

**Community Practitioner - Policymakers Dialogue**  
*Disaster Risk Reduction and Role of Grassroots Women's groups*  
November 5, 2009, New Delhi, India



During a visit to New Delhi on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2009, UN Asst. Secretary General Margareta Wahlstrom spent a morning at a community practitioner and policymakers' dialogue organized by the National Alliance on Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (NAADRR), Swayam Shikshan Prayog, GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission. In addition to the 30 grassroots leaders and NGO staff from 9 states of India, policymakers were represented by the UNDP country office, UNISDR's headquarters and Asia-Pacific offices and the Government of India's National Disaster Management Authority.

The dialogue focused primarily on the Community Disaster Resilience Fund (CDRF), a mechanism designed to put resources in the hands of communities, enabling them to demonstrate their capacities to reduce disaster risk, build local alliances and to promote a community driven approach to DRR.

Much of the morning was spent listening to grassroots women's accounts of losses experienced during disasters and actions they were undertaking to reduce such losses. Grassroots women leaders talked about the impacts of disasters and climate change in their communities: untimely rain, cyclones, droughts and floods which were responsible for the loss of livestock, loss of crops, water shortages, food insecurity and the lack of incomes and employment. Several women reiterated the idea that being organized as self help groups had been key to their ability to take sustained, collective action.

In pastoral communities of Bikaner, Rajasthan, grassroots women explained that they were using the CDRF to revive an indigenous grass called sevan grass in two model villages to demonstrate the benefits of this grass as fodder. Women were also creating fodder banks and selling this sevan grass to other villages.

In Sanghamitra Service Society, Krishna district, Andhra Pradesh, 8 ideas for vulnerability reduction were identified through community mapping and collective reflection. However community leaders soon realized that they could raise funds elsewhere to implement several of these ideas. So they decided to use the CDRF funds to support the federation of community response teams and the fisherfolk's federation to plant 15 acres of shelter belt and mangrove forests in two villages to protect the coastal ecology. In addition – since 2007 – community leaders have been part of an inter-state and inter-district network through which they have had opportunities to form and train several emergency response teams. SSS now has 48 trainers who specialize in emergency response and water and sanitation. The community response teams coordinated and worked closely with the District Collector's office in the recent flood in September 2009.

In Assam, in response to monsoon floods and sudden cloudbursts and flashfloods Rural Volunteers Center formed village level emergency response teams. In addition 14 groups across 2 districts are involved in expanding and securing the market spaces which are managed by women. RVC was also supporting communities to raise the levels of handpumps and houses to reduce the impact of floods. Through the Silk Board, RVC has organized training to upgrade women's traditional skills and provide machines to increase productivity of silk yarn.

C. Kasthuri, a senior grassroots woman leader from Covenant Center for Development from drought ridden areas of Tamil Nadu talked about the challenge of creating local livelihoods that build on local resources and skills of federations of women's groups to access local markets. 'We have formed companies owned by women's federations to do this. We have one herbal medicines business supplying raw material or processed herbs to other companies, a mango business that supplies pulp and a retail food company. Following the tsunami we restored livelihoods by applying the same strategy in the coastal districts. From 7 federations we scaled up our work to 23 federations which organized livelihoods groups to access markets. Muttulakshmi from Kanyakumari district was a leader from these federations. She added that 500 women who are sea shell artisans have federated to sell their products through wholesalers. As a result of the CDRF which provides small capital to make their products and enables them to negotiate good prices with wholesalers they are getting an income of 100 per day.

In Jamnagar, Gujarat where saline ingress is a major problem, Saurashtra Voluntary Actions (SAVA) requested communities to add their own money to the CDRF in order to seal bore wells to prevent salinity. But communities went far beyond matching the fund. Whereas the CDRF provided Rs 5000 in each village the communities have added Rs.14,000 to this fund. Thus while they had targeted a total of 25,000 as people's contribution it is currently Rs. 62,000. SAVA has also supported 208 farmers to buy weather insurance.

Women from Kanchan Seva Ashram in Darbhanga, Bihar, spoke about their efforts to revolve the CDRF through their self help groups. They had invested in fishing and agriculture and had even leased land to grow vegetables such as peas and cauliflower, rather than the traditional rice, as this would yield a harvest in a shorter time and thus were good for food security as well as incomes. Women also pointed out that they were now that they were now active in the village emergency response and had grain banks in every village.

In Uttarakhand, the self help groups linked to Institute for Development Support from Pauri Garwal was undertaking reforestation and fodder security by leveraging government resources. The CDRF was being used to invest in a collective dairy business managed by the federation.

Udyama, an NGO network from Orissa described how they had revived dysfunctional self help groups and activated them in gathering baseline information in their villages. The CDRF funds were essentially being utilized in three ways – for DRR and for economic activities. DRR activities included repairing embankments, training in lifesaving skills, acquiring first aid kits for emergency response. Here community members were required to replace medicines after they used them. Economic activities included investing in small businesses, rice, processing machines and cashew plantations or intensive rice cultivation. Udyama also organized panchayat and district level advocacy workshops in addition to advocacy with several state and national agencies.

