



Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood

***Women Building Sustainable Communities  
Amid Rapid Urbanization and Decentralization***  
**Grassroots Women's International Academy**  
 June 12 – June 16, 2006  
 University of British Columbia, Liu Center  
 Vancouver, Canada

GROOTS International led the Grassroots Women's International Academy as a part of the Huairou Commission's women's program of activities at the World Urban Forum 3 (WUF3). The Grassroots Women's International Academy<sup>1</sup> was a five-day event where representatives of grassroots women's community organizations met to exchange knowledge with each other and dialogue with partners from NGOs and high level institutions. The process focused on peer teaching and learning and facilitated women to share strategies for improving their communities.

The Grassroots Women's International Academy took place in preparation for the World Urban Forum 3, which focused on strengthening cities. The WUF3's major themes - urban sustainability, social inclusion, partnership and finance - are directly relevant to the grassroots women leaders who gathered in the Academy and encompass issues they grapple with in their daily lives. The Academy therefore sought to harvest women's knowledge and foster their solidarity as a



delegation - consciously preparing them to participate in a global agenda setting and networking event.

<sup>1</sup> For a full background of Grassroots Women's International Academies, see Appendix A

**Box 1: Grassroots Women's International Academy Program at WUF III**

**Day 1:**

- Welcome & Introduction of Hosts, Organizers, Participants and Partners
- History of Groots Intl. and the Huairou Commission with Grassroots Academies, past WUFs and UN Habitat
- Vision, Working Methods & Agreements for the 5-day Academy
- Meeting in Learning Tracks

**Day 2:**

Learning Tracks meet to share practices:

- **Caring Community Development**
- **Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Livelihoods**
- **Housing, Land and Basic Services**
- **Policy Change and Advocacy**
- **Resilience in the face of Natural Disasters**

**Day 3:**

- Learning Track Groups Finalize their Reports & Recommendations
- A delegation visits local women's organizations and housing projects
- Report backs from tracks & synthesis of learning track outcomes

**Day 4:**

Strategies and activities that help grassroots women to access resources, decision making spaces and leadership opportunities:

- Plenary dialogues & small discussion groups to discuss effective strategies and tools for developing our leadership & our communities
- Lessons learned & recommendations for promoting women-centered, effective governance & decision making (Local to Global)

**Day 5:**

- Finalize recommendations to WUF and future plans and commitments between organizations for the future.
- Sub group meetings and report back in plenary
- Dialogue with strategic partners on opportunities & alliances for expanding grassroots women's impact on global and national decision making affecting their communities

## Not your typical conference

More than one hundred twenty women, representing 36 countries, participated in the Academy. Forty eight percent were from developing countries, thirty two percent were Canadian women working in poor communities, and the remaining twenty percent were East and West Europeans and Americans. A majority were grassroots community leaders (55%), while the remainder included representatives of professional NGOs that work with grassroots women's organizations plus a small number of women from donor and development agencies and from universities.

To kick off the Academy program, grassroots leaders and their partners led an opening ceremony June 12 demonstrating the values and diverse cultures represented by the global grassroots women's movement for equitable development (see Box 1 for full program).

**Penny Kerrigan, founder and director of the Aboriginal Mother Center Society in Vancouver**, welcomed the filled room, quickly introducing Charlotte Mearns a revered Musqueam First Nations spiritual leader who led the group in prayer and a thanks to the Coast Salish peoples on whose land we sat. Next, Penny proudly announced that her Mother Center was awarded the contract to produce 8,000 WUF conference bags and that next week we'd be shouldering a gorgeous handmade Haida design! In turning to the Canadian officials gathered to open and applaud the Academy, Penny expressed her appreciation for the contract while registering a protest against UN Habitat and the Government Canada's last minute decision to withdraw the recognition of indigenous people as a key stakeholder group at the WUF.

**Suzanne Anton, the Deputy Mayor of Vancouver** and **Charles Kelly, WUF 3 Commissioner General** welcomed participants by underscoring respectively the importance of the Academy deliberations:

*"The strength of women in the community is that they understand how important it is to consult with people, collaborate with people and work with people." - Anton*

*"A world today requires different kinds of conversations and solutions." (So) carefully formulate your ideas to actions; (at WUF) you're going to have an opportunity to come forward in an equal, inclusive dialogue" - Kelly*



**Gloria Gallant, President of GROOTS Canada** and **Sandy Schilen, Global Facilitator, GROOTS International** spoke of the commitment and vision that made the Academy at WUF possible. Gloria explained how members of their network rallied to ensure that grassroots community leaders from Canada not be absent, marginalized or tokenized at WUF3 activities. She described the enormous volunteer effort they'd put in to raise monies to enable 60 women to come from across Canada and to nationally anchor the women's program at WUF with the Huairou Commission. She singled **Marnie Tamaki** out for special recognition for the months of work she'd given to see this through. **Jan Peterson, Chair of the Huairou Commission**, spoke about the history of the Huairou Commission and Grassroots Academies, explaining that the Huairou Commission is *an effort to create a global organization from the bottom up, founded with the recognition that we are stronger together than apart.*

**Sandy Schilen** explained that GROOTS was leading the Academy as a founding member of the Huairou Commission, describing the vision it reflects:

*"No group understands sustainability better than grassroots women! [The Academy] is a methodology from members of GROOTS International, initiated by the Mothers Centers, to create a process in large events that makes visible to the world and to us the creativity and practices that grassroots women have pioneered in community development. It's a space to place the innovative work you do in your communities - where you will teach and learn from one another.*

*We know grassroots women can be technical assistants to each other and do not need outside professionals to train them. We deliberately hold the Grassroots Academies at international policy making and networking event like the WUF to demonstrate these ideas and to insure grassroots women are included in them. During this week we will collectively prepare to be seen and valued at WUF and by next Monday you will see us enter the Forum as a very powerful force - with influence and a perspective greater than any one of us here."*

## **Focusing on Grassroots Leaders Experience and Skills**

Four grassroots leaders, members of GROOTS from Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, took the dais next to outline why the Academy matters to them and illustrate the kinds of community development practices they brought to share.

