

## UNDERSTANDING DISASTER RESILIENCE

### Grassroots Women's Strategies for Building Disaster Resilience

In two regions – Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia, GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission have facilitated conversations with grassroots women at different learning forums in order to collectively develop a shared understanding of resilience. The following are some of the ideas and actions discussed with grassroots women leaders in these two regions. These conversations are helping us evolve common understanding of resilience.

Grassroots women's groups in poor communities are working collectively to improve the lives of their families and communities. Everyday, these women work hard to make sure that their families and communities have food, shelter, water, sanitation and that their livelihoods and homes are secure. Floods, droughts, landslides, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and earthquakes deepen and worsen the problems poor women experience as a result of their poverty. So when asked about their disaster risk reduction strategies or resilience building strategies women will usually find it difficult to separate their everyday survival strategies from their strategies for reducing the impact of disasters. Thus GROOTS International has tried to facilitate conversations that enable women to reflect on their development and disaster experiences to help women to create a common understanding of resilience.

### What is resilience?

Resilience refers to bouncing back to the original position, shape or form without being misshapen or damaged.

Policymakers and practitioners are using the word 'resilience' to talk about the **capacities of communities to cope with the shocks and stresses** they experience as a result of natural disasters and climate change.

Building community resilience to natural disasters and climate change includes several actions bundled together. They include actions taken both before and after disasters. All the actions are centered around one core idea: improving community capacities to reduce the impacts of disaster and climate change.

Resilience is the capacity of a community to organize itself to reduce the impact of disasters by protecting lives, livelihoods, homes, assets, basic services, and infrastructure. Capacities include skills, knowledge, resources, practices and networks.

Resilience includes the capacities of communities to advance development processes, social networks and institutional partnerships that strengthen the ability of the community to cope with and recover from disasters.

Rather than focusing on the definitions of the different terms used by practitioners and policymakers, our discussions have focused on getting grassroots women to understand resilience from an operational perspective to help them recognize and build on existing efforts that reduce the impact of disasters.

## Naming Hazards

- Hurricanes
- Droughts
- Windstorms
- Frosts / Cold waves
- Volcanic eruptions
- Landslides, mudslides
- Tsunamis
- Earthquakes

These are natural phenomenon. They don't have to lead to disasters. It is when hazards connect with communities that are vulnerable that they cause death, damage and destruction. By understanding their vulnerabilities and identifying and strengthening their capacities to resist, cope with and recover from disasters, communities can protect their communities from damage and loss.

## Risks and Vulnerabilities

**What are the problems that women experience as a result of natural disasters in their communities**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inadequate basic services</li> <li>▪ Poor Sanitation</li> <li>▪ Water contamination</li> <li>▪ Children fall sick – water borne diseases</li> <li>▪ Roads submerged / damaged</li> <li>▪ School is far away</li> <li>▪ No health center</li> <li>▪ Housing</li> <li>▪ Houses located in disaster prone areas – river banks, hillsides vulnerable to flooding or landslides.</li> <li>▪ Poor construction</li> <li>▪ Squatters and renters with Insecure tenure</li> <li>▪ Relocation sites lack basic services and livelihoods</li> <li>▪ Infrastructure</li> <li>▪ Bad roads / no roads</li> <li>▪ Livelihoods</li> <li>▪ No awareness on entitlements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Destruction of assets – equipment, livestock</li> <li>▪ Livelihoods, Housing, crisis credit/ funds</li> <li>▪ Inability to access markets</li> <li>▪ Delays in relief supplies reaching communities</li> <li>▪ Food shortages</li> <li>▪ Destruction of crops, agricultural produce</li> <li>▪ Disappearance of indigenous foods that can survive drought or floods.</li> <li>▪ Degradation of natural resources</li> <li>▪ Deforestation causing landslides</li> <li>▪ Soil erosion</li> <li>▪ Water scarcity</li> <li>▪ Government, Policy, Planning</li> <li>▪ Women not involved in planning</li> <li>▪ Government is indifferent to community needs</li> <li>▪ No contingency plans – no coordinated response to disaster</li> <li>▪ No information on public resources available</li> </ul> |
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## Analyzing vulnerabilities

