

## Speaker Summary Note

<b>Session:</b>	Addressing Gender, Exclusion, and Resilience
<b>Speaker:</b>	<b>Esther Mwaura-Muiru</b> Founder and Coordinator Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS), Kenya
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Building institutions that enhance resilience among communities against recurrent disasters and negative impacts of climate change: The role grassroots women play and importance of acknowledging and formalizing their contributions</b>

### CONTEXT/EXISTING SITUATIONS

The lens of food security or insecurity is a crucial guide to understanding how rural communities experience and cope with the impact of climate change and disaster threats. Long droughts, unpredictable rainfalls, flash floods as well as the increased invasive plants and disease choking food production are serious problems farming communities are coping with during production and post-harvest phases. As a consequence grassroots women farmers and their communities are faced with malnutrition, diminished quantities and variety of farm produce, unbearable raising costs of food production. In this context, able bodied and educated family members (predominantly males) frequently migrate to urban areas for alternative income opportunities. The women living in already poor conditions stay behind to protect the family land (and assets). These women further commonly shoulder disproportionately the responsibility for the wellbeing of the elderly, young children, the physically challenged and the unwell.

Low investment to provide adequate and quality basic services like water, energy, roads, etc., means that grassroots women additionally have had to employ innovative collective strategies to preserve and protect these fragile assets in the face of recurrent disasters and climate change threats. Indeed a growing body of empirical evidence indicates that rural grassroots women's self-help organizations have been at the forefront of taking practical and strategic action to protect their family's quality of life and key assets from the eroding and devastating effects of environmental degradation and unpredictable weather patterns. Regrettably, women's practical adaptive knowledge currently represents an untapped, valuable resource.

Furthermore, institutions have created additional barriers by treating climate and disaster threats as emergency events rather than recurring, systemic challenges that require collaborative, community centered responses. Food for work and food relief programs illustrate the problem. In traditional food for work programs for example, work assignments often prioritize the repair and rebuilding of public infrastructure (bridges and roads) and food relief is handed out to affected households in a manner that converts them into individual aid beneficiaries. This approach skews or bypasses how community organizations and overlooking livelihood and small assets protection (such as household earth dams or protection of family farm against soil erosion). Similarly, these approaches typically force households to accept agricultural inputs (seeds and fertilizers) as farming and food aid/subsidies that are mismatched to changing weather conditions, existing forms of agricultural production, and essential community food staples. These "emergency" approaches—at their very heart—ignore that communities are caught in ongoing cycles of weather and climate change, and overlook the potential for building local capacities to adapt and build resilience over longer terms by working with existing grassroots organizations, especially self-help rural women's groups.

The frequency of these rural "disasters" and mounting food insecurity has forced development and community actors to change their approach. For example research institutions increasingly are investing in strategies to build knowledge and scale up production of drought resistant food crops such as cassava, millet, and sorghum—which women farmers can more easily manage and sustain. At the local level, grassroots women farmers are using their organizing skills and base to build cereal banks (for collective sharing of traditional seeds), investing in water harvesting at the household level, diversifying their economic security by engaging in a variety of livelihood strategies and are sharing knowledge. In addition, they are organizing collectively to redirect

research, programming and policy approaches so that they facilitate grassroots women's groups to become full partners in building community resilience to climate and disaster threats.

## WAYS FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Governments and development agencies should **prioritize resources and technical capacities towards scaling up community-based grassroots women led innovations** that have proved to build resilience. While grassroots women farmers have demonstrated significant capacities to respond to challenges arising from recurrent disasters and impacts of climate, these efforts have not been matched with adequate investments.

**Grassroots women led vulnerability mapping and tracking changes and planning actions to cope with emerging patterns affecting their own microclimates and environment.** In Kenya a group of women farmers kept data over a period of five years on the quantity of beans harvested per hectare using the available seed and fertilizers. The dwindling production was alarming and it was hard to get enough for family consumption let alone extra to sell in the markets for additional income. The group invested in organic farming to rebuild soil nutrients and reverse soil acidity that had accumulated over years. In partnership with ministries of agriculture and non-state agricultural development institutions organic farming is now prioritized as part of official extension services that farmers receive.

2. **Development of partnership that formalize the role grassroots women play in policy and program development** as well as in project implementation. This would include ensuring that grassroots women's long-term lived experiences in disaster responses and climate change adaptation systematically inform policies and programs development. For example, Ministries of agriculture and research institutions should explore opportunities where grassroots women farmers are acknowledged as knowledge holders and have the opportunity to formally impart this knowledge to institutions and related professionals.


**Grassroots women are implementers of food security policies formulated by research institutions and ministries.** Rural women farmers have leveraged their organizing abilities to complement and compensate for the strained capacities of formal agricultural extension services. Applying and modifying agricultural inputs produced and distributed by the private and public sector, grassroots women helped multiply the uptake of extension services as well redefine how agricultural extension officers do their work. For example, 10 by 10 feet portions of land have been used by extension services as the standard demonstration plot. Women farmers have influenced the use of much larger portions of land (up to 1 acre as demonstrations plots).

3. There is a need for researchers to **partner with and invest in grassroots women farmers to track, analyze and store data on their lived environment.**

**Grassroots women are supporting to rally communities and other stakeholders in establishing partnership to build resilience.** A group of women in Kenya after experiencing floodings and water losses on an otherwise a river that in years supplied community members with farming and drinking water undertook a vulnerability risk mapping. The group led the community to undertake transect walk through a dilapidated 11 km river line and have organized the stakeholders including relevant government authorities to rehabilitate and reclaim it.

4. Bold actions to **promote a holistic sustainable development approach** to these challenges must focus on structurally expanding grassroots women's economic opportunities by: (a) Investing in gender equitable rural infrastructure projects including those related to small scale irrigations, renewable energy, farmers tailor-made financing, feeder roads, etc. that even the playing field and position grassroots women as credible climate smart agricultural producers; (b) Incentivizing and secure women's access to and control over land and natural resources; and (c) Promoting and subsidizing women's access to diverse and robust markets including investing in building women farmer's capacities to advance their position in agricultural value chains via bulk buying and higher end processing.

**Organized women's groups consolidate savings to promote affordable and timely financing.** A major challenge among grassroots farmers has been access to affordable and timely financing. Through formation of solidarity cooperatives, women groups have been able to build significant asset base that helps to respond to emerging needs on timely basis. The members are also a much-needed source of shared knowhow and labor. Over a period of one year, organized groups of women farmers in Kitui (a semi-arid region) in Kenya were able to excavate 40 earth dams in time before the rains. The 10 dams that withstood the torrential rains are currently able to supply water to approximately 500 families. Women have developed vegetable gardens that have provided sufficient supply all year round.



“Grassroots women’s organizations are a key buffer, shock absorbing and responsive force in coping with the risks and vulnerabilities associated with climate and disaster threats”.