**Andrea Laux, founder** of Intergenerational House West in **Stuttgart**, the **Baden Württemberg Regional German Mother Center network and Mother Centers International Network (MINE)** reached out to the participants:

*I want to invite you to a picture, a feeling of who we are. On the panel we are four representatives from GROOTS International. If you look at us and feel what bonds us...we are friends over continents and what brings us together is our network. We want a GWIA that is our space. We want to share what we've learned.*

*When we created GWIA, we created it as a training for ourselves. For us it's a movement building activity, not an event.... It's something to strengthen our lives and our communities.*

**Kasthuri Chandrashekar, leader of a large federation of women's collectives partnering with the Covenant Center for Development, in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India**, continued by describing what she brought to teach:

*We started self-help groups to save money. It seemed impossible at first since all our money went out for basic needs. Many years later, we now have 250,000 rupees in the bank and we get a lot of (matching loan) money from them. After CCD's livelihood training, we started businesses. We have kitchen gardens and herbal medicines. Using and selling herbal medicines give us*



*money and now we're part of a company which sells medicines to pharmaceutical companies."*

**Roxana Aching Rojas, Women United for a Better Community, Ventanilla, greater Lima, Peru,** continued in this vein, explaining:

*Our country Peru is susceptible to earthquakes, so we need housing that is safe and resistant to earthquakes. We women helped create a community owned business to produce affordable, earthquake resistant concrete bricks and we work with the mayor to building housing and upgrade community facilities with them. I am a national trainer and also work as a community program monitor.*

**Ann Wanjiru, Mathare Mother Center and Nairobi Focal Point in GROOTS Kenya,** rounded out this picture

*I come from one of the biggest slums of Kenya and before attending an Academy I could not stand in front of a big crowd. Like Andrea said, you learn a lot from each other at GWIA. We learn by hearing and seeing each others work; we don't need professionals to come and teach us....My first GWIA I learned a lot from a slum dweller and traditional medicines group—both Ugandans--and afterwards we organized an exchange and we were able to go and learn from them.*

*This space has a grassroots perspective and then in the WUF we feel we are able to participate Because of the last GWIA at WUF I attended in Barcelona, UN Habitat sponsored me to come to Vancouver to speak at one of their big events at WUF next week.*

## **Learning Tracks**

After a hearty lunch, participants spent the afternoon of June 12<sup>th</sup> meeting in small group sessions according to their Learning Track assignment. The Tracks were designed so grassroots women leaders and NGO partners could discuss the initiatives they have been leading to strengthen their cities and towns, the obstacles they face, and analyze the links and possible transfer. They continued to meet in the Learning Tracks through day 2 and the morning of day 3.<sup>2</sup>

Participants in the Tracks represented some of the most marginalized communities. They were women from poor communities who had been struck by natural disasters, have had their land seized, witnessed their local economies being decimated by HIV/AIDS, and have survived unprecedented levels of violence. Unlike hierarchical forums where the speakers are considered the experts and others have few chances to contribute their own expertise, the Learning Tracks gave these women leaders representing grassroots constituencies a chance to lead the discussion of effective local strategies and debate and decide upon their own actionable ideas.

The Academy divided participants into five thematic Learning Tracks:

- Caring Community Development
- Housing, Land and Basic Services\*

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<sup>2</sup> For a list of strategies and tools emerging from the Learning Tracks, see Appendix B

- Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Livelihoods
- Resilience in the Face of Natural Disasters\*
- Policy Change and Advocacy

In some cases, the thematic Track overlapped with action campaigns (those listed with an asterisk\*) currently anchored by Huairou Commission and GROOTS members. In others, the goal was to bring together practitioners who use very different entry points and strategies to improve women’s situations together to see if there were values, development aims and social change goals they might have in common.

The following summaries attempt to capture how Academy participants described their development and advocacy initiatives, what ideas and actions excited members of the various Learning Tracks, and the cross cutting insights that emerged when the groups reported back.

### **Caring Community Development**

This Track brought together participants from the North and South who, while dealing with a diversity of contexts and discrete practices, were united by the fact that they are all caring for their communities holistically and organize their work around values of respect, inclusiveness and love. Participants included representatives of indigenous women’s centers and crisis centers in Canada, women dealing with violence and other social ills in Jamaica and two major organizing movements uniting hundreds of Mother Centers in Europe (under the Mother Center International Network—MINE) and members of a federated alliance of thousands of Home-based Care groups (being piloted by GROOTS Kenya) responding to HIV/AIDS in their communities in Africa.

Despite their diversity of experiences, these women are united by the invisibility and marginalization women’s caregiving work imposes. Whether caring for children or the sick or helping teenagers to develop as healthy and productive members of society, women experience their work as being taken for granted and devalued. These grassroots women are organizing themselves to gain recognition for the social nurturing they are providing, to link with local authorities and to identify ways to generate income for themselves to survive.

Despite their struggles, these women are finding ways to support and value their own caregiving work. For instance, women in Mother Centers have successfully organized to claim and manage public space in cities throughout Europe. Home-based caregivers across Africa have been successfully forging partnerships with local authorities—a vital step in claiming space, mobilizing resources, linking to services and gaining public recognition and good will. All of the participants are also trying to identify ways to generate income for themselves to survive.



