Simply Isis
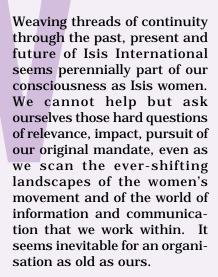
by Susanna George

"In order to know where you are going, you need to know where you have been..."

Weaving threads of continuity through the past, present and future of Isis International seems perennially part of our consciousness as Isis women. We cannot help but ask ourselves those hard questions of relevance, impact, pursuit of our original mandate, even as we scan the ever-shifting landscapes of the women's movement and of the world of information and communication that we work within. It seems inevitable for an organisation as old as ours.

A VISION CARRIED ON...

The vision that our founders had for Isis was simple yet courageous—that information should be organised and disseminated in ways that were far more accessible to women. If such information could flow through alternative channels designed to meet the needs of international women's networking and solidarity building, then, surely the women's movements in both North and South would grow from strength to strength.

Working together at the international level, raising the visibility and social consciousness of the transformative power of women's collective organising, creating space for women to be able to speak for themselves and to speak directly with their sisters around the world—all these were seen as magnifying the development of women's collective power.

In 1974, another international information and communication service such as Isis did not exist. Women's stories and experiences rarely featured in mainstream media. The primary mediums of communication were the postal service, telephones, telexes and personal contacts in meetings and conferences. There was a vibrant belief that as women, we all shared fundamental commonalities upon which sister solidarity could be built. Gender justice had just barely entered into the busy business of development and governance.

Today, in 1999, there is a critical mass of organisations

all over the world doing various forms of women's information and communication work. Newletters and bulletins fuel women's information sharing and exchange in a diverse range of groups, organisations, networks and alliances. There are more opportunities now for women in NGOs and in communities to enhance their skills and abilities in information and communication work.

Information on almost everything from the relevant to the irrelevant is peddled. With the creation of the Internet and the advances of new information technologies, information slips from desktop to desktop in a matter of seconds and is now literally at one's fingertips. The facility of electronic communication at once excites and throws up doubts amongst women activists who have access to this.   On the one hand its incredible potential for global women's networking and movement building is rapidly changing the way women are organising at that level, while on the other, it has enabled global empire builders.

If the vision of our founders were described as a soul, then this soul has been reincarnated in several bodies since Isis began in 1974. Today the bodies that this soul exist in, and the environment that these bodies work within is far different than anything that could be imagined two decades ago. Isis International-Manila and its two sister organisations are now well-established in three continents, familiar to many who work at international and regional levels on women's issues. Isis International-Manila is physically located in a comfortable space that belongs to the organisation,

stable after several years of transition to an international organisation but with a strong regional focus. In some sense however, Isis has changed in form, but not in its essence. We still strive to provide accessible and effective information gathering systems and communication channels in support of the women's movement and movements for social change.   There's something simply Isis about our desire to stay relevant.

FINDING OUR GROUND...

When Isis International first relocated to Manila, its role in the region was not clearly

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defined, and its relationships within the complex political milieu of the Philippine were at best tenuous. Stories that get told about those early days of transition, echo with tensions and discomforts of not finding level, firm ground for the organisation to get anchored into. After conducting feasibility studies of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Manila seemed the most natural home for Isis International. From the

early days, Marilee Karl, one of the founders of Isis, had been part of the Philippine solidarity movement in Europe. From as early as 1982, Sr. Mary John Mananzan was on the international advisory board of Isis International. Girlie Villariba, our former Executive Director volunteered at the Rome office in 1980. Luchie Pavia Ticzon and Marilee were in touch through various international events and networks.

The Philippine women's movement through the 1980s was one of the most vocal, visible and powerful within Asia and Isis International maintained strong ties with GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action), a national alliance of women's organisations in the Philippines. When the office moved, it was the GABRIELA network that facilitated that process in the Philippines. Nevertheless, Isis suffered an identity crisis of sorts, with most of its staff having come from the national democratic movement and yet having to straddle its accountabilities to the national women's movement while reaching out to the regional and international women's movements. Internal structures were also affected while trying to redefine the original mandate of the organisation within an entirely new context. Dissatisfaction of all sorts was rife in those first few years in Manila.

