

HUAIROU & PARTNERSHIP

Past, present and future

Partnership is the dominant strand in Huairou's genetic structure.

At Huairou China in 1995, in an NGO conference running parallel to the Beijing Conference on Women, a loosely defined network of grassroots women's organizations came together around development issues. Their statements drew the attention of Wally N'Dow, head of the upcoming United Nations Habitat Conference. He asked them to bring their grassroots development voice to the meeting (which they did in force), and dubbed them the Huairou Commission.

The Huairou Commission and UN-Habitat, whose charge is to "to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all" are partners to this day.

Partnership Envisioned_____

The founders of Huairou, a mix of experienced grassroots leaders and professional women, understood the power inherent in their relationship. The professional women - whether organizers, technicians, or development professionals - could offer resources to grassroots women while avoiding the compromises inherent in "doing for" them; grassroots women could gain access to the cultures of influence - academic, business, donor or international governance - from which they were separated.

Huairou's entire strategy is based on the assumption of a productive synergy between grassroots women and professional individuals and institutions who are committed to creating healthier communities through partnerships.

One of Huairou's earliest documents, a three year plan, was called *A New Way of Partnering*. It explained the professional/grassroots partnership concept, but left other characteristics of "New" relatively vague. This was appropriate. The women, after all, were attempting to create an international, bottom-up organization which would have to cut across cultures, languages, geography and technologies to be successful. "New" was the right word, and needed to be read with an emphasis on discovery.

That said, "New Way" established the core standards of Huairou's approach to partnership:

- a. grassroots women's groups drive the goals and objective of the organization and its partnerships.
- b. grassroots women's groups engage in partnerships primarily for the purpose of influencing the policy, planning, financing and implementation of sustainable development.

Base Line Partnerships_____

Three years later, in 2000, and drawing from an extended workshop (called the Grassroots Women's International Academy or Academy) in which women from 40 countries exchanged practices, Jacquelyn Leavitt, an "academic partner", described the grassroots partnership experience to-date. In her *Inviting Partners to Partner: Creating Partnership Learning & Code of Conduct*, she briefly identifies the benefits of the "new way", itemizes a few of responsibilities of grassroots women to partnership, lists types of partnerships, gives examples and puts forth a "Partnership Code of Conduct" based on discussions at the Academy>

While the Code lists some behaviors common to the best practices of partnership, it may reveal more about how women perceived their political position. The grassroots side of the code is heavier on demand than exchange, implying their sense of inequality.

PARTNERSHIP CODE

1. Explicitly recognize inequalities of power, resources and money.
2. Identify and be transparent about shared concerns, risks, and uncertainty
Use language that everybody understands.
Regularly review changes and compare changes to the original partnership objectives.
Provide resources to grassroots women in order for them to document their projects, their sustainability and their transferability.
Create ways to link grassroots partners to opportunities for funding, sitting on boards, being appoint to advisory committees, and jointly issues strategy papers|
3. Partners in government, business, foundations, media, and universities should build the capacity of their staffs, retain grassroots women's groups to train staffs...
4. Assist grassroots women's groups to package curriculum tools as an economic development too and create a grassroots Women's Development Trust Fund.

.... the Huairou Commission will
5. Continue to work with grassroots women as partners in capacity building
6. Prepare partner report cards.
7. Explore grassroots women's intellectual property rights...
8. Explore access to public space ...
9. Encourage dialogues through local ...[Academies]

Courting Partnerships

In 2002, with support from UN-HABITAT, seven grassroots groups undertook pilot projects called *Local to Local Dialogues*. These might be described as partnership exploration activities. The point was to empower grassroots women to get into conversation with people in their local government about local development issues, learn themselves from the experience, allow the local authorities to learn and maybe initiate longer term "partnerships."

The Dialogues, which ranged from discussions on legal education for citizens to community wide environmental design, revealed the tremendous potential of these partnerships. [see summaries www.huairou.org/campaigns/governance/solutions01.html and the full exposition at www.huairou.org/assets/download/UrbanGovToolkit_L2L.pdf).

They also moved Huairou's understanding of partnership principles ahead. Drawing from the groups reports, the author, Suranjana Gupta, isolates "Principles of Engagement", behavior that grassroots women must undertake if they are to successfully engage local government. In contrast to *Inviting Partners to Partner*, these pronouncements indicate an audience with a much stronger sense of being empowered:

- **Collective action-** always work from a group; create a critical mass of actors/ a constituency; and set its priorities

Capacity building: on-site, in process learning; e.g. understanding hierarchies, locus of power, strategic communication, negotiation, local politics, raising funds, record keeping, resource management, building an information base,

Building Alliance; not partnerships, but alliances, "working relationships" collaborations. A common way for women to begin participate is by monitoring projects. Tools are to invite people to visit communities;

Demonstrating Capacities. To manage resources, back up women in elected positions; offer large scale solutions; ask for demonstration projects

WIN/WIN

A Grassroots Academy¹ in 2004 was the site of Huairou's next step in its documentation and development of grassroots partnership. The breadth and diversity of partnerships described during the five day event preceding World Urban Forum² is, if nothing else, a vindication of Huairou's originating vision. So was the endorsement² of the local authorities.

More than twenty partnerships presented³ on projects in community building, physical infrastructure, economic development, AIDS, community legislation and global development.

Several of the extended sessions featured pairs of presenters, allowing the audience to learn about the partnership process from two points of view. Some of the teams - particularly those from the Philippines and Peru - were very high on the results of their partnerships and anxious to replicate the experience; others were frank about the sometimes rugged learning curve involved and talked about doing it differently next time⁴.

Taken together, however, the conclusion was unavoidable: These were win/win events. Not only did grassroots women's groups and their immediate partners benefit, but the effects circulated through their communities.

The growth of confidence of the grassroots women's groups is indicated by the WIN/WIN document which was distributed at World Urban Forum². In comparison to the hints of weakness implied by *Inviting Partners to Partner* piece described above, *WIN/WIN Commitments*⁵ represents a negotiated agreement with women who perceive themselves as fully legitimate partners with significant resources and responsibilities.

Next Steps

Appropriate for a start-up NGO, Huairou has been occupied with creating the institutional partnerships necessary for its survival. While it still needs to grow, it has put together a portfolio of 5 major partners with whom it regularly works. This base allows the organization to address one of its primary goal in a more methodic way.

Step one: Devise more effective strategies for bringing together grassroots groups and partners committed to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals

The documents which record grassroots women's experience with partnership are dotted shorts lists of recommendations on how to create and sustain successful partnerships. These should be mined and used to seed the second recommendation for partnership growth.

Step two: Create a disciplined learning program - partly peer based - which will support grassroots women and partners develop more effective partnership skills.

Finally, acknowledging the desire of women and men in the first world to support those who struggle to build community in the developing

Step three: Create an educational program which will support financial partners, whether individual or institutional, in learning to make more effective investment in grassroots groups around the world.

¹ The major purpose of a Grassroots Women's International Academy is for grassroots groups to exchange knowledge and information. GROOTS International, a member network of the Huairou Commission, was the primary organizer of the Grassroots Academy.

²

³ See appendix

⁴ Partnership Lessons Learned attached.

⁵ See Appendix