In a concerted effort to mainstream gender and social inclusion for the Dubai International Awards several of these suggestions were incorporated into the BPLL Program:

- ♦ The reporting format will be adapted to include a separate category on gender as well as new lead questions pertaining to gender roles and responsibilities.
- ♦ Where appropriate feedback will be given to early submitters regarding the desirability of including gender sensitive data and information prior to the final submission deadline.
- ♦ Gender awareness and gender sensitivity, while not being used as an eliminating factor for qualifying a submission as a good or best practice, will be used:
  - a) in the balance between qualifying a submission as a good or best practice,
  - b) in selecting a given submission versus another one to be included in the shortlist and
  - c) in helping to decide on award-winning practices.
- ♦ The TAC and Jury will be given a general orientation and briefing on the importance of gender awareness for the BPLL Program

1) The United Nations Centre on Human Settlements (UNCHS) has been upgraded recently to be a programme, called UN-Habitat. For the sake of simplicity however, we will refer to the organization as UNCHS throughout.

## **Gender Mainstreaming**

The Huairou Commission in addition to conducting its own Our Best Practices Campaign, also focuses on creating more gender awareness and gender sensitivity in the activities of other actors. In this capacity it serves on the Steering Committee of the UNCHS Best Practices and Lessons Learnt Program as thematic center for gender and grassroots perspectives and as partner in gender mainstreaming the BPLL process and program.

The Huairou Commission is committed to both women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming to ensure a more equal sharing of decision-making at all levels of human endeavour. Women's empowerment is about ensuring a more equal sharing of participation (planning, deciding, implementing and evaluating) and benefit (access and control of resources) between women and men, including class, race and ethnicity, religion, and age issues. Gender mainstreaming involves putting up front the social, economic, political and cultural relations between women and men. In the context of Best Practices Programs, women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming means ensuring that Best Practice submissions highlight this in their written and oral presentations. This should be highlighted in all of the categories, as well as related in the narrative. The experience of the practices in regard to gender awareness and gender relations, should be described in some detail. The following issues should be addressed: changes in gender equity that have been achieved, barriers that were overcome, how priorities in decision making have changed, how the leadership skills of women have been acknowledged and developed, what policy implications for gender mainstreaming were derived from the practice.

Gender Mainstreaming is not about targeting women as beneficiaries or recipients of programs or practices. It means empowering women, to actively take the lead in changing the status quo of gender relations. Gender mainstreaming involves change, involves the transformation of the culture of public procedures and decision making, of public priorities and the allocation of resources. It is about creating equitable and equal partnerships with women's groups that are already taking leadership on the ground, thereby lifting the veil of invisibility that often surrounds women's work.

Gender mainstreaming is a concept used in many settings in many different ways. Originating as a strategy to ensure the impact of the women's movement on mainstream institutions, it has since served as legitimization to discontinue the support for women's groups and women's



groups. It is therefore important to clarify some of the misunderstandings that have developed around gender mainstreaming and to lay out the basic principles as seen by grassroots women's groups.

Gender mainstreaming does not mean women's groups, projects, spaces, or women specific research and work is given up. They need to be maintained as the source of innovation and gender sensitivity, the fountain from which the parallel process of engaging institutional actors in taking responsibility for gender equity and gender mainstreaming is fed.

Gender mainstreaming involves a shift in gender relations and capacity building of both men and women around leadership. Women need to be supported in taking leadership roles and men need to be supported in learning to be comfortable with taking support roles.

Gender mainstreaming needs to include grassroots mainstreaming. It is on the ground, where the real mainstream flows. As much as it is about capacitating grassroots women to participate in mainstream procedures and public policies, it is the institutional arena and public decision making which needs to be capacitated to link to the ground. Because it is there, where the magic of reality really is to be found.

### **Huairou Commission Gender Mainstreaming Indicators**

How to document practices in a gender aware way and how to measure the impact of gender in human settlements and urban development?

Practices should have gender specific indicators by which their process be both described and evaluated.

The following **checklist** provides guidance and orientation for gender mainstreaming best practices:

- Were both women and men involved in the planning and the implementation of the program/best practice? In what ways?
- Was an analysis made of the differentiation of women's and men's needs in the local context of the practice and were women's needs and visions as well as men's, taken into consideration in the planning stage? In what way? Were they equally responded to during implementation? In what way?
- Have women as well as men benefited from the practice? In what way?
- In what way have women influenced the best practice? And what needed to be put in place to make that happen?
- In what way does the best practice relate to the multiple roles of women and the whole scope of their everyday lives?