Poor communities often have insecure shelters, built on unstable lands, they do not have adequate access to clean drinking water, health and sanitation facilities are missing from their settlements, their livelihoods and incomes are unstable and they are excluded from decision making processes. Problems discussed represented both risks – i.e. damage and loss in the event of a disaster; or vulnerabilities – problems that increased the impact of disaster.

When analyzing community vulnerabilities, we found that women name structural factors – unsafe houses, houses too close to the sea side, poor sanitation – that could cause damage and loss. They also went on to identify economic, social and political realities that increase the likelihood of damage and destruction. These realities included poverty, food shortages, the lack of government subsidies for food crops, the lack of reliable information and the loss of indigenous knowledge and practices. These problems are more intangible not as visible, but are nevertheless crucial to the abilities of grassroots women to protect their communities from the impacts of disasters.

## Mapping Risks, Resources and Capacities

One way of helping women develop their understanding of resilience, is to provide opportunities – whether this is for a few hours or a few days - to visit disaster prone communities and see for themselves how these communities experienced disaster risks and what resources, practices and relationships they had had to cope with and reduce the impact of disasters in their settlements. Community risk mapping processes led by grassroots women leaders has emerged as a practical tool which grassroots women are using to understand and analyze what makes their communities vulnerable to disaster and the resources, skills, capacities, knowledge and relationships which reduce the impact of disaster.

Grassroots women were also given opportunities to learn and participate in collectively making maps of their communities, in which they were asked to look at which people, structures and resources were threatened by disasters and what resources, skills, practices and partnerships they could mobilize to reduce the disasters. Here are some examples of the kinds of risks, vulnerabilities, resources, practices and solutions that grassroots women identified:

*This is what participants at the Asian Grassroots Academy found when they visited Basak San Nicolas, near Cebu City, Philippines. This community was highly vulnerable to typhoons, fires and threatened by reclamation projects that will displace them. Houses are built too close to each other and made of light materials, which in the event of typhoons and fires, will lead communities to lose both their houses and their livelihoods.*

*Community, women went from house to house to motivate the community to form small groups in their settlements eventually coming together to form a federation. Group members in the federations took different responsibilities as part of committees that worked on securing land tenure, disaster preparedness, education, health, livelihoods and sanitation. They also formed emergency task forces that ensured that warnings are sent out before typhoons hit the community. The task forces also include 32 women leaders from the Bantay Banay network who are trained volunteers. The volunteers are closely linked to government and other institutions, making it easier to coordinate in emergencies. The visitors noted several important elements of the community including, the credible leadership in the barangay, regular clean up and de-clogging of drains, presence of emergency facilities and good coordination with multiple stakeholders. All these were community strengths that would reduce the impact of disasters on communities. At the same time women noted that this community did not have adequate livelihoods or a decent waste disposal system, which would increase their problems in the event of a disaster.*

*During a four-country exchange in Honduras, in which a group of grassroots women from Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras learned to map risks and vulnerabilities from Jamaican grassroots leaders in the coastal town of Guadalupe. After making a map of the settlement, they collectively analyzed the different kinds of vulnerabilities that increased the impact of disasters: These included the lack of warning systems, houses that were poorly constructed and would collapse in a hurricane; trees around the houses would also fall on the houses, crops cultivated on the low lands would be destroyed, there was poor drainage which would increase the likelihoods of floods and the lack of medical facilities. In addition the group identified the lack of political will, lack of legal protection as things that made them vulnerable. In addition to structural changes to prevent flooding and mosquitoes to prevent epidemics, the group included reviving indigenous knowledge and practices and cooperating with the municipality as key to their ability to withstand disasters. Communities that are not organized were seen as more vulnerable than those that were.*