Through the two and half days of sharing, participants in this Track shared some of the ways that they are successfully reversing their marginalization and having their contributions valued in their communities. For example, a Home-Based Caregiver from Kenya shared her

group's recent success in bringing together local authorities, grassroots women and members of the local AIDS council in a dialogue that had two successful outcomes. The first was that the visibility of grassroots contributions to the local HIV/AIDS response was raised. Home-based care, generally undertaken informally by women, is one of the major responses to HIV/AIDS at the local level, and yet it is too often invisible and undervalued. The second was the creation of a community team to monitor resources in the community meant to fight AIDS, to ensure they were being distributed equitably and used effectively. Many of the women from Mother Centers in Europe (community centers led by mothers) and women's drop-in centers in Canada felt that they could adapt this practice - community monitoring of resources - to their own circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

A philosophical debate also occurred within this Track on the best way to financially support caregivers. While many European Mother Centers have found ways to raise income to support their work and pay volunteers, such as by starting coffee shops, home-based caregivers from poor communities in Africa feared that direct remuneration for caregiving work would spoil people's motivation. This is a debate that members of the Learning Track expressed an interest in continuing within GROOTS International.

### **Land, Housing and Basic Services**

In this Learning Track, women came together to find ways to upscale recognition for the contributions they are making to housing improvements, slum upgrading and efforts to enforce women's land and housing rights at the local level. Although the groups are working on a variety of issues, from direct provision of services and construction to advocacy on land and housing rights, they were united by a desire to reverse the dominant perception of them as simply providing band-aid solutions to lack of housing, infrastructure and basic services. While dominant civil society actors focus on research and national or global advocacy to demand women's rights to these essential needs, grassroots participants in this Track are creating effective solutions to the problems plaguing their communities.

Despite the breadth of experiences and practices represented in this group, participants, who came from groups as diverse as women's construction collectives, community Watch Dog Groups and popular land right's movements involved in mobilizing citizens against evictions and land seizures, were united by principles including building principled partnerships, advocating to and working with local government to promote women's participation in planning, and working with principles of collectivity. Collective action was cross-cutting and applied to groups working in water cooperatives in Zimbabwe, housing construction in Peru, community pharmacies in the Philippines and in those organizing mass mobilizations around secure tenure in Brazil. Challenges included marginalization by those in power (or worse, including direct violence and attack), and difficulties in promoting women's leadership in a male-dominated field.



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<sup>3</sup> For a list of practices targeted for future peer exchange, see Appendix C

Women in this Track identified concrete practices they were eager to learn through peer exchange. Innovative practices such as low-cost earthquake-resistant housing and ecologically friendly building, rainwater collection and building cooperative housing, as well as anti-eviction work, were all practices that other groups expressed an interest in learning more about. Plans to continue communication via global and regional networks, in order to support and add legitimacy to local advocacy campaigns were made.



The groups together created plans to upscale mapping exercises (already happening in some areas). Mapping produces information the community and local government do not have and becomes a basis for creating alternative policies. The processes have facilitated grassroots women to understand the laws, policies and practices regarding secure tenure, to gather statistics and empower themselves with information (including documenting their own contributions) for use in negotiations. They also plan to examine current grassroots initiatives on how to access resources from national and local government budgets for a women's agenda in land, housing and community development.

### **Economic Empowerment**

The grassroots leaders that convened the Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Livelihoods Learning Track were keenly interested in one another's practical methods and in the impact they achieved in their communities. In contrast with academics or NGO professionals who typically debate the details of micro-lending and interest rates, these community leaders focused on women leading efforts to generate income collectively, to establish banks they control and to promote collective production and marketing associations. Excited by what they learned, they proposed concrete plans to transfer and adapt the practices to their own communities. Their work demonstrated how developing economic initiatives promoted women's leadership more broadly within communities.<sup>4</sup>

Most participants in the Track had experience marketing their products and were eager to share and learn new ideas on accessing markets in rural and urban contexts. A strong presentation by an immigrant Somali women's organization in Toronto, describing how they approached schools and universities to find a niche for producing uniforms and bags as a way to market the products they produced in their cooperative gave people new ideas. A Mexican group from Chiapas told how they market handicrafts in the U.S. through an intermediary group of American students. Women's sustainable agriculture networks in Nicaragua and Honduras want to move from local to international markets but acknowledge the need to develop networks, trainings and policy change in order to do so.

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<sup>4</sup> For a list of practices targeted for future peer exchange, see Appendix C

Another practice shared revealed schemes for women to save and access credit collectively. The group listened to how women in Lima, Peru have developed Communal Banks in partnership with a local NGO to save and access credit and eventually start their own businesses. A participant from the Disaster Track joined the group to share her experience. From Tamil Nadu, India (and being translated from Tamil to both English and then Spanish!), she shared the success of women in her region that created several thousands of savings and credit groups, forming federations and eventually developing a large-scale business of herbal medicines run by grassroots women from those groups and marketing products at the national level.

The ideas discussed among the women reached beyond the details of different economic initiatives, recognizing how economic empowerment occurs simultaneously with the development of women's leadership skills and the impetus to develop communities holistically. The Somali women's successful marketing in Toronto took place as the result of training in production skills, provision of child care services and awareness-raising that they carried out to unite and mobilize community women. The Jamaican women who have organized to make their streets safer and to redirect aid that arrives in their community have developed income-generating projects in order to continue their broader community work. A women's micro-enterprise in construction has produced economic stability and increased gender equality for its members by providing a job in fabricating building components. Additionally, these women have built homes and developed partnerships with the local government to continue building and to include the women in the planning of their neighborhood. In the end, their efforts produced inclusion in local decision-making, social cohesiveness and safer cities.

Participants proposed peer exchanges to scale up their initiatives and surmount challenges. Topics range from reforestation and organic agriculture to communal banks to proposal writing skills. In order to deepen their relationships within the movement, increase their understanding of each other's practices and better plan the Peer Exchanges, they also proposed to plan a Grassroots Women's International Academy in Latin America and the Caribbean for next year.