**checklist for gender mainstreaming best practices: (cont.)**

- What positions did women and men hold at the beginning, during and at the end of the process?
- Are women and men equally represented in leadership roles? How did they get there? What needed to change for women to be in leadership roles? Does this situation differ from the one that existed before the best practice? In what way? Has the best practice acknowledged and developed the leadership skills of women as well as men?
- Have women as well as men been empowered by the best practice? In what way?
- Do women and men have equal access to and control of resources and opportunities to engage with mainstream institutions? Has this changed because of the best practice? And in what way?
- Have there been changes in women's access to resources like:
  - ◆ Property, Land, Housing, (public) Space, Credit, Funds
  - ◆ Knowledge, Education, Information
  - ◆ Services, Utilities, Technology
  - ◆ Labor Market, Careers, and Income Generation
  - ◆ Status, Influence, Decision Making
  - ◆ Mobility, Freedom, Sense of Safety
  - ◆ Time
  - ◆ Autonomy
- Have the priorities in decision making changed? In what way?
- Has there been a change in gender awareness through the best practice? In what way?
- Were any of the following tools used to make the practice more gender responsive?
  - ◆ Checklists
  - ◆ Consultation with gender experts
  - ◆ Trainings in gender responsiveness
  - ◆ Collection of gender specific information
  - ◆ Any other tools for integrating gender perspectives
- Has the best practice contributed to a greater validation and visibility of women's work and contributions as well as men's?
- Has there been a shift in the division of labor between men and women?
- Has the best practice increased policy support for women's as well as men's issues and local practices?
- Has it increased the long term negotiation power of women as well as men?
- Has the practice impacted in any way the socially constructed meaning of differences between men and women?
- Has the best practice served in some way as a gender catalyst for the community and for local authorities? In what way?
- Were the actors normally influential in decision making involved and supportive?
- Has the political will to mainstream gender issues increased? Have criteria, benchmarks and indicators for gender mainstreaming been laid down?
- Are there regular evaluations?

## Ensuring Gender specific data

Institutional actors, NGOs and even CBOs, are often not aware of the gender dimension involved in their practices. The social, economic and political differences between women and



men are often not taken into consideration. There is often a lack of awareness of the differences between the approaches, needs, desires, values, contributions, visions and priorities between women and men. The social relations between women and men often remain concealed, invisible or inscrutable. Gender disaggregated data and statistics that visibly show the difference between the situation, status and work of men and women, are often lacking. Programs and measures often have different effects, impacts and ramifications on men and women.

According to research done by the World Bank, even seemingly gender-neutral investment decisions can have a disproportionate impact on men and women.

Reporting formats that help uncover, analyse and understand these differences are therefore extremely important.





## **Gender Aware Best Practices Reporting Format**

### **Summary**

Make sure that it is clear who did the work, who made the decisions, and who was affected by the practice. Don't forget to put the percentage of women and men in this description.

### **Establishment of Practice**

Please specify which social groups participated and were most influential in initiating the practice (both in the decision-making and the implementation), which groups (community organizations, local authorities, NGOs, indigenous organizations, environmental groups...) and what percentage of women and men within these groups. Who was more affected by the intervention and in which way? (Women, men, young elderly, ethnic minorities...)

### **Gender Relations**

Please specify leadership and gender specific roles. Remember that this implies looking at the existing social, economic, political and cultural relationships between women and men (including race, age, class,) and how the practice is supporting more equal decision-making power and more inclusive policies and practices, no matter what the "Best Practice" may be.

### **Situation Before the Initiative Began**

What was the situation, what was the balance of decision-making between women and men, different ethnic groups or racial groupings involved, ages., who was doing what.

### **Establishment of Priorities**

Remember to clearly explain what strategic roles were being addressed (change of social and cultural roles between women and men) as well as the practical needs being addressed.

### **Formulation of Objectives and Strategies**

By whom and how were strategies formulated. (Don't just put "the coordinator" but let us know if this person is male or female, young or mature, black or white.) Was it a "collective decision" or an individual one and what were the method/s used?

### **Process**

When you talk about "people", "communities", "organizations"....give us a description of who is involved....taking into consideration gender, class, race, (all that we have mentioned above). Don't use general terms without letting us know what percentage of women vis a vis the percentage of men was involved.

### **Mobilization of Resources**

Who mobilized the resources (financial, technical and human), where did they come from, how were they mobilized and who influenced their use? Please desegregate by gender, class, race, social groups and sector (public/private/social).

### **Results Achieved**

Let us "see" whose lives were changed (put a gender, class, age, race. face to these results).

### **Sustainability**

Has the practice increased the long term negotiating power of women as well as men? Has the political will to mainstream gender issues increased? Have criteria, benchmarks and indicators for gender mainstreaming been institutionalized? Are mechanisms in place which insure a continuous mainstreaming of gender? Please explain.

### **Lessons Learned**

Make this clearly gender aware and socially inclusive.

### **Transferability**

Also state what could be done better in the future, in order to make the practice more gender aware and socially inclusive.

## **Results and Lessons learned**

### **◆ Grassroots sensitive documentation**

An important result of the Huairou Commission OBP campaign, concerns the documentation process of grassroots women's practices. Grassroots women's groups need an intense interactive process and support, as well as a different documentation format, in order for the richness of their experiences and the lessons from their practices to be made visible.

The quality of the submissions varied widely, based on the extent to which the existing reporting format was rigidly followed and whether the groups had academic partners to support the documenting, as well as the translating of their experiences into mainstream language and mainstream frame of reference. The written language as well as mainstream abstraction levels and categories proved to be major barriers.

Grassroots groups relate their wisdom best in story telling formats. Asking for stories, examples and quotes and encouraging the groups to describe their work in their own words, categories and frame of reference, proved a more appropriate way to capture grassroots women's knowledge. The power of the story telling format, of visual images, of concrete demonstrations and metaphorical language, is used by grassroots groups in their peer learning and networking strategies. It is user friendly, bridges language and cultural barriers and easily captures the full attention of the listener. This, while duly recognised by the media, very seldomly enters the information and communication systems of mainstream institutions.

Documentation in the institutional style of mainstream best practice systems and data bases, requires a partnership process with journalists, researchers or other institutional actors, familiar with both grassroots and the institutional culture. Such a process requires both the allocation of resources to underwrite the efforts of both sides and it requires a careful and respectful handling of the partnership process.