## Strategies that Reduce Disaster Impact and Increase Disaster Resilience

These are strategies that women said they used to prevent damage and destruction in their settlements and to protect lives, livelihoods and homes and improve living conditions in their communities

### ORGANIZING COMMUNITIES

- Mobilizing, organizing, awareness raising i.e. formation of cooperatives, federations, disaster management committees

### IMPROVING SANITATION

- Construction of canals
- De-clogging drains and canals
- Solid waste management

### IMPROVING HEALTH AND ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

- Linkages with health service providers
- Community Health Insurance
- Community Pharmacies
- Herbal and home remedies (prevent and cure)

### SECURING HOUSING AND SHELTER

- Securing land and housing
- Financial mechanisms for house ownership
- Schools as emergency shelters
- Land certification / titling

### IMPROVING INFRASTRUCTURE

- Repairing and constructing roads
- Improving transportation
- Creating bridges to reach isolated communities
- Building retaining walls to prevent mudslides

### BUILDING COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTERS

- Safe spaces for women and children
- Community shelters

### ENSURING FOOD SECURITY and LIVELIHOODS

- Micro-finance, savings and credit programs
- Income restoration programs
- Rice retailing
- Restoring livelihoods assets, machines, equipment
- Cooperatives to provide credit
- Organic agriculture through tool and seed banks to sustain livelihoods
- Emergency food stocks

### CONSERVING NATURAL RESOURCES

- Planting trees along hillsides to prevent landslides and soil erosion
- Seed banks
- Water harvesting
- Planting indigenous fruit trees in coastal areas
- Planting mangroves to protect coastal ecology
- Protecting and planting indigenous herbs and medicinal plants

### ACCESSING INSTITUTIONAL FUNDS

- Accessing local budgets for disaster risk reduction
- Accessing development budgets (for sanitation, housing, Infrastructure) to fund to disaster risk reduction priorities

## MAPPING AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING

- Mapped disaster risk in their communities
- Identifying shelters where people can be sheltered in an emergency
- Early warning(indigenous) and communication systems
- Negotiating with government and other partners to respond to community needs
- Monitoring DRR programs
- Reducing corruption by ensuring accountability and transparency
- Membership in decision-making bodies

## CREATING PARTNERSHIPS FOR PLANNING

- Strong relationships with local, provincial or national government enabling women to participate in planning and coordinating their response

## Good development generally makes communities more resilient

The overlap between grassroots women's development initiatives and disaster resilience priorities convey the fact that good development makes communities more resilient and enhances their ability to cope with and recover from natural disasters. A functioning, affordable public healthcare system and high awareness of diseases can prevent epidemics in the event of a disaster. When women's groups are well organized and can speak in one collective voice they can influence and impact decision-making – this creates programs and plans that respond to their needs and priorities. Those with secure tenure can make investments to improve to retrofit their houses, making them disaster resistant.

## Bad development usually makes communities more vulnerable

It was also pointed out that development programs that marginalize poor communities can increase disaster risks and vulnerabilities of communities. Bad development programs can destroy natural resources, indigenous knowledge, livelihoods and food security, thus eroding communities' abilities to cope and recover from disasters. Insecure housing and regular evictions often means that communities won't invest in building safer structures that can withstand earthquakes, typhoons and floods. Lack of sanitation, drainage and solid waste management systems will result in water borne diseases in the event of floods. Exclusion from decision making processes and the absence of engagement mechanisms reduces community access to resources and development programs.

## Core elements of community resilience efforts and good development

1. **Organization:** Organizations, platforms and constituencies of grassroots women and communities
2. **Skills, knowledge and capacities:** consolidating and transferring knowledge and practices that enable grassroots women to minimize losses and rapidly recover from disasters
3. **Engaging institutional actors such as government and local authorities:** Engaging and influencing decision makers to ensure coordination between institutions and communities along with responsive, accountable institutional arrangements.

