

Interview with Regina Pritchett, Representative of the Nine Major Groups, who gave a speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction

Y oung People's Views on Disaster Mitigation

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

JS: Could you please give us some background about yourself and what led you to become a community organizer?

Pritchett: I work as a global organizer now, which means that I facilitate and coordinate grassroots women's organizations that are working on issues around disaster risk reduction, community resilience building, land tenure and housing. I work globally but mostly in Africa with our 23 groups there in 14 countries. I support peer learning between the groups who have developed different practices in their communities. It means I'm constantly learning also, reflecting, connecting and strategizing to scale up and to leverage resources and partnerships for the groups in our network. But my work is mainly to support their work. It's a different positionality than being the organizer on the ground yourself. I came into this work at the Huairou Commission, as an organizer myself. I am the child of activists who have instilled in me that I'm responsible for making the space I occupy better than when I entered it. I have always worked in the communities that I have lived in — which have predominantly been poor or working class. I've always liked to see myself as equipped with the tools I need to better serve my community and resolve issues. I have a background in urban and regional planning, where I specialized in community development for social justice. I see planning at the community level as an opportunity to address issues collectively. And in doing this work I've really learned how group development becomes as important as the development of the built environment.

JS: What intrigued you about the United Nations?

Pritchett: The UN is a space that guides global policy and governs development. Since the grassroots women I work with are also doing development, across communities and even countries, it's important that their contributions are recognized and built upon. We work to open up space in these global fora to have real grassroots women speak from their lived experience.

Photo: Huairou Commission



Regina Pritchett, Representative of the Nine Major Groups, delivering a speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction

JS: What made you decide to participate in the conference at Sendai?

Pritchett: I participated in the Sendai conference because I had been coordinating the Global Community Practitioners Platform for Resilience. I had been working to coordinate our coalition and to ensure that community practitioners are also included in the discussions and decision making leading up to the process in Sendai. We worked together for over a year and a half in the build-up to Sendai. Being in Sendai was really the culmination of our policy advocacy and an opportunity to

talk about implementation with partners.

JS: What was your impression of the Japanese local government and NGOs in Japan?

Pritchett: I hadn't been more inspired in a long time than when I went to Sendai and Minamisanriku. The disaster risk reduction work was really excellent and I felt hopeful because I could see concrete gains from real partnerships between local governments and community members. Ahead of the conference the Huairou Commission, which hosts the Community Practitioners Platform for Resilience, partnered with Women's Eye, and the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation to hold a grassroots academy in Minamisanriku, where we met with grassroots women, and met also the local officials. It was really very powerful. Japanese women's groups were leading important work to develop escape routes using the local camellia flowers. Many groups were working on inter-generational issues in teaching children about disasters and trying to help them return to normal life after the terror of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. Women were also focused on restoring other community members' relationships to nature, building local economies and working with their local government to build back better. I was really impressed by the mayor of Minamisanriku also, who really embodied leadership in galvanizing development to build on the initiatives of residents in the area. We also met amazing hotel owners and staff at

Photo: UNISDR



UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR) on March 14 in Sendai, Japan.

the Hotel Kanyo who housed and fed people who were displaced during the disaster. Minamisanriku is an example of how everyone has a role to play in disaster risk governance, and the recovery and reconstruction process.

At the academy, we also met with women from Fukushima who were affected by the nuclear disaster. That was hard. There are very few other people who have gone through that experience. Nevertheless, these women were extremely proactive and were exemplary community organizers. I hope their local government will work more closely and build upon their work to monitor radiation levels and really ensure that citizens are safe.

I was honored to also sit next to the mayor of Sendai who was an inspiring woman. I commend her for leading their recovery efforts and for the condition of the city when we arrived. For us, who were visiting for the first time, I wouldn't have known that a few years earlier the city was badly affected. Sendai is lucky to have her, and I was lucky to have met and shared the stage with her.

JS: Could you tell us about the Huairou Commission and your thoughts about the work that they do?