### **Resilience to Natural Disaster**

The Resilience to Natural Disaster Track linked grassroots women who have survived and responded to disasters such as the recent Asian tsunami, devastating earthquakes and recurring Caribbean hurricanes (in regions where services and public infrastructure were already weak or non-existent) and with others who are preparing their communities to resist potential disasters. The group emphasized strategies of recovery that work from disaster toward long term development and strategies to build resilience physically and socially.

The group discussed how disaster often presents opportunities for women to organize and strengthen democracy in that country. As they destroy, disasters provide opportunities to build back better, and to support grassroots women to overcome pre-existing customs, violence, unsafe conditions and other obstacles restricting their mobility. Income-generating opportunities also open up during reconstruction and the restoration of commercial activities.

As in the other Tracks, women see their work in disaster response as deeply linked to efforts to promote women's leadership, economic empowerment and good



other cities agreed to allow urban communities to develop their houses incrementally rather than all at one time. Russian women overcame the social resistance to community engagement and then developed positive relationships with local officials. This partnership led to training the police force in violence against women and changing housing and garbage policies.

Cross-cutting goals in their work were fostering greater public participation in decision-making and social inclusion to decrease crime, and stopping government land seizures.

To share their tools and tactics, in the future they suggested Internet blogs, creating a database of skills and more support for global networks. Many asked to hear more about gender budgets and successes in reducing violence against women from the women in the Philippines, while others asked for support on improving their advocacy and lobbying skills. Participants eagerly offered to teach one another skills such as community theatre, mobilization, and staying true to their values.

### **Box 2: The Value Added When Grassroots Women Succeed**

Upon analyzing the practices shared in each of the Learning Tracks and the impact that result, one could see that several common types of impact appeared among practices in all Learning Tracks. Below is a fleshed out description of how those common impacts yield a plethora of other results and added value.

#### **Increased income and economic independence for women *leads to:***

- ⇒ More children going to school
- ⇒ More children and elderly receiving health care
- ⇒ Better health and nutrition
- ⇒ Improved living conditions – housing, basic services
- ⇒ Reduction of violence against women

#### **A feeling of community and support (that professionals call ‘social cohesion’) *leads to:***

- ⇒ Participation in local governance
- ⇒ Improved care for children, the elderly, the ill, particularly people with HIV/AIDS
- ⇒ Support networks that can be activated in times of disaster or conflict

#### **Owning space, promoting savings groups, organizing the community continuously *leads to:***

- ⇒ Women being prepared to respond to needs of communities as they arise.
- ⇒ Dialogues with local authorities that can be held in women’s community space
- ⇒ Social cohesion

#### **Women’s increased participation in community development planning and in crisis level response (e.g. post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction) *leads to:***

- ⇒ Greater inclusion of women and children’s priorities in development investments, basic

## A Statement of Our Delegation at WUF Starts to Emerge



After three days of deep sharing, participants in the Academy clearly appreciated each other's many innovations and the unique values and viewpoints they brought to their communities—linking human, economic and political development.

Through these learning Tracks, grassroots women were able to claim their knowledge, and recognition was formed of the significance of the constituencies they represented and the diversity of practices they contribute to development in some of the most difficult circumstances. To honor the unique value grassroots women bring,

members of the Caring Community Development Track developed the following statement:

*As Grassroots women and their supporting partners, we care for our communities and are grounded in the local realities of our unique places. Our work is based on principles and values that cross cultures and borders. We promote an alternative model of development that places families and communities at the center of focus and believe in local solutions to human needs.*

*Living and working in our communities, we respond to the immediate needs of our communities in a holistic, inclusive, non-thematic, non-programmatic way. We value peer learning and learn best by seeing. We know what is happening in our communities—the strengths, challenges and needs.*

*Our work is organized around Values:*

- *Gender equity and equality*
- *Democratic participation and decision-making*
- *Solidarity*
- *Transparency*
- *Ensuring universal basic amenities*
- *Honoring diversity*
- *Principled Partnerships*

At the Academy, **Canadian groups** shared that they saw the success of grassroots women's strategies in:

- The range of women's entrepreneurial activities
- The public space and housing women have claimed and developed.
- Public awareness of homelessness, domestic violence, housing issues, etc.
- Visibility and solidarity among homeless women and men
- Grassroots women's voice in local government.

## Nurturing Women Leaders, Safeguarding Community Work

In addition to being a space for peer learning, practice-sharing and political strategizing, The Academy also wanted to be a space where women who spend their lives being strong and holding up their families and communities could personally connect and share their challenges as leaders. Jamaican women who presented their success in making their neighborhoods



safer had also lost their own children to violence. Aboriginal Canadian women who pioneered local family support centers have been forced to fight the foster care system's removal of their children from their homes for years. Hurricane Katrina and Tsunami survivors described their efforts to make recovery programs work for them, but they live every day with the loss of their homes and family members. Women living in slum communities in the Philippines, Kenya and Zimbabwe shared equally hard struggles. Thus the Academy created an environment that encouraged women to bond with one another and talk about the hardships they face as they work for community transformation (where too little separation exists between development 'issues' and their daily lives).

Facilitators used methods from the Leadership Support Process of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (in the U.S.) in order to develop this nurturing environment. The methods reflected the culture and spirit of grassroots organizing, with songs that reaffirmed commitment and self worth, and with dynamic games and exercises. Participants learned the method of giving (and receiving) public appreciations to one another (to contradict how seldom women's gifts and contributions are acknowledged). The Leadership Support Process trainers also led special session support groups and trainings on the Process for interested participants (in the evenings and weekend). The Canadian GROOTS hosts organized a multi-cultural talent show and an aboriginal Generation to Generation night to help people relax and celebrate their diversity and home place/culture.