In the Huairou Commission Our Best Practices campaign grassroots groups "partnered up" with academics, researchers and journalists to document their stories. Funds to support documentation were allocated to the grassroots level, so that the groups could stay in control of the documentation process. A set of principles were developed to guide the interface of grassroots groups with professional partners, researchers and documentors, in order to develop principled partnerships where communities are enriched by the experience.



## **Our Best Practices Principles**

Following are a number of principles that guide the work of the Huairou Commission in identifying, documenting and disseminating Our Best Practices

### **1. Diversity**

The Huairou Commission recognises and respects diversity among women, which is seen as a source of richness and resources. For this reason, the effort of gathering women's practices is happening throughout the globe. In each region the members of the Huairou Commission are trying to reach diverse women, approaches and answers to our everyday problems and challenges.

### **2. Building Knowledge**

Documentation of Our Best Practices is meant to be in itself a process of empowerment for those women who are developing the experience. Women interested in sharing their experience should learn from the process of documenting it. The documentation of the experience (with or without external support) is an opportunity to reflect about how we are doing things, what our visions are and what empowers us, what things are working for women and which are not, what are ways women learn, what sustains women's networks, who are our partners and in what circumstances.

### **3. Participation**

One of the important things that make Our Best Practices different is participation. Participation is a value that needs to be enhanced and promoted in all our efforts. Gathering information in an inclusive and participatory manner, looking at our experiences from the point of view of all the people involved, deciding together how to present the experience is important.

### **4. Sharing**

The idea of documenting Our Best Practices is meant to enhance sharing among women, and to foster mutual capacity building in face to face exchanges, peer learning and transfer systems. It is important that grassroots women be initiators of their own information sharing and horizontal and vertical transfers. This, rather than be receivers and beneficiaries of trainings, programs and capacity buildings of the "Development industry".

### **5. Ownership**

The experiences documented are the practices of those who carry them out. The inclusion of these experiences in publications, data bases, conferences and other channels of communication and transfer will respect this ownership and create favourable conditions for grassroots participation and ownership in dissemination and implementation processes.

### **6. Empowerment and Global Learning**

The Huairou Commission looks at the process of documenting Our Best Practices as a means for providing CBOs with tools for their empowerment and as part of a process of global learning. Women are acting locally, but we are also building strong connections and networks at a global level. This way, we put value on indigenous expertise, to validate and legitimize women's ways of knowing and doing, to monitor the framing and interpretation of women's experiences and initiatives and to ensure that benefits come back to the groups that helped in the process of identifying, gathering and making known what women are doing.

### **7. Respectful Partnerships**

Respectful relationships and partnerships for the documentation and dissemination of Our Best Practices are a way of bringing together our strength and that of our alliances. This includes careful consideration of the conditions and principles needed for sustainable partnerships.

Developing principled partnerships involves reversing information and knowledge flows. Instead of a process in which researchers extract information of grassroots groups and run off with it to enhance their own careers or repackage and develop it into capacity building trainings to bring back to the communities as (highly paid) education programs, a principled partnership involves mirroring back grassroots knowledge to the communities so that they can value and claim it as their expertise. It involves supporting communities to understand where there is a demand for their knowledge, serving as cultural translators and mediators and helping to open doors to institutional channels and partnerships where they can speak for themselves, and disseminate and teach their knowledge in their own name.

Research is often oriented towards fulfilling institutional agendas, rather than community agendas. Grassroots researcher relationships need to be designed as partnerships from which both researchers and communities can benefit, in which the value added is acknowledged and accredited to both sides.

◆ **Women's leadership**

Women's leadership is becoming one of the key developmental issues. Communities are increasingly choosing women as leaders, because they are more effective. The Huairou Commission focuses on grassroots women's groups for this reason and the OBP campaign put special attention on practices highlighting women's leadership. The following summarises the main lessons that can be extracted from the OBP data base on issues of women's leadership.



Long-term community process is more likely to be holistic and sustainable when women are central to the process. Women's leadership tends to be inclusive and team oriented. Everyone's perspectives, needs and wisdom are taken into consideration, not only the views of the quick, the articulate, the most powerful and influential.

Women's leadership often results in the benefit of the whole community. It is most often based on solid knowledge of the community, as women deal first hand with the everyday issues of life. World wide, violence, insecurity, the breakdown of family, kin and neighborhood networks, environmental and community deterioration are massively increasing. Women tend to be the ones holding communities together. They know that solutions lie primarily in people, not in technology. Investing in women's leadership is an investment in the social fabric of communities and human settlements. Solutions are developed that are more in harmony with the whole community, as well as with the natural environment. Development stays rooted in local culture and is connected to everyday life issues and to rebuilding community ties and neighborhood networks.

Women have demonstrated that they can be effective mediators between the government and the people. In this role they also provide quality information to the state, thus ensuring more transparency and a more authentic view of the issues at hand. Under women's leadership resources are more likely to reach those who need them most. When women take leadership roles in local development, corruption is reduced.

Women's leadership contributes to transforming power, by making alliances across deeply divisive social categories and traditions and by deepening democratic values and practice. Change is initiated from the neighborhoods in which people live, and private survival strategies are transformed into collective agendas and public negotiations. Excluded groups like mothers and children that have been confined to the private sphere, win a voice and access to public participation. Self help and helping others is linked and connected, and the culture of care gains social value and is reintegrated into public and collective commitment.

