

United Nations

Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)

International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)

Expert Group Meeting on

**“Environmental management and the mitigation of natural disasters:
a gender perspective”**

6-9 November 2001

Ankara, Turkey

**Responding to Earthquakes:
People’s Participation in Reconstruction and Rehabilitation**

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Responding to earthquakes: People's participation in Reconstruction and Rehabilitation¹

"Life, after disasters is what happens to people, while the state is busy making other plans".

Introduction

Cyclones, earthquakes and floods visit us year after year. They are a grim reminder of the lack of a disaster management policy and vulnerability reduction measures **at the national and local level**. Disasters erase in a few minutes, years of development gains disrupting the social, political and economic fabric of the affected communities. Where disasters strike, they hit the most vulnerable the hardest. Rehabilitation of earthquake-affected communities is a challenging task. It calls for vision, innovation, resources and above all long-term commitment. Rebuilding lives and livelihoods along with life support systems like shelter, health care, schools, ration shops, water supply and sanitation, etc. may take years due to the scale of the disaster.

Post disaster Response

Gujarat January 26th 2001: An earthquake of 8.0 magnitude on the Richter's scale with its epicenter at Bhuj damaged over 6,20,000 households in villages, towns and cities spread across several districts.

The response was unprecedented. The media was full of reports of valor, sacrifice, tenacity, compassion and generosity from across the country and elsewhere.

Disaster is at the same time, really a big business. It is expected that a huge amount of aid (over 2 million crores will be finally spent in rehabilitation of people and infrastructure in Gujarat²) in the shortest possible time. Additionally, massive disasters brings to fore, fault lines in institutional structures. There is breakdown within the administration and in civil society-state relations. These factors need to be considered while structuring a post disaster response.

State response

On the whole, the state response in the wake of disasters has by and large been a replication of standardized packages for reconstruction of housing and infrastructure. Such an intervention process:

- Prevents active participation by community /women's groups

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² Gujarat Earthquake Recovery Program : An Assessment Report WB and ADB March 14 2001

- Precludes a 'reality check' of what peoples' needs are in -shelter, employment, basic services etc. A failure *"to understand the economic and social realities facing disaster victims, leads to poorly designed aid efforts, which don't help protect people from the impact of future disasters"*.³
- Does not address region specific economic and social factors. Hence, programmes do not lead to recovery. *"Instead they end up rebuilding the risk of danger in future disasters by ignoring economic realities"*.⁴
- Repeats the usual tendency of centralized, uniform top-down planning and implementation seen in rural development programmes with all its evils in the emergency relief rehabilitation programmes.
- Absence of community participation /consultation/planning mechanisms.
- Allocates a disproportionately high investment on brick and mortar.
- Fails to build people's capacities to understand earthquake resistant technology
- Favors the domination of outsiders as disaster experts.
- Reinforces a client-patron type of relationship between the state and civil society groups
- Ignores people's local knowledge and skills and thus is bereft of an important resource which can sustain the programme beyond the crisis.
- Infuses massive volumes of resources into relief, shelter, basic services and infrastructure, with little or no investment in eliciting people's participation in assessment, planning and implementation.

Community Response

It is well recorded, and the recent earthquakes in Turkey and India were no exceptions, that survivors (esp. collectives of women and local organizations), mobilized to launch post-disaster initiatives in the face of tardy government response. Neighborhood groups formed rescue teams and risked their lives to save people, carry the injured to hospitals, this despite death and tragedy in own their families. At such times of crisis, people-based initiatives often precede state interventions.

Relief efforts were usually limited to providing food, medicine and clothes leaving survivors to evolve employment and shelter alternatives on their own. The trauma faced by survivors is among the critical issues, which are sidelined. Growing impoverishment and complexities of everyday survival, force women and poor communities to cope with the crisis and therefore evolve "self help" responses which:

- Bridge the gap by women taking on increased burden on behalf of their families.
- Address practical needs such as rebuilding shelter, restoring livelihoods, getting children back to school.
- Help cope with ill health and trauma of children and family members.
- Mobilize credit and other resources instead of waiting for aid.
- Enable local communities to move from disaster management to development action (Enormous potential exists to turn a "disaster" into an opportunity for sustainable community development).

³ World Disasters Report, 2001, IFRC, Geneva

While these self-initiatives are at times lauded, they remain largely invisible. Despite the crucial contribution of local survivors and communities, to-date, policy makers are yet to accord any *formal recognition and support* to grassroots community based organizations (CBOs) and women's groups in post disaster programming.

Achievements

Marmara Earthquake

Women formed collectives to generate income and explore the possibilities for working together to earn money and retain their jobs. They also increased their ability to organise themselves because they ran community centres with a range of activities that included childcare, paper making, carpentry and doll making. They took joint decisions through committees and boards about their plans and came together to share the needs and problems of the centers, the settlements, and the reconstruction process with one another.

Latur Earthquake

With the initiation of the community facilitator programme, where members of women's groups interfaced between the government and the communities, the local women's groups played a key role in the Repair and Strengthening programme after the earthquake. Crucial to the community facilitator programme was the government decision to "empower" women's groups as dialogue assistants to monitor village-wise reconstruction of houses. The women defied the long-held gender stereotypes and there was a significant shift from their being restricted to house and fieldwork to entering construction and taking on public roles. At the village level, the local leaders supported the participation of women in reconstruction first and later in long-term development.