Pritchett: The Huairou Commission is a global coalition of grassroots women's organizations. We believe strongly that women organized across communities and at the global level can leverage power and visibility. We work with the women who are collectively providing their communities with answers for the development challenges they face. That is very exciting to be working with some of the world's greatest problem solvers. I think the mission of the Huairou Commission is radically important. It moves away from believing the global North knows what's best for everyone. Opening space for grassroots women is the work of leveraging our relative privilege and trying to build partnerships where grassroots women are empowered to contribute their local perspectives, and together with partners they are able to derive solutions.

JS: What kind of mindset should a "community" have for disaster mitigation?

Pritchett: I believe that communities have to know their risks and develop plans in advance. There is a rapper, Suga Free, who says: "If you stay ready, you ain't got to get ready." That's important. The other thing is that disasters disproportionately affect the poor. Underlying risk factors have a lot to do with the poor infrastructure and lack of planning in poor communities. Community practitioners we work with do community mapping to show their governments the severity of their conditions. It's really important for communities facing slow onset disaster to be documenting the changes they experience over time, and partner with academic institutions even, in order to

demonstrate that they are in fact suffering from a disaster and can access resources. For all of our groups, mapping is usually the entry point into their work. From risk maps they are able to also plan their own development.

I would also caution communities who receive a lot of aid after disasters that this influx of money, people and attention will go. The disaster world is very short-term development work, unfortunately. It's also poorly monitored in terms of making sure money reaches the ground and the people who need it most. Humanitarian aid and assistance is needed and an important component. But the communities we work with often find that people parachute in, without working with established development community-based organizations, and think they know the solutions. I would encourage community organizations to be prepared to capitalize on the short-term influx, but be ready for that to come to an end within five years of the disaster. Humanitarian aid needs to be linked to development more broadly and grassroots groups who can make these links are going to do a lot better in the long run.

JS: What is the best way of doing community building?

Pritchett: Be with people. Talk to people. You have to love the people you serve, or you aren't fit to be a leader. At the heart it's about relationships in my eyes. Love has everything to do with it.

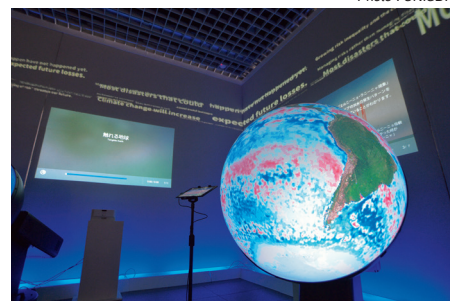
JS: Where and what were you doing when the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake happened? What was your first reaction?

Pritchett: I was in grad school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. My brother was living in Fukuoka at the time and I had just come from visiting him. I was shocked and scared to reach him. He had not been affected because Fukuoka where he was was OK, being so far south. But I remember waves of people calling to confirm he was OK. It was scary for our family. But I feel gravely for the people who were affected and lost family members or lost their homes. Visiting those areas recently where lots of lives were lost moved me. You could feel the death still in the air, like it had roots in the ground. I pray for those souls and those that survived them.

JS: How should we strengthen the people and communities who have been affected by natural disasters?

Pritchett: We should look for ways of learning what they are doing and support their learning and teaching of other communities. People who have been through a disaster can speak a language that those who haven't been through it can't. We can build solidarity communities to

Photo : UNISDR



Tangible Earth

help people feel connected and regain perspective. Professionals also have to learn from these experiences so we can plan better interventions and keep our practice relevant and connected. We have to get rid of the trap whereby people say communities are vulnerable — you hear that especially about women, children and the disabled. The vulnerability language is an excuse to ensure that money goes to those who assert that they know what needs to be done. There are places where people are vulnerable and there are groups who have aspects that make them relatively more or less vulnerable, but sweeping statements like this are used by large international NGOs, professionals and governments to channel money their way.