#### ◆ **Engendering Local governance**

Political intention alone, like constitutional amendments or gender quotas, have proved not to be enough to truly integrate women into decision making on an equitable basis. Trainings and capacity building tools for women, do not always result in women actually claiming their potential of political influence and power. Grassroots women's groups have developed solutions that go well beyond traditional strategies of engendering local governance, in that they address the reasons why political rhetoric, trainings and legal frameworks often fall short.

The culture of political arenas operate to marginalise grassroots women's voices. Institutional arrangements are often hostile to grassroots women's participation. If there is no institutional arrangement to make sure that grassroots voices count equally, more likely than not, they will go unheeded.

Women operate from multiple identities that are rooted both in public and private life. They need public culture to acknowledge and bridge, not compartmentalise them. Bridging cultural and language gaps, raising awareness of what grassroots women are bringing to the table, as well as building sustainable structures for on going interaction and dialogue, are important elements of engendering local governance.



Grassroots strategies begin with creating a favourable environment for grassroots participation and advocacy. A key part of this transformation is acknowledging women's values and priorities, daily responsibilities and ways of doing things and creating public support and validation for them. Grassroots women's groups are challenging the paradigm of professionalism, by making local governance an extension of expertise that comes from dealing with everyday life concerns of families and communities.

Grassroots strategies attach critical importance to claiming physical and reflective space enabling women to meet collectively, to interact, reflect, mirror their competencies and learn as a group, as well as to formalise and sustain their involvement in local development beyond short term volunteerism.

Grassroots women also operate on a more connected concept of leadership versus individual leadership models. They put confidence in collaborative processes, community bonding, and maximum and inclusive participation. They invest extensively in methods, tools and support processes to this end.

Enabling women to feel safe in cities is a pre-requisite to citizenship and local governance because safety determines women's mobility and use of the city and its resources to the fullest extent possible. Mobility enhances participation.

Grassroots strategies focus on the crucial area of reallocating resources to the grassroots level. This involves investing in experiments and solutions on the ground as demonstration projects and as basis for negotiations.

Recommendations for engendering local governance which come from the grassroots experience include:

- ♦ Providing grassroots women with physical space to expand and formalise their participation in local decision making;
- ♦ Acknowledging everyday life expertise on an equitable basis to professional qualifications;
- ♦ Creating direct channels for expertise from the ground to enter local governance;
- ♦ Creating support structures like childcare facilities, safe transport, community based consultation and leadership support systems;
- ♦ Soliciting grassroots women's participation from the very beginning planning stage;
- ♦ Opening up opportunities for long term engagement and negotiation rather than one-time consultations;
- ♦ Resourcing grassroots communities with funds and opportunities, to participate in the allocation and monitoring of public resources and services.



### III Peer Learning and Networking Formats

If there are persistent problems with poverty, with decent housing and with sustainable development, there probably is something wrong with the knowledge base in our countries and with our mainstream education systems. One vital reason is that grassroots expertise and know-how is missing. By excluding the voices of grassroots women and ignoring, distorting or diluting their practices, a wealth of highly needed expertise is wasted. Many academic, institutional and political arrangements and processes manage to overlook and abstract from what happens and works on the ground. This is quite amazing, considering the fact that it is there, that they need to be implemented. It is there where the ultimate answer and test to ideas, theories and best practices, proof if they apply or not, is to be found.

A major obstacle to incorporating grassroots wisdom and solutions in public decision making, lies in the fact that they often stay local. Another relates to the fact that mainstream education systems most often fail to address grassroots ways of knowing and learning, as well as grassroots women's values and priorities around education and knowledge. Global problems cannot be solved by the same thinking that created them.

What is needed is getting behind what already works in communities. What is needed are educational settings to learn from "informal knowledge" and the "informal sector". What is needed are learning formats and knowledge building arrangements, that enable grassroots groups to link and learn from each other, as well as mainstream actors to perceive and learn from the wisdom gathered on the ground. Education systems are needed that enable the evolution of learning and a body of knowledge defined, shaped, owned, disseminated, nurtured and replenished by grassroots communities in their own right. In the following three learning formats to this end are presented, face to face exchanges, GWIA and peer learning.





## Face to Face Exchanges

Experience shows that the most powerful mode for grassroots groups to learn, enrich and up-scale their practices and build their movements, lies in face to face exchanges. The South African network People's Dialogue describes this as a very potent multiplication process:<sup>3</sup>

„There is a very strong multiplication effect at work, and it is shown most effectively in how exchange programmes work at the local level. A single settlement or a single community has a very finite capacity. And if you leave that community in isolation, it is required almost inevitably to find external assistance for its solutions. And it has to then draw in professionals, academics and political patrons in order to find solutions, because the resource capacity in a single settlement is minimal. If you then start to link that community up to other communities, you suddenly find that a solution that might not exist in Community A might just happen to exist in Community B. And so Community B enables Community A to learn from its own experience. And if you start to replicate that on scale, you have almost an exponential growth in knowledge, capacity and experience. When you do that across international boundaries. the exercise is

Findings in the field of life long learning, point out that 80% of learning does not happen as classroom and textbook learning but as learning in informal settings. Learning horizontally from peers is a natural mode of sharing and learning.

The model of exchanges is based on seeing and hearing rather than on teaching and learning. Travelling to another place, visiting another group naturally sparks many stimulating and inspiring experiences and ideas. Exchanges generate a learning that is experiential, that comes from exposure to evidence, that happens through seeing for yourself, absorbing through all your senses. Learning goes deeper as it involves the whole universe of the lessons learned, the mistakes made, the obstacles faced, reflected on and overcome.