SSP's experience of working with a 'critical mass' of women's groups from 200,000 households revealed that listening to women pays. Consequently, strengthening the participation of women's groups and communities in reconstruction, rehabilitation and later in their development in the quake-affected areas in Kutch is at the core of SSP's and its partners' strategy.

Gujarat Earthquake

The real lesson from Latur is the need to involve communities, particularly women, centrally in the planning of the repair and reconstruction effort and thereafter in the shaping of on going needs of development in their community. In SSP's view, sharing of insights and skills by women's groups with previous experience of disasters, would act as the much-needed catalyst for community efforts in Gujarat. In the last six months, over 100 women leaders have traveled to Gujarat to meet with women and communities across the three districts. The community-to-community exchanges are seen by SSP as a tool of horizontal learning.

Community Centres

The earthquake showed that crisis which offers an opportunity for social mobility of women and poor. Exchanges bring with them a new hope for affected women in Gujarat where the caste and religious barriers are predominant. The women in Gujarat were encouraged that ordinary women could come out, for the first time, and do something for their village. Women had defied tradition, by training as masons, supervising earthquake safe construction and playing public roles as community facilitators.

Relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation are actually the milestones. They should not be seen as disconnected periods after a disaster. They are pointers in the path to development. Nine months after, we are at a stage where we are looking at rehabilitation but we are moving towards developing the capacities of women and communities to address crucial development needs together with rebuilding houses and habitats.

Myths and Facts

Arising from the experience of GROOTS members and other like-minded organizations is a sampling of myths which, influence policy makers, planners, donor agencies, multilateral agencies and NGOs. These agencies, do not place adequate emphasis or resources on building community capacities, probably influenced by the following myths:

- **Myth:** Grassroots equals small scale. **Fact:** Grassroots equals very big scale.
- **Myth:** Grassroots work means low-tech work. **Fact:** Grassroots work can be very high-tech work.
- **Myth:** Grassroots equals people who need to learn and be trained. **Fact:** Grassroots can train and teach experts.
- **Myth:** Affected people are victims need to be provided with aid. **Fact:** Village communities have tremendous resilience and they are the first ones to spring to action in calamities and with a little technical assistance, they become prime movers of rehabilitation process.

In GROOTS perspective a *people-led process from disaster to development action*:

- Ensures equitable access to information and public resources
- Rebuilds housing and infrastructure with full participation of grassroots women's groups and communities
- Reestablishes livelihoods and restore essential services such as health centers and schools, to ensure basic needs
- Strengthens local governance mechanisms to increases responsiveness to community needs.
- Recognizes community institutions such as grassroots women's groups in establishing safety standards through a community self-monitoring system.

Lessons for policy makers

There are two ways of dealing with a disaster - to build houses and give it to people, or support people to rebuild their houses and lives. The manner in which communities, especially women, are facilitated to respond to disasters and to post-disaster sets the tone for their transition from disaster to development.

To enable informed participation of women and for the emergence of community-led reconstruction effort, the State has to

- Ensure information flow on entitlements
- Community consultations are held
- Empower CBOs, especially women's groups to monitor earthquake safety construction
- Create grievance redressal mechanisms
- Avoid intermediaries in the transfer of financial assistance.
- Provide technical training on earthquake resistant construction
- Establish on-site services and infrastructure

About Us

The Huairou Commission a global coalition of networks across 55 countries, working on women, communities and settlements is proposing a sequence of programmes leading to establishing a global Working Commission on Disasters and Development -WCDD that seeks to bring new voices together that can reform post-disaster policy and programming to : Focus on the nature of disaster response and its impact on women and poor communities. Highlight initiatives by multiple private/ public agencies around rebuilding communities. Initiate partnerships to demonstrate community- state projects. Advocate for a perspective on communities as partners not victims /beneficiaries.

Hosted by the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (FSWW), a HC Steering Committee member and a 16 year old NGO active in the Marmara region in Turkey following the massive earthquake in August 1999, the event is intended to culminate in the formation of the proposed HC Working Commission on Disasters and Development. Consensus on the need for a partner dialogue and a "Disasters Watch Group" emerged from the positive response to the Huairou Commission's efforts to highlight the post disaster initiatives within the global debate on Habitat issues UN Istanbul +5 held in early June in New York.

The workshops on Engendering Post-Disaster and Post Conflict Initiatives co-convened by Swayam Shikshan Prayog (India) and FSSW (Turkey) on behalf of Huairou Commission¹, presented lessons from grassroots women's groups and partnering NGOs who had advanced a de-centralised community led approach. Against the back drop of measuring governments' mid-decade progress in implementing the Habitat Agenda, the workshops urged government, UNCHS, foundation and NGO representatives focused upon sustainable human settlements, to support a "people led disaster to development strategy".

Amidst a range of review and reform initiatives underway in the field of post disaster programming and policy making the Huairou Commission's primary goal is to establish a Working Commission on Disasters consisting of a group of practitioner organisations and partners who will collaborate to shift the post disaster paradigm from top down, externally driven relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction to a community-driven, pro-poor one that highlights and empowers grassroots women's collectives as key actors.

The experience of Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) and other Huairou Commission network members (in particular Women and Peace and Asian Women and Shelter networks) across continents and in countries as varied as Turkey, Zimbabwe, Kenya, India, Philippines, Guatemala and Honduras, are showing that a "critical mass" of people at the grassroots could make a difference in the way post disaster programs are shaped.

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