## THE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HYOGO FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA) is an international policy commitment whose goal is the “substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries” by year 2015. There are 5 Priority Areas of Action of the framework. While the Hyogo framework and the five priorities for action are unfamiliar to grassroots women’s, it’s evident that many of the local actions that grassroots women are undertaken in their communities are actually ways in which they are locally implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action. During the Asian Grassroots Academy grassroots women were oriented on the HFA as well as given examples of how many activities they had heard about represented local efforts to implement the HFA. In addition grassroots women were also made aware that the HFA also names gender and community participation as crosscutting principles that should be addressed across all five priority areas of action. This means that there have to be clear mandates within all programs for grassroots women’s participation with resources allocated for the implementation of these mandates:

## HYOGO FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

### Five Priorities for Action

HFA Priorities for Action	How grassroots women are implementing the 5 Priorities for Action
<b>1. Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation.</b>	Here, while national governments are passing laws, formulating policies and allocating budgets to disaster risk reduction, local authorities and local groups are disconnected from these processes. But in Bicol, Philippines a city sharing process led to a multi-stakeholder agreement in which the city and urban poor communities each have roles in taking action to reduce disaster risk. In Nicaragua, the Cooperativa Las Brumas, a union of women's agricultural cooperatives has used risk mapping to negotiate with local and national authorities to support women farmers' efforts to protect their natural environment.
<b>2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning</b>	<p>Increasingly, communities are using community risk mapping methodologies to identify vulnerabilities, risks, resources and capacities so that they can plan their actions to reduce the impact of disasters in their communities.</p> <p>When communities visited Baranguay Apas they found that everyone in the community – including children were aware of the risks related to flooding faced by the community. In Basak San Nicolas women went house to house motivating community members to organize themselves. Once organized group members created committees in which one of these communities addressed disaster preparedness. Emergency task forces created ensured that warnings were communicated to the community before floods and typhoons hit their community.</p>
<b>3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.</b>	The Asian Grassroots Academy where grassroots women leaders from several countries came together to share and transfer their knowledge and strategies for building resilience was an effort to mobilize the knowledge, innovations and experiences. Throughout the Academy grassroots women shared their strategies and innovations which could be transferred to other communities to reduce the impact of disasters. For example the women's health groups in Tamil Nadu shared their strategy of working with the government to prevent water-borne diseases which usually increase during disasters. Sri Lankan women spoke of improving drainage; in Baranguay Guba visitors saw that formers had planted trees to prevent soil erosion from landslides Honduran participants spoke of reviving indigenous knowledge to ensure livelihoods and food security. Participants also decided to develop regional and sub-regional networks to share and transfer effective resilience practices within and across countries.
<b>4. Reduce the underlying risk factors</b>	One example of this was DAMPA's work in Quezon City in Manila to relocate families from flood prone areas. But some of the underlying causes for risk were not just the location of the community but their insecure housing and lack of basic services. Thus DAMPA developed organizing and negotiation strategies for securing basic services and livelihoods for the relocated community. In addition DAMPA also developed innovative financial instruments like the community mortgage to enable community members to own their homes. Many efforts to reduce poverty, secure housing, protect livelihoods and assets would fall under this priority as the vulnerabilities to disaster are often embedded in poverty.
<b>5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.</b>	After the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo drastically affected the lives of those living in Zambales, the community organized to create strategies to reduce the risks of future disasters. Initiatives included among others creating alternative livelihoods, food security programs, early warning systems, evacuation plans, and conducting hazard mapping, all with the support and coordination of the Local Government Unit. In addition, the Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance included relief operations and medical missions to ensure that all citizens are protected. This community is illustrative of the fact that when communities work in an enabling environment with multiple stakeholders, community capacities are enhanced, disaster preparedness is strengthened and vulnerabilities are substantially reduced.