The effects of this kind of sharing were undeniable: some women left Vancouver with their minds open and confident with broader, more ambitious visions for their work, while others took home a sense of relief and confidence, having learned their difficulties are shared by others and can be overcome. Others had learned practical methods for dealing with conflict, building trust in their organization and acquiring the personal support they need to be good leaders.

## Organizing and Negotiating for Resources and Decision Making Opportunities: Days Four and Five

### *Thursday morning: National, Regional and International Networks of Significant Impact and Scale*

Academy participants gathered in plenary session Thursday morning to hear stories from grassroots leaders about how they have expanded their activities within and across communities and how they were able to increase the impact and success of their work. This dialogue focused on how women organized local, national and global networks and what they have accomplished thus far.

**Haydee Rodriguez, Cooperativa Las Brumas, Nicaragua and the Women and Peace Network in Latin America** opened this session recounting how she and her neighbors had survived six years of civil war which left 3600 widows, orphans and mutilated women in its wake and claimed two of her own brothers. To heal these physical and emotional wounds and help community women return to productive, income generating activities she and 266 other women founded the Cooperativa Las Brumas. They have promoted literacy, built houses (for men as well), produced organic coffee, and today negotiate with the government to get land for women who were left out of the post-conflict settlement process.

She explained how through the Women and Peace Network in Central America, Colombian, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan women have established a common date to lobby their governments on land and other resource claims. Through the network they exchange effective strategies for empowering women economically and socially, encourage women to run for elected office and get appointed to municipal committees (where Haydee serves), and sustain their efforts to promote peace and reconciliation.

**Groots Kenya: Esther Mwaura-Muiru** opened by describing how she was inspired to found the Groots Kenya network when she met Groots International at the UN Third World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 and got excited by their idea of how important it is that grassroots women speak on their own behalf (and not be spoken for) in decision making and development processes. Back home Esther spoke to other women who agreed to stake hold an ongoing organizing process that would build solidarity among grassroots women's groups in Kenya and help group leaders learn to represent themselves in development and decision making processes (national and global).

Three grassroots leaders of the network, **Violet Shivutse, Justina Wanjiku Kamaitha and Ann Wanjiru** explain that now, more than ten years later, Groots Kenya links more than 2,000 local self help groups in ten regions. Focal point leaders maintain communication and linkages within their region and across networks. Violet's group, located in western Kenya represents more than 300 women who offer home based care, support to youth and other family members, and who also



work to enforce women and orphans inheritance and property rights in the event the male head of household dies. Violet explained: *We share our challenges as leaders and we give and get support so we can help support others.*

Justina and Ann described how they have been able to negotiate with officials at the Kenyan/British airbase in Nanyuki and elected officials representing the Mathare slums. Justina: *We have limited resources, but we do have things to negotiate...with the airbase we are now starting to get ARVs for the people.*

The leaders feel that working across different tribes and cultures is something they do that is quite difficult. *When we sit together as grassroots women we set aside our different tribes and communities. This is an unusual strength. In election periods, politicians want to come to see us because we bring all community members,* explained Ann.

### **Mother Center International Network: 15 countries, 750 centers world wide**

The Mother Center International Network was founded several years ago to unite Mother Centers being founded across the world. Mother Centers are founded on the principle of family self-support, and are generally established by mothers who share leadership. The Centers enable women to come out of the isolation of their daily care duties into a supportive, women-run community center, open to all generations.

**Andrea Laux:** I'm from Germany, I was a single mother and came many years ago. When I first started my Mother Center, I never heard about public kitchen or public spaces, and I never thought that claiming space was political. I learned from other mothers how to talk to with our mayor, or how to start a second-hand store. Our region is as big as the Czech Republic (and) after 15 years we are a strong network ...we don't use media, only mouth-to-mouth.

**Rut Kolinska** explained: we took the German idea to the Czech Republic. We started with one and now are 150 Mother Centers (Klara Smolikova, a grassroots woman from the Czech Republic calls her center "a place where I can meet other mothers with children and other new friends.") We needed support at the political level and a strong voice, so we formed a national network.

**Chrissy Fortin** from the Aboriginal Mother Center in Vancouver, Canada explained how Penny Irons went to Germany and came back and *told me about this great idea. I was a single mother with very little resources and I loved the idea of having a place to go and share ideas. Now I am a full-time program director at the center. We have daycare, family meals for those in need and a knitting factory and catering company. As aboriginal women we were challenged with marginalization and many problems, we asked ourselves what we could do within our own communities. We founded not only a feminist organization, but an organization for women and children."*

As an international network, MINE is supporting campaigning. One element is their "Move the Pram, Move the World" where women in eight countries simultaneously demonstrate by pushing prams in public centers for one hour and raising women and family issues in each government's parliament.

**DAMPA: Evelyn Abagao** from Quezon City, Philippines has been a housing leader since 1978, when the president declared their land public, appropriating it for social

housing. DAMPA is a grassroots federation composed of 95 organizations, with 22,700 household members that started with only 20 leaders. She explained: *Our main strategy is community organizing and engagement with the government. We have a community pharmacy program (36 in the national capital region) where the urban poor can access cheap and generic medicines, savings cooperatives, consumer cooperatives (stores where members can purchase cheap groceries), and transportation cooperatives to help members truck in water. In the housing and land programs we encourage leaders and members to attend technical trainings to read land titles, to understand the women's and urban poors' rights. We have laws regarding the urban poor (act 779) saying that a communities land that is demolished has the right to be resettled.*

**Femie Duka**, Secretary-General of DAMPA added that their goal was to provide an alternative to the patronage system of government housing. *Because most people are on protected or government lands, they will be evicted so we are looking for relocation sites. We are showing the government that people have money to buy the land and are pooling their resources where possible... (they don't want a favor). So we are working on a community mortgage program at present.*

### **Box 3: Participant Discussions of their Constituency's Successes and Challenges**

On day four of the Grassroots Academy participants divided into small groups to discuss the focus, structure, and constituency of each of their own organizations. Representatives discussed what kind of organization they represented, their constituency (in numbers), a list of their successes and challenges, and other entities with whom they have negotiated.

