The Women's International Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR)
Leadership Awards 2022

Background on 2022 Winners

Dr. Esline Garaebiti, Director General of the Ministry of Climate Change Adaptation, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards, Environment, Energy and Disaster Management in Vanuatu.

Dr. Homolata Borah, a researcher from India working with communities on Majuli, the world's largest inhabited river island where river erosion is an existential issue.

PHOTOS HERE

Dr. Esline Garaebiti - Vanuatu

Winner: The Women's International Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR) Leadership Awards for Excellence 2022
Background

Esline is the Director of the Vanuatu Meteorology and Geohazards Department. She is an inspiring Pacific Island woman who has built up geohazards capability in Vanuatu and in the region.

When working as the Geo-Hazards Manager for Vanuatu she initiated the establishment of the Oceania regional seismic network (ORSNET) between Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Samoa to improve tsunami detection system in the region and in order to reduce risks of tsunami in these countries. She is also the advocator for the Melanesia volcano network between PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to reduce risks of volcanic eruptions in Melanesia.

Esline was instrumental in the design and rollout of the Oceania Regional Seismic Network (ORSNET) to address a capacity gap in seismic monitoring and tsunami warning in the region. This has included mobilising resources to provide training on seismic instrumentation, data analysis, formulation of Standard Operating Procedures for earthquake detection, tsunami warning and response. This work has also included public and community engagement with the preparation of response plans. Data collected under ORSNET now provides countries with faster lead times to warn at-risk communities. This advice is received by ORSNET member states before PTWC messages are received by National Tsunami Warning Centres. She is the project Manager of the ORSNET and has chaired the ORSNET task team since its establishment. The improvements of the tsunami detection system in the Southwest Pacific would not be possible without her initiative. ORSNET is recognized by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission as the model of seismic data sharing for the pacific Tsunami warning system.

Esline’s leadership in DRR across the Pacific is evident with her leading the establishment and coordination of the ORSNET, improved Pacific capabilities in seismic monitoring and tsunami warning and mitigation which has seen a number of countries supported, availing Vanuatu Geohazards Division to provide technical advice and support to other Pacific Island Countries in the installation of seismic networks, continued involvement in the ICG for Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System, and as a senior government official i.e. as Director General, Ministry of Climate Change, Adaptation, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards, Energy, Environment and Disaster Management in Vanuatu.

As Director of the Vanuatu Geohazards Division she supports her ni Vanuatu staff. As a scientist she has advocated the use of scientific approaches and risk information in early warning and key decisions by the Government. She was instrumental in
bringing together Pacific Island Countries with significant tsunami risk to collaborate and agree on sharing seismic monitoring data and expertise to improve tsunami warning in the region. As a result, a number of Pacific Island Countries now share their seismic data to a central server which is shared directly to the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre.

Esline has advocated the strengthening of local expertise in the region and has published many scientific publications related to geo-hazards studies in Vanuatu.

References

http://www.orsnet.org/?lang=EN

Direct quotes from Dr. Esline Garaebiti, Director General of the Ministry of Climate Change Adaptation, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards, Environment, Energy and Disaster Management in Vanuatu:

Before any disaster hits, women and girls have the primary and natural role and responsibility for caring for a home which includes children, older family members and people with disabilities. Involving women in DRR in Vanuatu means the need of the vulnerable group in times of natural disasters is considered in National, Provincial and Community disaster risk management planning from preparedness to the recovery. Gender became

My duty as the Head of the Ministry of Climate Change, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards, Environment, Energy and Disaster Risk Management is to uphold the vision of the ministry to promote a resilient, sustainable, safe and well informed Vanuatu. Resilient, safe and well informed communities and societies value the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the face of climate change and disaster risk reduction.

Vanuatu is prone to all natural hazards with its location on the ring of fire and the tropical cyclone belt of the Pacific. Direct impacts of climate change are felt every day and everywhere in Vanuatu. Reducing the risks of these climate risks requires the inclusion of women not only in the Climate risk management planning and implementation processes but also in leadership roles.
Dr. Homolata Borah, India

Winner The Women’s International Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR) Leadership Awards - Rising Star 2022

Researcher working with communities on Majuli, the world’s largest inhabited river island where river erosion is an existential issue.

Background

Over the last six years, Dr. Homolata Borah has been working towards reducing disaster risk for some of the most vulnerable (and diverse) communities living in the world’s largest inhabited river island of Majuli in the state of Assam in India. The island has lost more than 30% of its landmass to river erosion over the last nine decades. In a changing climate, more frequent and intense rainfall events, increased siltation, and increased streamflow have accelerated the erosion of the island. This is not only causing permanent loss of land and housing for hundreds of households but also threatening the very existence of a traditional society and its historical and cultural assets such as centuries old vaishnavite monasteries. Nearly half of the 64 pre-existing monasteries are already wiped out.
Homolata’s work has spanned field research, community engagement, dialogue with local and state governments, and policy advocacy. There are five main pillars of her work:

Putting communities at the centre: Her field research has engaged vulnerable communities in Majuli and helped identify practical solutions to the problem of soil and river erosion. She has documented indigenous knowledge on vernacular Mishing houses that are more resilient and can protect livestock, food grain, and household assets. She has not only documented local flood resistant rice varieties but also assessed the viability of new practices such as hydroponic agriculture.

