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Thank you for the invitation to come to this important conference

Title: Siho Mai – Listening and responding to the voices of Rural Women

The 2008 DevNet Conference call them the "Periphery", I call them the "Unofficial", the "Voluntary", the "Weekenders", the "After hours", the "Informal", the "Unstructured" and the "leftovers". I use these terms based on the work and responsibilities I perform for the Kukum Campus SSEC, Panatina Valley Community Association, Chiefs meetings, West `Are `Are SSEC Women's Fellowship, West `Are `Are Rokotanikeni Association and other Community Groups. I do their work as unofficial work, I do their work on voluntary basis, I do their work after official hours, I do their work over the weekends, I do their work at my own expense and I do their work when I have time. In Solomon Islands, the periphery are the majority, they are the resource owners and in their name, Solomon Islands Successive governments have created slogans such as "bottom-up" approach and "Solomon Islands Government of National Unity and Rural Advancement",

Introduction

My presentation will focus on the West `Are`Are Rokotanikeni Association (WARA), as a case study although I will make connections to two other community programs I am involved in. WARA for short is a rural based women's Association, covering the Southern part of Malaita. It was established in 1999 and will celebrate its tenth anniversary in June 2009. It is divided into 14 zones – 12 rural based and 2 urban based. WARA operates in an environment where there are no roads, no electricity, no telephones, faxes or mobiles and poor infrastructures.

WARA is premised on the `Are`Are traditional leadership structure of "Complementary but Separate by gender". This leadership structure gives equal space for women and men to demonstrate leadership and develop programs. It gives equal space and access to the centre and it gives equal space to decision-making. This traditional leadership structure in its practice allow separate doors for women and men, separate sleeping space for men and women, separate house for men and women, separate roles for men and women and separate feasts for men and women. This "separateness" gives equal access to authority, resources and leadership. Women have equal access to leadership and decision-making processes in this traditional structure.

When women of `Are` Are translates modernity into the principle of "complementary but Separate", they could become empowered if they have access to development programs

or they could be marginalized if they do not have access to development programs. I argue here that mainstreaming gender will be problematic for this leadership structure, instead consideration and separate development programs be designed for women. Giving equal emphasis to "separateness by gender" and mainstreaming gender issues or development programs in the formal structures would be ideal.

Background Information

WARA was established in response to a research I conducted in 1997 on the changing roles of rural women and men and the rural women's overdue cry (siho mai) meaning "come down to us". This cry was made to their own advantaged folks and the government. It is a common call that is echoed all over the rural women's population of Solomon Islands. Siho mai in the context of WARA calls for trickling down to them the essential services that are much needed in the rural areas and provision of better quality services. Generally, in the case of Solomon Islands, best education, health and infrastructure and banking services are centred around Honiara or provincial centres. Centering these essential services around Honiara meant that any rural woman wishing to see health professionals or send her kids for good education or access banking facilities, have to travel to the provincial town or to Honiara which is very expensive.

In October 1999, a forum was held to discuss the possibility of women getting organized and formed an Association. The women took the challenge and slowly formed the Association. It took two years to get organized. While organized, the civil conflict rocked the country and therefore WARA turned its attention towards peace making.

The overall aim of WARA is to empower and equip its members with skills, knowledge and wisdom and enable them to participate fully in decision-making on issues that affect their lives and that of their families and communities.

One becomes a member of WARA through payment of a membership fee. Currently, membership fee ranges from SBD\$20 to SBD\$60. WARA has around **566 financial members**. Its prime activities includes: skills training in the areas of sewing, craft, food & nutrition and weaving, Business development and Leadership. It operates a Revolving Loan Fund scheme and a Savings Club as well.

Men are not allowed to be financial members but assists through giving of advisory roles, childcare, supportive roles and assisting women in their fundraising activities.

Activities

Training

WARA identifies training to be significant for their members. Members are very much keen to learn skills in the traditional welfare areas such as sewing, weaving, vegetable growing, cooking, dyeing, crocheting etc. These are referred to as the traditional welfare area but are still relevant to them in today's context. These skills do not only improve their lives, homes and families but also empowers them to involve in income generating activities. They cook, sew, dye and crochet to sell and to improve their home. Utilising these skills gives them economic empowerment.

In addition to these trainings, business skills and leadership training are also provided. In business skills training they learn about how to manage a small income generating activities, manage their loan scheme and how to save. Leadership is a key ingredient for WARA.

Revolving Loans Fund

EU had given WARA a total amount of SBD\$39,000 of seed money towards setting up their Revolving Fund scheme, SBD\$3,000 per zone except the two urban zones who shared SBD\$3,000. The scheme has assisted around 300 women already and is ongoing. Each zone manages and administers its own Revolving fund scheme with a 5% interest rate. Honiara Zone is committed to raise SBD\$1,000 each year on top of their SBD\$1,500. Today they now have SBD\$9,000.

Savings Club

WARA's savings club was launched in September 2006 in response to the lack of banking facilities in the rural villages or even closer to them. Currently there are around 480 members who have saved with Rokotanikeni. They were able to save around SBD\$150,000 within 2 years. Savings is growing at an alarming rate. We collect savings three times a year. Members are allowed to withdraw twice a year. Each zone has two Keni ni Isuha (Money Counters) and the two women who collects money are called Keni ni Tarakoniha (Money Collectors). All the money is saved in one Bank Account.

Publication

WARA is working closely with some chiefs to document `Are`Are women's position in their society in response to the argument that culture has marginalized women. We are hoping to launch the book in June 2009, written in the `Are`Are language. EU Micro-Project Phase II gave Rokotanikeni a total amount of SBD\$15,000 to finance this publication.