Learning in the context of exchanges is self guided and self controlled and does not follow a predefined outcome or agenda. Groups pick up from what they see and hear that what makes sense to them in their own context at home.

Exchanges create a direct transfer of solutions and lessons learned. When you have seen something work elsewhere you don't take „no, this cannot work“ for an answer. Your mind opens to change, to different options, the status quo loses power.

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<sup>3</sup> Face to Face, Notes from the Network on Community Exchange. A publication of the Asian Coalition for

There is a learning that comes from teaching others, from experiencing that your own experiences are relevant to others and to other settings.

Explaining to others sharpens ones own understanding of what and why things work at home. Exchanges help women see their own work through different eyes. Own practices and positions are explored with a fresh look, questions from others initiate the further development and refinement of ones own practice.

Face to face exchanges are also a strong federating and networking tool:

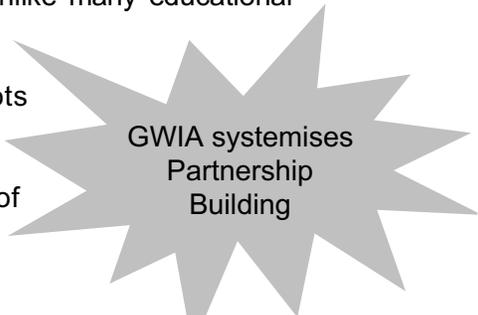
Political effects and impacts of exchanges include:

- ♦ Choices of local groups to address practical and strategic issues are expanded
- ♦ A pool of community skills, ideas and solutions is built
- ♦ Local breakthroughs inspire international confidence and linking
- ♦ Dependency on professionals and external agents is reduced
- ♦ More negotiating power, more resources come to the communities
- ♦ More opportunities to involve institutional partners
- ♦ More influence on the larger debate, gaining a voice in the global arena

### **The Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA)**

The Grassroots Women's International Academies during Expo 2000 and the United Nations General Assembly Special Session Istanbul+5 were a unique experience. Grassroots women's groups from all corners of the globe presented their best practices and the underlying skills and strategies that make them work, in the format of trainings.

The success of grassroots women's initiatives is grounded in their ability to build alliances and share their knowledge, both at the local level, regionally and globally. The Grassroots Women's International Academy is designed as a platform for direct encounter and exchange from the ground, as well as for interaction with mainstream stakeholders. Unlike many educational settings, where grassroots women are targeted as receivers of capacity building, GWIA is unique in that it is the grassroots women's groups who are the ones owning and teaching their knowledge. GWIA is a format to ensure that the innovators of solutions from the ground, also be the ones articulating, naming, claiming and transferring their knowledge.



GWIA systemises  
Partnership  
Building

GWIA is not a workshop, conference or seminar. It is a hands on learning format, to transfer successful practices and learnings from one group to another, from one part of the globe to another. By teaching their methods, analysis and lessons learned in a curriculum format, GWIA presentations enable groups from other regions and other continents to debate and understand the practices concretely enough, to be able to adapt it to their own work and own social and cultural setting. Common strategies and understandings are generated, common issues and emerging trends identified. Mainstream planning and decision making is informed, by extracting the political and legislative reforms implied and the institutional challenges and innovations required.

An important part of GWIA focuses on building partnerships with mainstream actors. Interactive joint problem solving sessions, between grassroots women's groups and partners from government, international agencies, churches, academia, foundations as well as the private

sector, are an integrated part of the GWIA format. The academies contribute to

understanding the issues and challenges that are better dealt with in

partnerships with grassroots organisations. The roles which partners

can play both in sustaining and up-scaling grassroots practices, are

defined. GWIA creates new knowledge by cross fertilisation of experience

and perspective from both grassroots and mainstream actors.



GWIA systemises  
Policy Defining

## Peer Learning

"Networks and federations of poor communities have only grown and developed the way they have by focusing on processes and not outputs. Processes and not products are what must be shared and transferred - between the poor, and between all the other actors in the urban development scene."

*Face to Face, Notes from the Network on Community Exchange.  
A publication of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, January 2000*

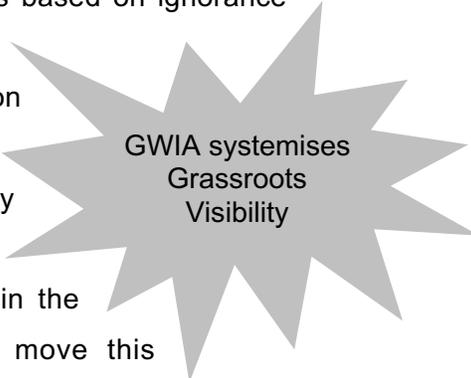
The Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) foster a process of peer learning linked to grassroots values, methods and perspectives. The focus of development from a grassroots point of view, is in the creation of community. Information, education and development efforts need to go beyond individual and personal development and be geared towards enhancing the development of community, team learning, collective and co-operative achievement.



GWIA systemises  
Peer Learning

For grassroots groups, education is not an up and out process for individual careers, but a process of empowerment of whole groups. Education and learning is seen as connected to and benefiting the community, rather than as a commodity serving the market and promoting individual achievement and responsibilities.

Programs are designed to raise awareness and to discover collective pride and strengths of a community. Education is seen as a tool for empowerment, a method to see through mystifications and social intransparencies, to breach agreements based on ignorance and hidden agendas. It is used to open opportunities and perspectives for self determined action, by collective self reflection and a comprehensive understanding of the environment. Learning in such a context engages groups in participatory democracy and involves building the awareness and the capacity to make links between local problems and injustices in the social, political and economic structures of society and to move this awareness in collective action.