Women also provided examples of how they were linking with gram panchayats (village councils) and government programs at district level. One woman from Bihar stated that it was because of the strengthening of the local governing bodies and self help groups that voices of women were now being heard. From the discussions it was also clear that communities were aware that their livelihoods were being severely impacted by climate change. A farmer from UP working with Grameen Development Services also spoke of the problems of climate change and the unpredictable weather patterns – while he had planted a new variety of rice to cope with the floods so that he could harvest his rice earlier in the year before the floods came, last year floods came much earlier than expected and washed away his crop. He also spoke of the fact that all youths were migrating from their villages in search of wage labor, elsewhere.

One of the insights from these discussions was that all the groups were exploring ways to replenish some proportion of the Fund. They had divided the Fund into two components –one was going towards investments in improvements such as water pumps or investing in demonstrating new solutions while the other portion of the fund was being revolved by the savings groups or federations in order to strengthen livelihoods. Thus communities were doing their best to ensure that at least some proportion of the fund would be replenished and revolved.

It was also clear that the Community Disaster Resilience Fund is more than just the money that goes to communities. It is also a catalyst that has sparked off multiple initiatives at the local level, that are both DRR and development focused. The process by which communities are brought together to reflect on their vulnerabilities and priorities has led to the identification of several priorities. Many of these are funded through other government programs.

The experiences of women's groups in Tsunami affected areas had been instrumental in the creation of the CDRF because NGOs saw what could be accomplished with grassroots women's involvement and what could be the problems when communities and women were marginalized from decision making.

Vijayalaxmi from tsunami affected Cuddalore stated that newly constructed houses in Tsunaminagar, Cuddalore were vulnerable, located in low lying areas with poor sanitation and poor quality construction. UNDP's Assistant Country Director and former Collector of Nagapattinam, admitted that the government had indeed made mistakes in the way they designed houses and had neglected to weathercoat them. S. Chithra from Nagapattinam described how she had organized groups to start addressing health, water supply and sanitation, adding in response to a question on women's ability to influence panchayats, that groups would give panchayats agenda points for gramsabha or village assembly meetings. She said, "The tsunami recovery process was a big opportunity for us to get organized. Before the tsunami we only did savings and loans. Today we are working on health, water, sanitation and we even make suggestions to the panchayats on the agenda of gramsabha (village assembly) meetings."

Having listened very carefully to grassroots leaders and NGOs on their experiences, Margareta Wahlstrom commented that she was impressed with what she had heard. It was evident that for community based organizations the significance of the CDRF was that they had the freedom to use it for problems that they prioritized. She noted also that grassroots women were adding their own funds and expanding the funds they had been given through the CDRF. She also commented that at the base of all the community initiatives were organized self help groups and that there were both challenges and opportunities for women who were linking to the local governing bodies at the village level. The importance of livelihoods in building community resilience, was evident from the discussions she had

heard. In closing Ms. Wahlstrom's questions to community leaders present – "do you feel that we are listening to you and that you can influence us?" drew attention to the need for policy makers to listen to communities in order to create more effective DRR programs.

In his closing remarks Prof Vinod Menon, Member, National Disaster Management Authority Government of India, pointed out that there were many more women than men present in the room and that this dialogue had more community voices than any meeting he had attended in recent times. Recalling Ms. Wahlstrom's point on the poverty reduction, sustainable development and DRR gains, Prof. Menon stated that CDRF in fact addressed three.

He stated that ensuring that community voices are heard by national, provincial and international organizations will be critical to DRR and the rest of the HFA implementation period and that he was certain this would indeed happen under Margareta Wahlstrom's leadership. Prof. Menon called for the UNISDR to promote the idea of "DRR with a human face" with governments and other institutions. Noting that the UN was changing and that UNDP was committed to scaling up the CDRF in India, he said that if DRR is to succeed it has to look at women's voices, grassroots organizations and children and he stated emphatically that women are not victims, they are committed change agents who can build the confidence of the communities. He called on policymakers to invest in grassroots initiatives and leadership and stated that there was a need to demonstrate these concepts, share the lessons with civil society and government organizations in order for them to scale up this model.

While recognizing the National Alliance for their belief that the CDRF was workable, Prof. Menon also went on to record his deep appreciation for Margaret Arnold (former Head, Provention Consortium) and Sandy Schilen (Global Facilitator of GROOTS International) for their vision, their faith in communities and the funds invested in this innovative project. He also thanked General Vij, for giving Prof. Menon the freedom to support this endeavour on behalf of the NDMA. Prof. Menon ended with the hope that he could bring the CDRF to the Government of India and Planning Commission to endorse it within the district level initiatives of the 12 Five Year Plan.