Operations/ structure

WARA structure is very simple, comprising of a rural executive, an urban executive and an advisory group. Everyone work on voluntary basis and rewards their leaders in their own way and time. Each zone has its own executive and the executive administers the year's programs. There is an annual general meeting every year and follow up visits if necessary.

WARA Finances

To become a member, one must pay a membership fee depending on the Zone's agreed amount. Currently, it ranges from SBD\$20 to SBD\$60. Each zone conducts fundraising activities throughout the year. We also receive donations from sympathetic friends. We also request assistance from donors for specific programs. Requesting of financial assistance from Donors are done for specific programs and when the cost is beyond our financial capacity.

We have a bank account with the ANZ Banking group and each zone contributes SBD\$200 annually to our main account.

Donor Assistance

After the height of the civil conflict in 2001, WARA diverted its attention from peace making to its training needs. We submitted a proposal to EU Micro-projects to finance some training programs and established our Rural Revolving Fund. The proposal was successful and EU provided SBD\$24,000 for setting up the Revolving Fund scheme and SBD\$36,000 for training in areas such as business, sewing and crafts, leadership and agriculture.

WARA focused its attention on training from 2002 to 2003, and then launched the Revolving Fund in 2004. It launched its Savings Club in September 2006. It submitted again another proposal in 2006 to EU Micro-Project, Phase 2 for further training activities, additional funds for Revolving fund for new zones and funds for publication. The proposal was favourable and an amount of SBD\$119,620.00 was made available to WARA for 2006-2008 activities.

Requests can be also made to NZAID & AUSAID for specific needs that are beyond our capacity.

Other Similar Programs I am involved in.

There are other two similar activities that I am involved in. The first is a Coconut Oil Press (2007-2008). The Surairo community identified a family to manage this business initiative. Money for this project came from the following as a loan: Lower Hutt Rotary -SBD\$34,538, the Lower Hutt Baptist Church -SBD\$17,172, we (Alice & Bob Pollard) -SBD\$40,000 and the family contributed in kind worth of \$20,000. The first eight containers of oil is ready for shipment to Honiara in November this year. The second project I am involved in is the SSEC Women's Fellowship Petrol project. The women wanted to start a petrol project and have discussed it in the 1980s, 1990s and during my field research in 2003, I heard them discussed it again but there was no one willing to assist them kick start this petrol project. Around June 2006, I asked them, how much money they had. They raised enough money SBD\$1,200 just for a drum of petrol (44 gal). Their plan was to reach ten drums in 2010. I contributed one drum and they started their petrol project with two drums of petrol. As they progressed, I continued to meet any short fall such as topping up the cost of an additional drum or the freight until they reached ten (10) drums of petrol in November this year. They have achieved their target of 10 drums of petrol just in 2 and half years. In this project a trusted man sells and records the sales while a woman manages the finances. These women are now raising funds (SBD\$1 per woman) to assist the Men's Fellowship to create an income generating activity for the men.

Some of the Lessons Learnt

- That any development program for the rural women or community must be identified by them. They must take responsibility for it and contributes towards its finances.
- That any development program designed for the rural women or community for that matter must respond to their need.
- The program must be flexible in its implementation in relation to time, mechanisms or systems put in place and recording
- Simple tools to use
- Continuous face to face dialogue with the people.
- The women or people owns, manages and responsible for the program
- The people must share in the cost of the program rather than dish out.
- Allow time for the people to grasp new concepts and systems
- Giving space for the people to demonstrate leadership and allow space for mistakes
- Allow the people to take the lead in any program they wish to participate in.
- Offer assistance where needed, otherwise leave them alone to implement their program in their own way, style and time
- Working from what they have and know
- Any development program must have a leader

Gender and Development Analysis

Solomon Islands is one of the countries in the South Pacific region that receives a significant amount of aid for development. Development aid is still a debatable issue in the rural communities, asking the question whether aid is doing good or harm to the people in SI rural communities. I would argue here that generally for a country like Solomon Islands, it still needs aid for development bearing in mind the following:

- Development programs must specifically targeting needs identified by the people
- Development programs must complement the efforts of the people
- Development programs must be flexible to people's program and activities
- Development programs must recognizes the structures and networks that are already in place and can easily work within that structure
- Separate development programs be specially provided for women's issues and needs where mainstreaming is problematic.

Mainstreaming gender and development does not always work in different leadership structures, for example, the Rokotanikeni Association. Mainstreaming gender and development works well in formal hierarchical structures. Furthermore, mainstreaming gender and development allows both men and women to compete equally for resources and in many cases, men benefit more than women. Giving equal emphasis for development programs for formal and informal structure would be ideal as women dominate the informal leadership structure. Further still taking special measures to design separate programs for women will be even better for rural women.

Conclusion

WARA's work is founded on the following. First, using the "ordinary" things that we have available, for example, using the ordinary envelopes, ordinary bags, ordinary transport, ordinary people, ordinary structure and the ordinary way of communication such as sending a service message through SIBC, word of mouth and hand delivered letters. Secondly, it is founded on "Trust". The ordinary rural women trust its leaders with their money. The leaders trust the women that they will use the project money for the right purpose and account for every cent. The man or woman who carries the money from the rural women is trusted to deliver that money to me once he/she reached Honiara, The rural women trusts me to buy the petrol and ship it across. In an environment where there is lack of communication facilities, our work is founded on trust.

From my experience, working with the periphery is risky, costly, needs patience and commitment but is rewarding when I see ordinary rural women demonstrate leadership and become economically active and responsible.

In an environment where there is no electricity, no telephone, no mobiles, no fax and no proper infrastructures, developing any tools or technology that would assist us improve our activities would be preferred..