**Membership** of women's organizations ranged from **30 to 600,000 individuals**.

**Types of organizations** represented:

Community-Based Organizations, including: Savings and Credit Cooperatives, Livelihood / Enterprise Groups, Home-Based Caregivers, Housing Cooperatives, Indigenous Organizations, Mother's Centers  
Local Government  
NGOs  
Universities  
Advocacy Organizations

**Groups negotiated with:**

- World Bank/local banks;
- International corporations;
- Mayors & local authorities;
- National ministries for basic services;
- Aid agencies; NGOs; and
- Foundations

### ***Day Five: Our Grassroots Movement's Involvement in Formal Decision Making***

The morning session of the last day of the Academy featured a range of speakers who focused on illustrating how grassroots groups, by organizing to improve their quality of life became increasingly involved with formal decision-making and resource allocation processes. Participants were instructed to listen to what groups negotiate for, how they represent themselves and how long they sustain action.

#### **Beth Chitekwe-Biti, Dialogue on Shelter and Sheila Magara Homeless People's Federation, Zimbabwe and members of Shack Dwellers, International**

They began by sharing: "We feel our main accomplishment is that we have gotten government to acknowledge grassroots innovations. Women are changing local government procedures, especially in housing regulations.

The women held discussions with the authorities ("city fathers") about the need for decent and affordable housing. "Because many authorities did not understand our requests, we organized visits to other cities for a sympathetic 'city fathers' to meet with authorities there. We were approved to create 150 units. The number has increased to 300. We hold the building plans and the contract ourselves.

"Although most women didn't go to school, we declare ourselves professionals because we have community-based experiences and know how to deal with our daily problems. When we didn't have proper documents to register with the city council, we negotiated a waiver and registered anyway."

#### **Liza Bozhkova, Independent Women's Information Center, Moscow, Russia**

Her story focused on how they were able to create large scale associations of women who participate in neighborhood planning and housing and infrastructure improvement and overcome the extreme resistance of a very bureaucratic government that now sees them as partners.

She starts by saying how her exposure to Groots and Huairou helped her envision how they could survive the huge social and economic crisis created by the fall of communism. With violence and slum-like housing conditions spreading, they knew they needed tools to create friendships among community women if they were to act. (She explained how their culture had been a mistrustful non-friendly one.)

The women began meeting together to share their problems and priorities, she explained. They decided to repair their housing complexes, which looked like slums (as officials claimed these conditions did not exist). They didn't want their neighborhoods to stay run down and dirty. So, they also decided to improve common spaces in the neighborhood. In five years they have planted flowers, posted signs, and regularly cleaned the streets and common spaces. Recently the once hostile government asked them to help take this approach to other neighborhoods but they said only if the community had real roles, resources and recognition. They're working it out now.

**Violet Shivutse, GROOTS Kenya and Birte Scholz from the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), Ghana describe the Women's Land Link Collaboration** (anchored by the Huairou Commission)

**Violet** explained that grassroots women in Kenya learned that women in Kenya lose their property rights when they lose their husbands. Chiefs and assistant chiefs are the first level of local government (closest to the people) to address social issues affecting the community. Their recommendations are quite influential with higher authorities.

Kenyan women brought local administrators to dialogues with local community leaders. Women with concerns about local land issues spoke out about how they had lost their property and were homeless. During these dialogues, they found chiefs who understood and could work with other chiefs. For example, last year a Kenyan chief traveled to Zambia and helped to support a widow to reclaim her land. Now grassroots Kenyan women are partners with the chiefs, who will call them when there is a question of land for women in the community. They visit communities to address inheritance issues, and especially to train officers. They have even joined the grassroots land use watchdog groups.

**Birte** added that COHRE, UNHABITAT, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the Huairou Commission became partners in the Women Land Link Africa initiative to resource initiatives at the grassroots level and broaden the actions and ideas that already exist. At present they work in 6 east and west African countries. Instead of putting professionals at the center of this work on women's property and inheritance rights, the project is designed to put grassroots women to beat the center and move outward from that. We hope to globalize grassroots knowledge and to localize human rights discourse, she explained.

**Prema Gopalan, founding director of Swayam Shikshan Prayog, Mumbai, India.** Prema's story focused on the relationship of government and grassroots women's collectives in the provision of basic services and sanitation. They have an initiative that has changed the lives of people in over 1000 communities.

Prema explained that in many parts of India, homes lack toilets. People prefer to go outside in the open. Subsidies to build toilets resulted in people using them as closets to store things. But bad sanitation creates health problems. The challenge was changing people's minds about this.

"We focused on working with children and asking them to draw what they saw. They drew 'piles of shit' and then we asked them to add up what the shit would amount to. They never talked about toilets, only about the situation. Children, teachers, and parents met in discussion groups. Then building toilets emerged.

"When they were ready to build toilets, women's groups would help homeowners to build. Then after they were built, people needed to be toilet trained. Not everyone would use them. Children helped with the training for adults who would not use them and would sneak away and go outside. Now government recognizes this as a best practice they want the women to transfer, and women are generating income from the toilets."

Prema concluded her remarks by saying this is an example of how important it is to empower grassroots women so they can change the way government works –

especially regarding basic services. When women's groups organize on basic services to improve health and water/sanitation, they build their capacities as well as the governments.

**Srilatha Batliwala, a Research Fellow at the Hauser Center at the John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Boston, USA**

synthesized the insights of the morning and underscored their importance through a power point she'd prepared. Emphasizing that our shared goal is to scale up grassroots women's role in decision-making, she summarized that the Academy had highlighted three dimensions:

**Empowering Women  
Redistributing Social Power  
Reaching across local, national and international levels**

She then gave an empowering exposition of the shifts grassroots women's groups are promoting in the three and the actors and spheres of action they operate from to advance their aims.