The disaster community is way behind other areas of development where we talk about “community driven” and “women led”. We understand that the most affected have the most skin in the game, and are the ones who may be best positioned to also derive their own solutions. Unfortunately the global South, the poor everywhere, receive a lot of messaging even before disasters strike that they don’t know, or that others (the global North, the rich, the educated) know more than them. Part of our work is breaking this thinking and to facilitate the fruition of the best ideas of any community as a starting point for their own action, their own healing and their own development.

JS: The speech you gave at Sendai was very powerful and we really liked the part where you talked about being an artist. When was the last time you were an artist and contemplated a certain issue in a community?

Pritchett: I do collages in my free time. It helps me express an idea buried deep inside. But what I have realized is that I can get into a really focused state where I’m really aware of the connection between the tactile aspect of the creation and my feelings, inspired by an idea. But when I’m done, and I step back, the composition usually surprises even myself.

I feel this was about the work we were doing within the UNISDR. I was tasked with advocating with community practitioners to give recommendations for the Hyogo Framework for Action. I was so focused on consolidating our messages across the community practitioners and making sure we could see ourselves in the document. But I remember being at a consultation in Geneva, and everyone wanted to see their name in the document. I was listening and thinking how hard it would be to reconcile all the demands. No one was offering a new way of operating across the stakeholders or a new way of doing disaster risk reduction. I felt bad for the co-chairs. It felt like a bad city hall meeting where people tell you about the potholes in their street and how their neighbor wouldn’t cut their grass. We were missing the bigger picture. I could tell we weren’t addressing the underlying issues. I felt like we needed to step back and propose the bigger picture, as this was after all a guiding document.

I started feeling that we needed to think like governments. If you received this document, what would you build as a result? How would you organize your ministries, citizens and funds to address what was proposed in the final document. It was clear to me that we could afford to keep proposing ourselves as the solution. We moved from proposing alliances and partnerships — like local action backed by the community practitioners, local authorities and NGOs. For me, I wished we had done this sooner and do more of it.

JS: What do you think is the best way to engage young people in communities?

Pritchett: Young people are important change agents, and always have been. It’s important to make spaces for them to associate on their own but I really appreciate how Japanese people culturally incorporate many age groups. This was really great to see and seemed like an important part of the recovery and reconstruction process. Young people bring energy and elders bring perspective. As long as one doesn’t assume to know it all, and the two can listen and learn from each other, there are amazing possibilities that await.

JS: How can women play a bigger role in Japan?

Pritchett: Women can play a bigger role if they continue to network through organizations like Women’s Eye. We were so impressed by the organization of women there. I hope these women keep moving forward and assert that they have ideas that can work too! I saw such ingenuity among the women. I hope men and society can make space to seek out these organized groups of women and support their work.

JS: Do you think Japanese society is ready to handle another situation like this?

Pritchett: I hope Japanese society never has to face another disaster. But it seems like you have learned a lot in a little amount of time. I hope Japan invests in peer learning across the country in order to learn from the successes as well as the failures.

JS: What are your future aspirations and goals?

Pritchett: I hope to continue to be a friend and ally to communities and community development. I hope to find new ways of doing this, including working more in my own community in New York.

JS: What kind of future can you see or hope for in Japan?

Pritchett: Japan has a bright future for sure. It has a rich history of resilience and remembering is at the crux of what we heard when we were there. I hope Japan continues to share its experiences and learn from itself and others in the world. I also hope Japan invests in its communities and those serving its communities, such as the local authorities, so that Minamisanriku can recover as fast as Sendai. If it can do this, it will solidify its position as one of the great countries on disaster risk reduction.

JS: Do you have any advice for young people who are interested in getting involved and becoming future activists or community organizers?

Pritchett: Get involved! Get a skill that’s useful and contribute it to a group in your area. You will be serving your community and you will of course learn by doing and improve over time. Experience is the best teacher but we have to be brave enough to go into situations that are new or unknown and figure it out. I would encourage young people to be brave and get involved.

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