GWIA systemises  
Grassroots  
Visibility

What characterises grassroots women's approaches to education, is that they refer to and build on a body of knowledge gained from everyday life experience and from the wealth of local cultural and spiritual traditions. It is mainly transferred in oral form, rather than in written orientation. In the grassroots experience the best way to learn, is from your own experience and from questions from someone like yourself. Peer learning involves providing spaces and opportunities for women to come together, reflect, share and build on each others learnings and experiences. When women articulate their own learning in order to explain it to others, they become more conscious of their own learning and can claim and value their knowledge more clearly. An important part of the process of peer learning is that women recognise who they are, how they learnt and that what they know is worth sharing. This way they are able to also teach it to others.



GWIA systemises  
Reinventing  
Education

Peer learning creates emotional safety without hierarchies and power imbalances. Concrete examples and demonstrations open minds and attitudes. Lessons personified and lived through create trust. Teachings are not programmatic, focussing on „shouds“ or „musts“ Instead they focus on conveying actions and experiences that have worked, that have already moved groups forward.

Knowledge becomes a living element with the potential to touch people's lives. Peer learning is a process not creating a stock of goods for filing away or to add to ones credentials. Peer learning has the power to enchant, to inspire, to unsettle, to build movements, to change.

Key elements comprising the peer learning processes in the context of the Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) include the following:

- ◆ Inducing individual and collective self reflection and assessment of motivations, resources and capacities, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and barriers, goals and visions, methods and strategies, successes and failures, individual and group conflicts and processes, individual and collective support structures, internal and external profiles, communication structures and co-operation and collaboration styles.
- ◆ Recognising that issues grassroots women face world wide are related and that their strategies to confront these issues, are also related. Mirroring each others strengths and challenges, as well as inspiring innovative thinking and new strategies.
- ◆ Producing and securing a grassroots knowledge base, to enrich each others practices as well as to inform legislation and policies. Creating visibility, recognition and acknowledgement for grassroots knowledge and practices. Extending the scope and influence of grassroots learnings and expertise. Controlling the teachings and dissemination of grassroots knowledge and practices.
- ◆ Creating transfer and up-scaling of grassroots practices, from one group to another, one region to another, and one continent to another. This is the case with the German Mother Centers, that have meanwhile spread into 15 countries on 4 continents, or in the case of the Indian Saving and Credit groups. This strategy has spread from the South to grassroots women's groups in the North.
- ◆ Creating dialogues with partners from other sectors of society in a direct and unfiltered form and allowing for a process between grassroots and mainstream partners, to understand what makes sustainable partnerships, and when respective partnerships work and when not.



## **Consolidating Grassroots Women's Knowledge**

For women's work to be appreciated in the world, it needs to be documented. For grassroots practices to translate into policies, they need to be named and owned by grassroots organisations and networks. For grassroots knowledge to create an alternative to mainstream approaches to education and capacity building, it needs to be consolidated and organised on an on-going, sustainable basis.

So far Grassroots Women's International Academies have been organised on a pilot basis and according to need and occasion, but not regularly and systematically. The need is felt to create GWIA as a long term organisational structure, where transformational knowledge and education, can emerge as a continuous bottom up process, of transfer of local solutions, peer learning and networking.

As permanent structure and institutional learning arm of grassroots women's practices, GWIA provides a continuous base for interaction and learning, among grassroots women's groups as well as with mainstream partners. Lessons from each session, can be carried forward to the next. A widespread grid of grassroots exchanges, dissemination and training formats, can create powerful cumulative knowledge development and a sturdy foundation for grassroots expertise to be visible and influential. A systematic co-ordination and monitoring of the policy implications of grassroots knowledge building and learning systems, is the basis for grassroots wisdom to be present, in shaping and defining mainstream education.



**GWIA systemises  
Gender Mainstreaming**

GWIA as a structural knowledge and policy interface contributes to:

- ◆ Highlighting women's leadership roles in issues like local governance, post disaster, community development or environmental sustainability;
- ◆ Outlining what gender mainstreaming in these areas means;
- ◆ Conducting and linking GWIA events in a systematic format;
- ◆ Co-ordinating exchanges, study tours, consultations and transfers;
- ◆ Creating a network of grassroots Living and Learning Centers;
- ◆ Shaping grassroots cases, approaches and strategies into targeted pieces for specific audiences;

- ◆ Preparing grassroots stories and lessons for print publications, electronic publications, audio and radio programs, video and TV programs, and academic data bases;
- ◆ Building a resource center for grassroots practices and information;
- ◆ Generating and disseminating training materials and manuals;
- ◆ Linking grassroots teachings with modern technologies;
- ◆ Creating hard cover and on line curricula and trainings that can be incorporated into universities and education institutions;
- ◆ Linking grassroots lessons to mainstream debates;
- ◆ Creating targeted campaigns to ensure that grassroots innovations influence policy at local, national and international levels;
- ◆ Designing accreditation procedures for grassroots knowledge;
- ◆ Defining the role of policies in sustaining grassroots practices;
- ◆ Designing structured dialogues and trainings for mainstream partners;
- ◆ Developing criteria and monitoring systems, for equitable and sustainable partnerships with mainstream partners beyond chequebook philanthropy.

### **The People's Process**

Grassroots groups use their learning formats and methodology also when engaging with local authorities and other mainstream partners.