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**Srilatha Batliwala** facilitated the final afternoon session of the Academy where an impressive array of dignitaries and global activists addressed grassroots women and community leaders. Speakers included UN-Habitat officials, World Urban Forum leaders, program officers of influential global foundations, seasoned network leaders from urban poor networks, and academic development professionals. Each suggested ways to strengthen the effectiveness of grassroots women's participation at the World Urban Forum. Some highlights of the discussion included:

**Charles Kelly, Commissioner General for the World Urban Forum**, urged grassroots women to: move around the dialogue sessions and get your stories out to the world. There will be representatives from 160 countries, professionals and experts. Grassroots organizations need to speak-up for action. There will also be 500 accredited journalists. They want to hear your passion and your commitment to your communities. After Vancouver, you will have a lot work to do.

**Lisa Jordan, Deputy Director of the Governance and Civil Society Unit, Ford Foundation** in New York, coached grassroots women to put themselves at the forefront of public dialogues and to work together to reach out to international policy makers, government officials, and development representatives present at the World Urban Forum. She asked grassroots women to make a commitment to be at the planning table, involved in [development] consultations [and] to invite key decision-makers to their communities. She also reminded the women that their presence, in such large numbers, legitimizes UN Habitat and the WUF and that they should think strategically about that.

**Sheela Patel of Slum Dwellers International (SDI)**, an experienced strategist in getting the grassroots voice into the global context, described five organizing principles of Slum Dwellers International, a network of communities operating at the national level who link globally to be a voice of the urban poor. Patel's network focuses on how to produce bottom-up actions that can actually create positive

development. Large numbers of men, women, and children are needed to identify a strategy and advocate for it persistently, over long periods of time. SDI's organizing emphasizes the following:

1. Poor people don't believe in the power of their own experiences. They need help to share their experiences and develop new confidences.
2. Poor women produce a powerful coalition through their learning to share and transact money, this builds trust.
3. Recognize the power of grassroots knowledge. No government produces good information about people. You must produce good statistics to use on your own behalf that is valuable and can't be ignored.
4. Create precedent setting projects and tell the governments what to do
5. Persistently engage with state institutions. Whether you like it or not, your government must contribute to projects that are of benefit of the public good. Engage them.

Patel told grassroots women leaders in the audience, the World Urban Forum is an exposure of local people to a global environment. You should be yourself. You can speak out of context. You want them to remember who you are, what your reality is and what you said. Later they will visit you.... WUF is a space to make new friends.



In addition to the three speakers quoted above other key speakers included; the Director of UN-Habitat's Global Division, Lars Reutersward; and academics Pietro Garau and Ian Davis working on urban poverty and disaster response and mitigation.

All of the invited speakers touched on four important insights that grassroots women should take with them to the World Urban Forum. This included:

1. Attitude with which grassroots women go into WUF.
2. Key spaces where grassroots women need to be present.
3. Good strategies for grassroots women to use.
4. Opportunities that will be there for grassroots women to exploit.

#### Attitude

- Speak to the number of people that grassroots women represent
- Explain why grassroots women are experts, have knowledge and understanding and of alternatives and solutions
- Grassroots women are agents of change (not victims)

#### Spaces

- Be at key spaces early and near the microphones in the town hall meeting
- Access the media
- Be present at grassroots women led events

#### Strategies

- Tell a concrete story, be concise and name solutions
- Speak as an expert
- Build alliances and make new friends

- Tell your story through the press
- Distribute yourselves in a strategic way

#### Opportunities

- Listen and learn how global experts talk about your issues
- Make strategic linkages
- Be yourself
- Create a new image in the minds of people you interact with



#### **Box 4: Recommendations**

The following is the final set of recommendations distributed and presented at the WUF3 as an outcome of the Academy. Analucy Bengochea, a GROOTS member who represented women at the Closing Ceremony, read a statement that summarized these recommendations. Together with partners, the members of GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission will lead the way toward implementation.

#### **1. Consult grassroots and indigenous women as key experts**

Given our longstanding contributions and demonstrated knowledge and skills in improving the quality of life and building democracy, grassroots women must be represented as experts in all global, regional and national policy-making dialogues.

Grassroots women should be given the role of monitors and evaluators of resources and programs in their communities, rather than simply being beneficiaries of those programs.

The areas of expertise include **sustainability, housing and land, post disaster and conflict recovery, HIV AIDS, caring communities, and economic development.**

Community focused indigenous women and women-led slum dwelling groups [?] are among the most innovative organizations within these marginalized communities, yet they are also the least recognized and consulted.

We pledge our own networks and call on donors and other partners to help us mainstream our expertise in upcoming opportunities that include:

- International AIDS Conference, Toronto, August 2006
- Africities Summit, Nairobi, September 2006
- WUF 4, Nanjing, China, 2008

#### **2. Establish new funds for grassroots women's Peer Exchanges, public spaces and organizing**

- Peer Exchanges transfer effective skills and knowledge.
- Grassroots ownership and management of public space sustains women's participation in public affairs, from planning and governance.
- Expanding community organizing builds long-term movements.

#### **3. Donor Dialogues: International aid agencies should schedule dialogues with grassroots women leaders and local authorities to redirect funds & programs.**

Funding to address the HIV AIDS pandemic in Africa is one area where aid agencies should unite to hold formal consultations with grassroots women's groups working in conjunction with local authorities to provide care, treatment and prevention. Global funds have bypassed the grassroots and established top down processes while claiming to be participatory and transparent.

Funding priorities and delivery systems, to respond to post disaster relief and recovery and to the provision of low-income housing are also skewed in ways that limit grassroots women's opportunities and community development.