Development of a multi-layered approach to protect lives and livelihoods. Given the high level of disaster risk in Majuli, Homolata has developed and advocated for an approach that combines; a) socio-economic strength; b) local leadership and participation, particularly of women; c) strengthened local government institutions, particularly the district disaster management authorities; d) regulatory frameworks to control erosion; e) flood control measures; and f) strategies for natural and cultural conservation.

Engagement with multiple technical disciplines to explore solutions ranging from geo-synthetics, bio-engineering to indigenous solutions, and across multiple fields of work such as administrators and civil society organisations to search for integrative solutions (e.g. boat clinics operated by NGOs to provide year round basic health services.)

Policy advocacy with the local, state and national governments to advocate for a range of solutions – from teaching swimming to women, to increasing resource allocation for disaster risk reduction in river islands. She has been writing on these issues in the national dailies such as The Times of India, The Economic Times as well as PreventionWeb.

Preparing the next generation of women disaster risk managers through classroom teaching, field visits, mentoring of student researchers, and special lectures.

Homolata’s work has had tangible impacts including the recognition of river erosion in river islands as an important disaster risk in India’s disaster risk reduction policy architecture. In 2021, for the first time the Government has allocated US$ 200 million to specifically address the risk of river erosion. As an Assistant Professor, she has educated more than 200 women in the theory and practice of disaster risk management. Additionally, along with Keio University in Japan and national universities in India, she has mentored young professionals on development of social and technological innovation for disaster risk reduction.
Homolata has demonstrated leadership through the sheer breadth of her engagement – from the local to state to national levels. She has been equally at ease discussing strategic issues with her State’s Chief Minister as she has been while communicating and connecting directly with communities living in Majuli. She has exhibited remarkable imagination in connecting local issues with higher-level policy discourse.

The main impact of her leadership has been the fact that issues pertaining to river islands have gained national attention, and that there are substantial amounts of resources allocated for disaster risk reduction in river islands. Also, there is a broader alliance of individuals and institutions working on these issues and there are concrete initiatives underway at the community level.

Homolata’s work embodies the spirit of “leave no one behind” enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals. Her focus area has a population of 150,000, which is only a tiny fraction of India’s population. However, these communities are bearing the brunt of climate change induced disaster and they must not be forgotten. An award to Homolata will encourage other women leaders to focus on disaster risk reduction for the marginal and most vulnerable communities.

The implications of Homolata’s work go beyond Majuli. Some of the insights from Majuli can be transferred to not only other river islands, but also coastal areas, and some of the Small Island Developing Countries. A recognition at this stage will help Homolata in making such knowledge transfer possible.

References

Direct quotes attributable to Dr. Homolata Borah:

Women in disaster risk reduction strategies have transformed the perception of women. Women are seen as ‘Leaders’ as opposed to being ‘vulnerable’.

Proactive inclusion of women makes a big difference in three ways: 1) It ensures that local concerns, local vulnerabilities, and local capacities are taken into account while implementing government programmes on disaster risk reduction.

This increases the efficiency of the programmes; When women are involved in DRR the disruption in children’s education due to disasters is minimised;

Women’s participation ensures that everyday needs of the communities are balanced with the need for safety from extreme events. Inclusivity helps successful implementation of disaster risk reduction. An inclusive approach maximises local initiative and leads to sustainable outcomes.

If there is one lesson from the pandemic, it is that no one is safe till everyone is safe! Our lives are interconnected and interdependent. Risk to one person or one section of the community eventually affects the rest of the system.

Inclusiveness is not only a moral imperative, it is also the most practical thing to do in the long term.

Give resources — including finances — in the hands of women. Notional leadership without a direct say in how resources are utilised is of limited value. After a disaster, if the direct cash transfer is done in a woman's bank account, it is perhaps ten times more likely to contribute to the family’s resilience to future disasters. If a woman farmer doesn't have the land title in her name, she can't buy crop insurance.

We need to go beyond the rhetoric of women empowerment to more fundamental changes in the way resources are managed equally by women and men.
This year, the river island of Majuli and other districts in the state of Assam have seen some of the worst flooding as compared to the past decades.

The floods came early this year! And they have affected larger areas than ever before. The most important aspect of climate change impact is uncertainty at the local level. It seems that each season is a surprise.

Women have to be at the centre of designing local level social protection measures to guard against these emerging impacts of climate change.

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Ends

About the WIN DRR Leadership Awards

The WIN DRR Leadership Awards recognise women's achievements in disaster risk reduction across the Asia-Pacific region. The awards are part of UNDRR's flagship women's leadership initiative, the Women's International Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR), which is supported by Australian Aid.

There are two award categories – the Excellence Award, proudly sponsored by SM Prime Inc., worth US$10,000 and the Rising Star Award worth US$7,500. The Award winners will be announced during an event at the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Brisbane.

The finalists for the Rising Star Award can be viewed here. https://www.preventionweb.net/blog/win-drr-leadership-awards-2022-rising-star-award-finalists

The finalists for the Excellence Award can be viewed here. https://www.preventionweb.net/blog/win-drr-leadership-awards-2022-excellence-award-finalists
For media enquiries please contact: Patrick Rose, WIN DRR Communications, patrick.rose@un.org or Branwen Millar, WIN DRR Programme Manager, branwen.millar@un.org