Grassroots exchanges and study tours often include the participation of local authorities, who end up bonding with their local groups stronger as an effect of travelling and learning together. Community groups invite their officials to fairs or festive occasions where they demonstrate and celebrate their achievements. Local to Local Dialogues are conducted to engage in structured communication with local authorities. Dialogue meetings with the State are held, in which grassroots groups give feedback on how government programs have been working, what could be improved and how resources could be better utilised. Visits from grassroots groups from other parts of the world, are used to expose local authorities to local strategies and successes that they have failed to notice or to understand and value adequately.

These kind of events create direct channels for communication and negotiations between grassroots groups, local authorities and other stakeholders in the community that are outside

regular governance procedures, but that are nevertheless public. To bring government down to community turf, to bring the formal world into the informal world of everyday life, is a key process that induces major learning and major (re)-education of city officials and mainstream partners. This cannot happen when they stay inside the parameters of their own corporate culture.

Grassroots practices and participation in governance, are strengthened when negotiations and procedures are flexible and less formal, when there is room for direct communication and debate, when there is room for experimentation with new formats and bottom up governance.

"The District Chief sat with all his department heads on one side and all the local councillors on the other. Filling the room were community people - lots of them - who stood up one at a time to explain what specific problems they had: water supply, solid waste, education, tenure and to negotiate directly and publicly with the districts. It was like a little parliament and the District Chief facilitated the interaction between all these actors."

*People's Process in Thailand, quoted from Face to Face, Notes from the Network on Community Exchange. A publication of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Jan. 2000*

Expecting grassroots groups to learn and adapt to mainstream protocol and procedures, usually proves to be a far less effective learning and capacity building tool, than the innovations and learning that get sparked off, when mainstream actors leave their offices and meet and engage directly with grassroots contingencies in the communities.

Strategies that try to induce more direct community involvement, like community round tables, Agenda 21 processes, community consultations etc. have been spreading in the last decade, to try to capture the power of grassroots knowledge and involvement. Experience shows however, that if they do not involve institutional change and innovation, but try to feed such processes into traditional structures and formal and bureaucratic procedures, their impact stays very limited or gets lost all together.

