

„We are part of the Solution“ The Grassroots Women's Voice at Expo 2000

by Monika Jaeckel

„World Exhibitions are like a Disneyland for adults - they have a tendency to focus on the latest sophistications of technology and highly professionalized presentations“ remarked Rut Kolinskà from Prague, when visiting the Expo 2000 grounds on display this summer in Germany, „ what women know and have to contribute to facing the challenges of the 21st century is, that solutions lie in people, not in technology.“

Rut Kolinskà from the environmentalist group „Prague Mothers“ and the Association of Czech Mother Centers represents one of the 42 groups from around the world participating in the GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY (GWIA) organised by the German Mother Centers and their international affiliations to ensure the presence of women's knowledge from the ground at Expo 2000.

Humankind, nature and technology, the three mottos of the Expo need to be in harmony to create sustainable development. What grassroots women's groups have found in their work is that when these three aspects remain connected to the community level, development stays balanced. Grassroots women's groups are always rooted in the local, dealing with every day life issues and their family and neighbourhood ties. Women have an important role to play that is increasingly recognised by international agencies. When women take leadership roles in local development, corruption is reduced and solutions are developed that are more in harmony with the whole community as well as with the natural environment.

The Grassroots Women's International Academy is a series of four one-week events to link grassroots and professional expertise in a format that enables transfer and replicability.

Women are at the core of communities. There is immense wisdom and know-how to be found in the daily survival strategies of neighbourhood women. GWIA has been an opportunity to identify the ideas, concepts, processes and strategies that are the seeds of change. GWIA highlighted practices from the South as well as the North where grassroots women are taking leadership roles in their communities, in redefining progress and development and in redistributing the use of resources.

Grassroots groups often are already practicing solutions on the ground where others are debating theories. Vibrant action by poor communities in addressing basic needs are keeping our cities alive. These initiatives are often not acknowledged by institutional actors, are taken for granted and not considered, when resources are being distributed. Their successes many times are acquired and repackaged into institutional channels without giving the grassroots initiators credit and authorship. The mission of the Grassroots Women's Academy is to create a reflective space for groups to articulate and share the abundance and sophistication of their practices, join forces and claim ownership in harvesting their lessons learned, and produce a basis for dialogue with mainstream partners.

„ It is important to have international peer learning and transfer systems. It is important that grassroots women be initiators of their own information and horizontal and vertical transfers, rather than receivers and beneficiaries of trainings, programs and capacity building of institutions and the international development industry” says Sandy Schilen from GROOTS (Grassroots Organisations Organising Together in Sisterhood).

„GWIA is about showcasing the expertise of women as everyday life experts, we are highlighting solutions, not problems, we are also highlighting that grassroots women’s groups intend to own their own practices and to be the ones teaching their successful strategies,” was how Andrea Laux from the Mother Center International Network (**mine**) summed up her experience of the 4 GWIA weeks during Expo 2000.

COMMON ISSUES

Rebuilding Community

The Mother Center movement itself, host of GWIA, symbolises how a grassroots initiative has developed international proportions and speaks to women’s groups facing the challenges of recreating and sustaining the social fabric of communities in the North as well as in the East and the South:

„The it takes a village concept takes form here. Mother Centers nurture intergenerational networks that integrate the care for children, youth and the elderly in a collective communal setting that is a high quality alternative to institutionalised care. Services in the context of the Mother Centers are close by, not only in a geographical sense, but also in an emotional and social sense, embedded in authentic relationships and neighbourly contact. The centers have the advantage of simultaneously pooling the resources and skills of all generations to contribute to neighbourhood networks, integrating eldercare in a reciprocal process of neighbourhood exchange. When challenged with our aging societies in the North, this is the way to go” says Andrea Laux

„ I am from the Haida Nation in Canada. When we heard about the Mother Centers we thought: this is where we came from, this is where we want to go. Our Indian Homemakers Association is involved in initiating Mother Center cooperatives in several of our communities in Canada”, said Penny Kerrigan, who presented the history of her people at GWIA in June.

„ In a situation where the social fabric of our society has been torn apart, where unemployment is the rule and employment the exception, where poverty and ill-health is wide spread you need to reweave social networks just as much as you need to rebuild the houses and the infrastructure of our cities, which have been destroyed. Mother Centers are exactly what we need in this respect”, said Drita Berisha from Kosowo at the September GWIA session.