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#### **HONORING GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S SUSTAINED CONTRIBUTIONS TO RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT**

Margareta Wahlstrom along with Praveen Pardeshi from UN ISDR also spent a day in Osmanabad district visiting villages hit by the Latur Earthquake in 1993. A village meeting in Lohara village was organized by Swayam Shikshan Prayog to help understand the role of grassroots women and the progress that communities had made as a result of grassroots women's involvement in the reconstruction process.

Federation leader Sharifa stated that she did not know anything before the earthquake as they were not organized and had no knowledge of SHG or the gram panchayat. It was through their work as self-help groups involved in both livelihoods and local village development that they became a force to contend with in the village. Women who had gathered in Lohara stated that among other things, they were now monitoring basic services such as the primary health center, promoting vegetable gardens to improve nutrition, they had participated in the Total Sanitation Campaign and undergone training in toilet construction and waste water management.

In the Government's Water and Sanitation Program, Jalswarajya 10% was to be funded by the GP. However, the GP could not pay this money so women's groups in Lohara agreed to pay this money through their self-help group funds. Women were actively involved in the inspection, monitoring and

construction of water/ pipes?. Even the contracts of more than 81 lakhs were overseen by women. Praveen Pardeshi from UNISDR stated that it was because women were managing the water supply that it was successful and water was actually reaching households. The Block Development Officer who was present also confirmed the grassroots women's role in the success of this program. The women have come a long way since the earthquake.

A small ceremony was organized in Umerga, to honor nine Communication Assistants or Samvaad Sahayaks, community leaders who were among the hundreds of grassroots women appointed by the government to disseminate information and supervise the implementation of the government's reconstruction program. For most of these women this was the first time they had undertaken public roles in their communities. Several Samvaad Sahayaks recalled their early experiences and the challenges they had faced.

Kashibai, one of the Samvaad Sahayaks present at the meeting explained that it was her role to connect communities to engineers and to government. The challenge was to get 570 houses constructed. She had to work hard to persuade homeowners to construct. "This was the beginning for us. After that we began to involve women in all the different development processes and committees. Now there are women in the village education committee, education, village water and sanitation committee, we are active in the total sanitation campaign and many other development issues. Another Samvaad Sahayak talked about how the women had reduced corruption by reporting junior engineers who were taking bribes."

Sudhamati Gore also a communication assistants found that no one trusted her. People thought that like other middle men she would try and profit from the government's program. However she soon changed their perception by facilitating community access to government entitlements and to date people go to her when they need to access government programs or funds. Sudhamati used the occasion to make a special request to the Additional Collector that women's groups should be formally appointed to identify beneficiaries for ration cards and have ration shops as well.

On a different note, a former sarpanch (village council leader) from Nanded talked about his community resource team. Water supply was the biggest problem in his village. He organized a group of men and women in his village to collaborate on a comprehensive development plan for his village which included making the village money lender free, making it open defecation free. His village was later awarded the national award in for total sanitation. Once the village had accomplished these things they decided to form a Shikwa group. This is a 10-15 person water and sanitation resource group that can be invited by officials or NGOs to train other villages. They don't only train, they also support villages to *implement* new practices such as vermi-culture for solid waste management. The Shikwa group has adopted 52 villages to do flood preparation and provides small loans to improve village water and sanitation.

All the women present at the meeting were community leaders who are at the forefront of development in their communities. They are trainers, resource persons, panchayat leaders and entrepreneurs. In addition to their savings and credit activities, federations run a retail business in which they procure and package good quality basic foods and other items and sell these. The federations also have a large health program through which they promote preventive health, use of primary health centers and a health mutual similar to an insurance program that allows communities access to a number of private and public health facilities. Women also talked about their experiments to respond to climate change and food insecurity and demonstrating organic farming by taking two plots of land and comparing results from organic farming inputs with chemical fertilizers.

Congratulating community leaders on their accomplishments, Sandy Schilen asked, “how does this level of organization help with disaster risk reduction?” Chhaya Patil from Osmanabad said, “If we have clean water, safe sanitation, food and our houses are safe then, our village will be safe. We need to do more to make it safe and make more of an effort to learn and teach one another our solutions.”

In response to what she had seen and heard in the villages, Margareta Wahlstrom reaffirmed that it was the ‘strong organizations for self help and the collaboration with government bodies’ that were the foundations which communities were using to improve their health, water, sanitation, education and income, even though improving incomes is a huge struggle. Better health, education, water and sanitation reduce the impact of disasters. These community based organizations had both the organizational and political resources to reduce the impact of disasters. Ms. Wahlstrom went on to say that if there were to be another disaster it was clear that these communities would be much better equipped to withstand it.

In her final remarks to the grassroots women present, she stated “All of you know that governments around the world are worried about the unpredictable weather patterns. We don’t have enough knowledge on what is happening locally. We must use your knowledge to inform governments by gathering information to inform governments what is happening locally to help them develop solutions. You have a lot to teach others. The 70 women present here are strong examples for women around the world, on how you can bring about change.”

- Disaster Watch, November 2009