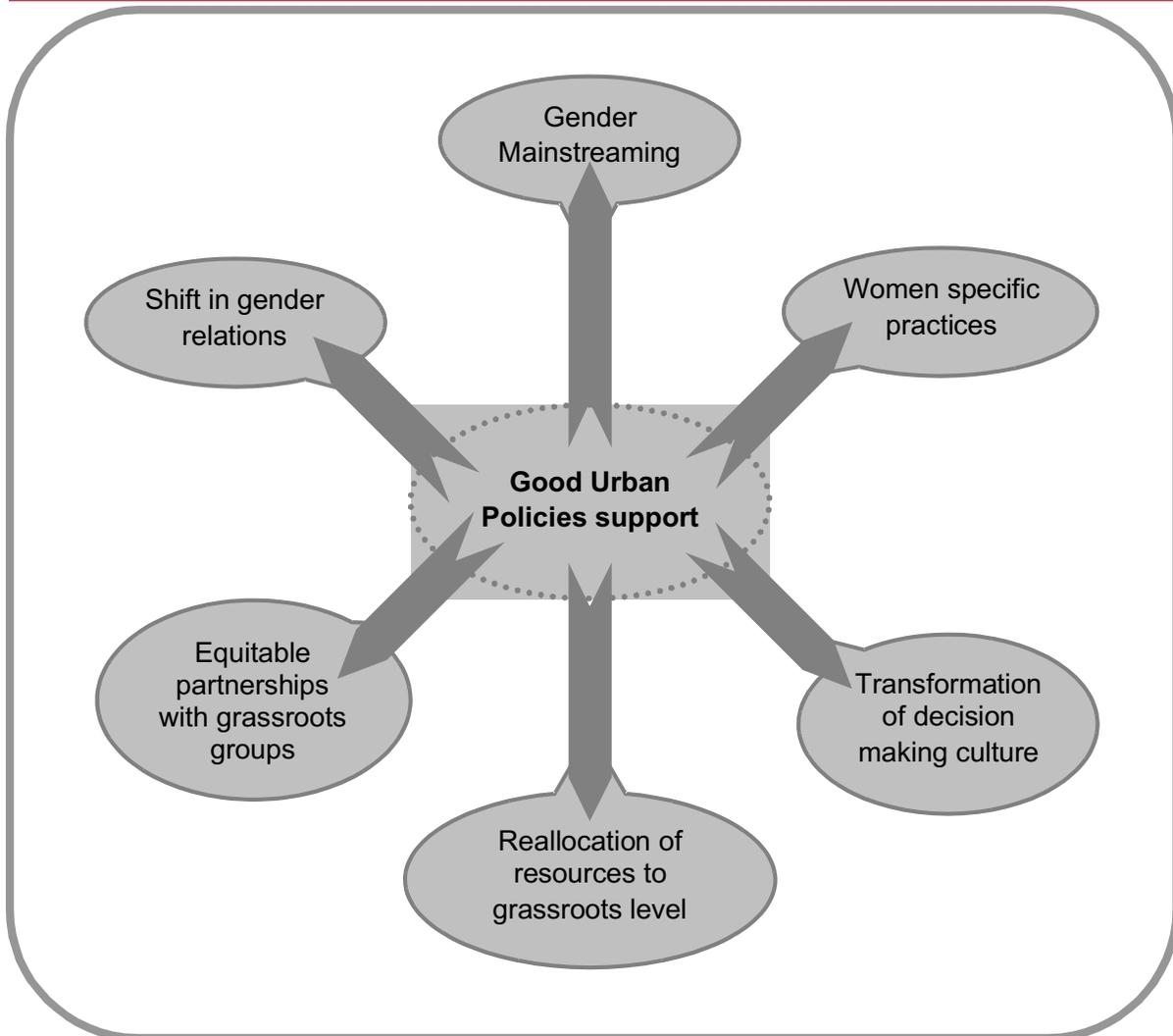
## **Recommendations**

Grassroots learning systems challenge mainstream education to re-examine its parameters and to re-think its organisation, as well as underlying goals and values. Grassroots learning focuses on processes, on how to learn and create solutions, versus on outcomes and specific results. The main objective of community education, is to enable grassroots groups to gain the skills, information and attitudes, that they need to develop the solutions that can solve the problems in the communities in which they live.

Investing in community led capacity building, requires a shift of resources, as well as of recognition, legitimacy and visibility to the grassroots level. Grassroots peer learning systems need to access independent and direct funding. Community education needs to be recognised and established as a sector in its own right, distinct from state and other institutional actors. Education and capacity building needs to be seen as an investment in long term peer learning and networking processes, that include experimentation, rather than as short term trainings and programs.

Community education initiatives go the route from being receivers of programs or trainings, to defining their own needs and processes, based on their unique expertise as everyday life practitioners. This requires a redefinition of mainstream and institutional actors, from being the ones teaching and defining capacity building, to engaging in principled and equitable partnerships with knowledge building actors and systems from the ground.

Such a shift also requires a redefinition of professionalism as the qualities needed to create equitable partnerships with grassroots practices and teaching these skills in colleges and other professional training institutions. How to be a resource for grassroots empowerment, how to open up channels for grassroots expertise to enter decision making on all levels of policy making, including political administration as well as civil society, media, foundations, financial agencies and mainstream education institutions, become important components of professional qualification.



This process can be supported by the following elements:

- ◆ Creation of an endowment facility to support grassroots peer learning and networking, exchanges and knowledge transfers;
- ◆ Availability of spaces and locations for grassroots learning systems;
- ◆ Creation of a process oriented organisational structure for the development of a grassroots information and knowledge base;
- ◆ Developmental and open ended funding policies for self organised learning;
- ◆ Opening up of knowledge venues for grassroots culture;
- ◆ Recognition of grassroots expertise as equitable to professional qualifications;
- ◆ Involvement of grassroots communities in designing education and accreditation;
- ◆ Grassroots participation in knowledge dissemination and transfer systems;
- ◆ Inclusion of grassroots knowledge and expertise in decision making in all stages;
- ◆ Creation of opportunities for regular and on-going dialogue between mainstream education institutions and community learning and education systems.

### **The LIFE Program**

LIFE is a UNDP global flagship programme to promote local-local dialogue and partnership between NGOs, CBOs, Local Governments and Private Sector, for improving the living conditions of the urban poor and influencing policies for participatory local governance. Using "upstreaming - downstreaming - upstreaming" approach, LIFE provides small grants (up to US \$50,000) directly to NGOs and CBOs for need based participatory community-based projects in urban poor communities; supports capacity development of local actors and promotes advocacy and policy dialogues, using the experience of the projects. LIFE is in operation in 12 developing countries where the LIFE national programmes are managed and monitored by multi-stakeholder National Steering Committee. In addition, LIFE supports regional and global NGOs and Cities Associations, to demonstrate and advocate participatory local governance for sustainable human development.

### **The Huairou Commission**

The lack of a gender perspective in settlement issues, inspired the creation of the Huairou Commission. It is an advocacy partnership group, formed by a network of grassroots women's international organisations, to forge strategic partnerships to advance the capacity of grassroots women world-wide, to strengthen and create sustainable communities.

The Huairou Commission promotes the work of low income women in developing strategies to sustain and create communities, within the principles adopted by the UN Habitat Agenda for housing, sustainability, equity, human dignity and social justice.

Grassroots women create homes and communities.

They do so intimately, through all the familiar, endless tasks - cooking, cleaning, building, repairing, planting, buying, selling, caring for the sick, the old and the young. Their work gives them an incomparable perspective on how their community works and what it needs.

The Huairou Commission is about:

- ◆ Building on, broadening, strengthening and sharing grassroots knowledge;
- ◆ Strengthening grassroots leadership to influence the decision making processes which shape their communities;
- ◆ Transforming policies and institutions by working with partners on engendering community development.

Networks that make up the core of the Huairou Commission include:

- ◆ Asian Women and Shelter Network (AWAS)
- ◆ GROOTS
- ◆ Habitat International Coalition Women and Shelter Network (HIC-WAS)
- ◆ International Council of Women (ICW)
- ◆ WEDO
- ◆ Women & Cities Network,
- ◆ Women and Peace Network.

Partners that work together with and have supported the Huairou Commission include

- ◆ UN Habitat
- ◆ UNIFEM,
- ◆ UNDP,
- ◆ WACLAC,
- ◆ IULA, as well as faith based organisations like the Methodist Church.

The Huairou Commission seeks to empower grassroots women, re-educate policy makers, channel resources to the level of the community and change the culture of public policy making and public events, to be more inclusive of grassroots groups and perspectives. Creating partnerships and a new way of partnering is essential to the Huairou Commission's strategy for change.

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