Grassroots women's groups have been filling the gaps and working with their local authorities to access and redirect resources for effective local problem solving. Donors need to hear these priorities and approaches and redesign aid streams to reflect them.

International financial agencies should provide loans to women at low interest rates on terms that recognize their lack of access to collateral and other barriers.

#### **4. Support grassroots and local authority collaborations such as Local-to-Local Dialogues to sustain women's participation in local decision-making.**

The Huairou Commission and United Cities and Local Government are seeking resources for a 3-year joint program to sustain women's representation in local decision making and stave off burnout and turnover.

Local to local dialogues are locally designed strategies whereby grassroots women's groups initiate and engage in on going dialogues with their local authorities for

- Negotiating issues and priorities
- Joint planning
- Developing on going partnerships

Participatory Budgeting processes have proven to work well and should be implemented and enforced.

## Impact at the World Urban Forum 3

After a week of sharing, debate, deliberation and solidarity building, the 120 participants in the Academy, joined by nearly 100 other women, entered as a delegation into the World Urban Forum 3, where the Huairou Commission claimed space for women with exhibits and booths, organized 9 Networking Events and one Roundtable and placed speakers in central dialogues of the conference.

The delegation of grassroots women leaders and the partners that support them brought an inestimable amount of legitimacy and authenticity to the WUF3. Looking at the sub-themes of WUF, they contain some basic principles that dialogues on urban sustainability should adhere to: social inclusion, participation of community women and participation of other groups such as the poor, indigenous, minorities and marginalized groups. These are themes that cannot be legitimately addressed without the participation of people who grapple with these issues every day in their own communities.

Preparatory organizing by the Huairou Commission and its member networks, many of whom have been working together and building relationships since Habitat II in 1996, were integral in the strength of the delegation and impact that these women were able to make at WUF3. The Huairou Commission worked for over a year negotiating for the space, building the program capacity to fill that space, and fundraising to ensure that a sizable delegation of grassroots women would be able to travel to Vancouver.

The Huairou Commission's delegates claimed space as a strategy to make themselves visible as a delegation, to exhibit women's work and to secure a "home base" that would enable them to work together as a movement within the WUF3. Had the women not spent a week strategizing and sharing beforehand, had they not held a Daily Caucus and had they not claimed physical space at the WUF3 to meet, organize and attract partners, they would have floated through the WUF3 as disparate individuals. Instead, what we saw at the WUF3 was a collective effort to make grassroots women's work visible. The solidarity built in these spaces contributed to the internal goals of networking and impact for grassroots women as well as the external goals of bringing a clear women's message to the WUF3.

### Box 5: Huairou Commission Activities at WUFIII

Grassroots Women's International Academy

Women's Roundtable

Gendering Land Tools Roundtable (co-sponsor)

Networking Events

- *Building Back Better: Rebuilding Communities After Disaster and Conflict*
- *Developing a Template: Partnership Models for Big Cities*
- *From Rhetoric to Reality: Grassroots Women's Actionable Ideas for Social Inclusion and Collaborative Problem Solving*
- *Gender Mainstreaming and Local Governance*
- *Grassroots Women and Local Authorities Partner to Fight AIDS in Africa*
- *Knowledge Networks for Women's Health and Safety*
- *Listen to Us: Grassroots Innovations for Securing Land and Housing*
- *Practices on Responsive Local Governance: Guidelines for Success in Partnering with Grassroots Organizations*
- *Sustainable Community Government Partnerships on Gendered Violence Prevention*

Daily Women's Caucus

Our Practices Exhibit

Huairou Women's Booth

Reception

Grassroots Women's International Market

Huairou Commission members carried out 9 Networking Events. Each of the Networking Events focused on women's experience and the gender dimension of urban sustainability, provided a space for women and grassroots women to share their practices and ideas, to learn from one another and to network for potential collaborations. Many of the events organized at WUF3 had direct links to the Academy, including Networking Events on Disaster, Secure Tenure and Governance. The Women's Roundtable, organized by the Huairou Commission, focused on many of the themes highlighted at the Academy.

The Roundtable featured grassroots women's successful interventions and innovations for problem-solving within their communities at the local level and working towards successfully achieving the Millennium Development Goals at the national and global level. Representatives of institutions and individual partners, many of whom had been present at the Academy, responded with recommendations on how grassroots initiatives can best be supported. They emphasized how grassroots women should become formally recognized as contributors to the MDGs within the international community, for example by recognizing and costing out the contributions of poor women in economic terms (suggested by Srilatha Batliwala).



Women were also represented as a stakeholder group within the closing ceremony of WUF3 by Analucy Bengochea—a leader of the *Comite Emergencia de Garifuna de Honduras*, and a member of GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission. Analucy received spirited applause when she read the actionable ideas that emerged from the gathering of grassroots women and their partners that took place during and prior to the World Urban Forum.

### **Impact beyond WUF3**

**Upon returning home, many participants planned to bring skills and motivation to continue and strengthen their work.** Grassroots women leaders at the Academy shared that they commonly feel isolated, as if they are the only ones that are doing their difficult work. They receive little support, appreciation or encouragement, and so must often rely on their intuition and that of their fellow leaders to continue their valuable work. Many participants stressed the strong motivation they received from their peers. They were encouraged to believe that their ideas and solutions could work, by hearing about each other's successes. Their leadership and self-esteem grew through the Leadership Support Process trainings, by overcoming feelings of isolation in their work and by seeing other strong grassroots women leaders. One NGO leader who believed that the grassroots women in her slum communities could not overcome their barriers to empowerment became convinced that she could empower them to become leaders rather than beneficiaries. Participants returned home with plans to upscale their work with local governments, to upscale their community banks and others have already reported that they have received recognition and opportunities to spread their work after returning from WUF3 and being recognized in the media and community. The experience clearly contradicted any notions that grassroots women are limited or can't solve the problems facing their communities.