„ What I saw here I want to take home with me to South Africa”, said Priscilla Maart from the Homemakers Association in Durban, „ just walking into the Mother Center on my first day of GWIA started giving me ideas and visions for what I would like to create in my community.”

„ Development lies in rebuilding the community, that is how we define progress “ said TeClaire N´Tomb from the Bogso Women Farmers Association of Cameroon at the September GWIA, „ we got from hunger to where we are now, a flourishing village, by reconnecting to our traditional wisdom, that strength lies in community. Using our traditional practice of YUM, a collective form of farming and revalorising our local crop Cassava, that is easy to cultivate in our environment and that has an extremely high nutritional value, we have put an end to the migration from our rural region into the cities“.

Everyday Life Expertise

Other grassroots strategies that have transcended countries and continents include the bottom up approach to housing the urban poor, pioneered by Sparc (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers) and Mahila Milan, a women´s pavement dwellers organisation in Bombay, and transferred to 32 other cities in India as well as to communities in South Africa and Thailand.

One of the pavement dwellers strategies is to organise housing exhibitions of model houses they have designed and constructed themselves for the resettlement programs of urban slum areas.

„In this process the women learned to see that house-building in a professional manner is only a logical extension of the expertise they have developed to build adequate housing out of the flimsiest of materials and in the most insecure of circumstances. They have learned to claim ownership of this expertise and enter it as a crucial bargaining chip in creating equitable partnerships with local authorities and construction agencies“ Sheela Patel, founder of Sparc said in her workshop on „Center Staging Grassroots Women in Community Development“ at the July GWIA.

Economic Self Reliance

Economic self reliance and becoming independent of the restrictions and limitations of financial agencies and international donors was another common issue addressed by the groups presenting at GWIA.

„Instead of giving money to the bank we learned how to create the banking system for ourselves“, said Suranjana Gupta from SSP in India while explaining the grassroots system of saving and credit federations they have developed among women´s groups in rural villages in India, „the wealth of the poor lies in our numbers.“

„To found a foundation not funded by the rich was like we killed Jesus“ reported Thandiwe N´komo from Orap, a woman led grassroots organisation with 1,5 million members in Zimbabwe.“ When we set up our own Community Foundation Fund to be independent of donor logic and pressures the donor community was raving. But it was the only logical consequence to the years and years we had spent in vain trying to make international donor agencies understand that their „project“ model and short term logics of investment, accounting and assessment is counterproductive to our goals of long term building of community cohesion and self reliance.“

Building Equitable Partnerships

The results of the workshops and trainings of GWIA are brought to the round table of partner dialogues with different players in mainstream society (foundations, academia, government, international agencies, churches, and the private sector) concluding each GWIA week. In a respectful dialogue taking into consideration the scope of action of each partner, ways of building sustainable partnerships between grassroots groups and institutional partners to implement the learnings of GWIA are debated.

„ In our churches and anywhere in the professional field we are used to a hierarchical approach to working with grassroots groups, we are the teachers, they are the students, we are the hospital administrators, they are the patients, we are the counsellors, they are the clients, we are the donors, they are the recipients. In order to create real partnerships, it has to be different, you need to be co drivers“, remarked Sister Mary Jude Jun from the Ursuline religious community, and Ray Coughlen, head of the Department of Education Development of the Cork Institute of Technology captured the spirit of GWIA when he said:

„Only when there is true partnership can the quality of policy making be improved, and can there be innovation“

Conclusions

GWIA 2000 was a very productive summer of peer learning, networking and partnership building across the world. The academy format has proved to be a valid tool for in depth learning and for the harvesting of grassroots knowledge. Already plans have started for future Grassroots Women's International Academies, as national events, as policy inputs at international meetings, as grassroots trainings for institutional partners, and as virtual learning events on line.

If there are persistent problems with poverty, with decent housing, with sustainable development there probably is something wrong with the knowledge base in our countries and with our mainstream knowledge systems. It is high time we put more emphasis on exploring the knowledge that comes from the ground.

If you are interested in connecting to this effort and to future GWIAs, please contact us.

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