

GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S (GWIA) INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY

Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) Europe

Economy has transcended national borders a long time ago. Social politics, however, clearly lag behind. International attention is growing towards knowledge and social solutions generated on the ground. Best Practice programs are one attempt to make their formulas of success visible and to extract their implications and lessons learned for policy making and institutional innovation.

During the World Exposition Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany, the Mother Centers Network together with the Huaiarou commission and GROOTS took the initiative to create an international forum to learn from grassroots Best Practices. They conducted 6 Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) as one week events featuring grassroots women's best practices in a training format of 42 groups from all corners of the globe.

The GWIA format has proved a good basis

- For a sociopolitical consolidation of successes in practice
- For the extraction of political implications of success on the ground
- For a dissemination of "Best Practices" and their lessons learned
- For the transfer of grassroots knowledge and expertise to other societal sectors

The creation of a European Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA Europe) is a way to build on this experience.

Qualification and certification of informal learning careers located in civil engagement is key to strengthening the sociopolitical utility of grassroots practices. Reflective spaces are needed for grassroots groups to name and claim the knowledge generated from their practices as well as for their social environment to take notice of and acknowledge the grassroots body of knowledge. Innovative formats of education, training and knowledge building are a key strategy to tap into the rich reservoirs of peer learning and social capital in civic society. Accreditation and certification of competencies gained from informal learning contexts are an important tool to create a process of social visibility and impact of grassroots expertise.

GWIA offers a model of structured learning processes for peer learning as well as learning dialogues spanning multiple sectors, thus up-scaling and mainstreaming grassroots knowledge. Processing grassroots experiences in a curricular form can support the dissemination and multiplication of self help processes, as well as make the political implications of their successes widely accessible to other social actors.



Tasks of GWIA Europe

GWIA implements an approach to education, which is orientated on the concept of lifelong learning and which incorporates formal and informal learning systems and interests. The major tasks comprise training modules and further education programs for social practice, the processing of didactic material to support self-reflection and empowerment as well as quality assurance through peer exchange and networking of grassroots groups.

GWIA acts as an assessment-center and clearing place for informal learning. On the individual level, assessment tools are developed (also for immigrants) to offer assessment and reflection of own competencies and own learning biographies to grassroots initiatives and actors. On the societal level, a clearing place is created where hidden qualification and education potentials in informal settings and the voluntary sector can be traced and made available to the society at large.

GWIA will contribute to the dissemination and societal transfer of bottom-up generated solutions by initiating public debates as well as offering sensitization and training possibilities for local authorities and other social stakeholders on sustainable ways to partner with grassroots groups, and by creating a dialogue structure between professionals and everyday life experts.

Self-help projects need professional partnerships and know-how, especially in the areas of marketing and public relations, fundraising, lobbying, negotiation skills, and organizational development. GWIA will support partnerships with professional partners along these lines.

An Academy can be an important instrument for the consolidation and advancement of innovations. A Grassroots Women's International Academy provides a perfect framework for the development of learning and partnering structures with which innovations coming from the ground can be implemented into public and institutional domains.

Learning from Best Practices – One Example

Once initiated as a pilot project by the German Ministry of Youth and Family, Mother Centers have evolved to a “bottom-up” formula of success that have spread across the borders of Germany. At present, there are 750 Mother Centers in 15 countries¹ throughout the world, most of them in (Western and Eastern) Europe. Mother Centers can be characterized as an export article of German family policy. They have won the Dubai International Award 2002 for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment for strengthening the capacity of civil society to revitalise local neighborhoods and revive community life and for the gaining of effective voices by women in decisions affecting their livelihoods.

The Mother Centers Movement has been growing since 20 years. The first Centers have emerged into “Multi-generation-centers”² and innovative models of urban development. The model is transferring into other countries and other continents and new Mother Centers are continuously springing up.

Mother Centers are self-organized meeting points in the neighborhood, where competencies are exchanged across generations and on-the-spot support systems for families are established.

Without external help, various forms of family support are offered, such as childcare, nursing groups, language- and computer courses, exchange of second hand goods, gardening- and housekeeper-services, sewing, care for the elderly, health- and wellness-services, crisis support, saving and credit groups, foundation of new businesses, nutrition counseling, and sport programs.

Mother Centers support single parents and mothers living on social welfare in getting back into the job-market. They offer a platform for families to realize their needs and to represent them on a community basis. They support intercultural integration as young mothers often face the same situations – independent of social, ethnic and cultural differences. Children can often create a bridge since they usually approach each other without hesitation regardless of social, ethnic or religious borders.

Mother Centers form an answer on the marginalization of mothers in industrialized societies. They reestablish neighborhood networks and social cohesion where these values have disappeared due to ‘modern life’ and they reintegrate a “culture of care” in community life. Caring for children, sick people, and the elderly becomes a community task within the framework of neighborhood networks. Mother Centers are an example of how the concept “it takes a village to raise a child” (Hillary Clinton) can be translated into the structures of our highly industrialized societies and rapidly-changing living conditions in post-socialist and developing countries.

In post-socialistic societies, Mother Centers represent a forum for learning and living democracy in daily life in order to build up a civil society from bottom-up.

¹ Mother Centers according to the German model exist outside Germany in the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Bosnia, Czech Republic, Slovakian Republic, Bulgaria, and Russia, as well as in the US, Canada, Kenya, Rwanda, and the Philippines.

² For example the Expo model “SOS Mutterzentrum 2000” in Salzgitter or the partnership model “Generationenhaus West” in Stuttgart.

In post-war areas, such as Bosnia and Rwanda, Mother Centers offer the opportunity to rebuild social relationships and social community where they were shattered by war and flight.

Mother Centers provide the answer to a historical demand. They represent an alternative form of "Globalization". They are a bottom-up reaction to the worldwide decrease of reliable social relationships and sustainable social environments. Migration into cities, mass epidemics, a more and more flexible labor market, and the shifting of communication and encounters to cyberspace wear away social interrelation. The ability to build up long-lasting social relationships, the capacity for cooperation and mutual support systems and the ability to establish reliable social communities are declining.

Mother Centers have developed tools to counteract these international trends.

Social Policy from the bottom up – a 15 point program

As a grassroots practice, Mother Centers actively implement on the ground solutions to central questions of social policy:

- Improvement of the quality of family socialization
- Promotion of tolerance and democracy
- Integration of socially disadvantaged families
- Integration of immigrants in the neighborhood
- Strengthening of civil society and civil engagement
- Innovation of institutional structures
- Improvement of education through informal learning environments
- Social integration of teenagers
- Increased involvement of fathers in family and household
- Reconciliation of family and work
- Promotion of children's and families' health
- Counteracting demographic developments
- Creation of alternatives to institutional eldercare
- Improvement of the quality of urban living spaces (Habitat)
- Promotion of peace and international understanding

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