Painfully, the organisation was forced to go through an institutional restructuring in 1994, which sought to rectify both the internal operations as well as sharpen the institution's focus regionally. In one sense the staff kept such a

The women of Isis International-Manila. Despite the growing pains, we've taken back our stride

brave face through all this that even our sisters in Santiago and (then) Geneva were surprised to hear of the restructuring process. Despite all that was happening internally, Isis International maintained a high profile in the Asia Pacific NGO Working Group responsible for regional preparations for the Beijing Conference, and organised together with the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) and the World Association for Christian Communication, the still talked about, Women Empowering Communications Conference in Bangkok, Thailand in early 1994.

Although that period is rarely discussed by the staff who were retained from before the restructuring, it seems to have taken its toll on the morale of the staff and the institution. Our foundations were solid though. Our network and funding partners still had faith in us, and in time we recovered

our stride. We have worked to maintain strong ties with the women's movement, and seek to favour all and prefer none in our local networking and information dissemination work.

At the regional level, Isis International seems to have found its ground. We are connected with many regional and national networks and organisations, particularly those focusing on information and communication work, women and media, women and food security, as well as those working on lobbying and advocacy work for women's advancement. We have supported the creation of important new information networks, such as the Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC) and participate in the strengthening of other national, subregional, regional and global networks for change.

TACKLING NEW ISSUES...

By 1980, the Isis Interna-

tional Rome office had already started incorporating an innovative manual information retrieval system known as OASIS (Open Access Symbiotic Information System) to strengthen its information service (Isis Project Proposal, 1980). Our information retrieval system in Isis International-Manila is fully computerised now. We still provide resource listings and annotated bibliographies to researchers, students and women activists. We have noted however that with the arrival of the Internet, many women who would previously write to us for listings and bibliographies are now enabled to search the Net.

Recognising this trend, Isis International set up a website in 1998 that featured articles from our magazine, *Women in Action.* We have also started dissemination our monthly news bulletin, *Women Envision*, electronically. In 1999, we have networked all

Isis International-Manila's resource centre

the computers in the office to improve internal connectivity. From dipping our toes at the edge of the cyber unknown, Isis International has now plunged deep into women's electronic information networking.

Despite the speed at which Isis has gone into the issue of women and the new information and communication technologies, we continue to be critical in our analyses. We are grappling with the meaning of this new information age and what it will mean for women and women's movement building in our region. We recognise that less than two percent of Asia and the Pacific has access to the means for electronic communication (ITU, 1999) and that like other disparities, there is a growing disparity between the "information rich" and the "information poor." Even so, we have gone ahead and spearheaded the setting up of the first Asian women's electronic information network, recognising that there is incredible potential to strengthen

women's information sharing and solidarity building through this.

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Our cognizance of the information gap that continues to exist for the most marginalised demanded us to find "convergence" between various mediums. Our electronic Radio News Dispatch to women radio communicators in the

region is one such attempt to bridge this information gap. We are also exploring how information can be easily repackaged from one medium to another and how we can train women who work in mediums such as print and radio, or who work on women's organising at the grassroots level to build their campaigns and their knowledge base through the use of electronic means.

It was noted in the assessment of the Beijing Platform for Action at the Asia-Pacific Regional NGO Symposium that "media has been transformed from a public utility to a transnational enterprise." The "revolving doors" between the state, military and private enterprise are more oiled and fluid than ever with electronic communications systems. As the UN system becomes more pliant and bended knee to accepting corporate dollars and corporate gimmicks to address their development mandates, corporate interests are ever more able to influence state and international policies and legislation, Isis International, will have to reckon with what it means to carve out space and find a voice for women within this world of information and communication. It appears that the first task must be to ensure the interests of civil society particularly in the South, where public, commonly owned communication channels are being rapidly encroached upon. Privatisation of all public utilities, the erosion of state control and national and local self-determination will mean that the most marginalised women have less and less access to communicate with each other,

nor have their voices ever heard.

RETHINKING FEMINIST STRUCTURES...

While our original mandate remains a beacon that throws light to our work in the present and our plans for the future, Isis is no longer structured around the original collective principle. The organisation that we inherited from Rome was already working on the basis of hierarchies between the staff. In the first operations policies and procedures document of Isis, our basic philosophy was that all members of the Isis team would "share and participate fully and equally in the responsibility of decision making, and in carrying out the work." This early attempt at collective processes sought to dismantle traditional hierarchical structures as they were seen as perpetuating "the inequalities and authoritarian values of a capitalist and patriarchal society."

Over the two and a half decades since Isis was founded, the return to structures of hierarchical accountabilities has been one that has remained a point of ceaseless self-critique and soul-searching. Have we indeed failed to present a viable feminist model for organisational management? Today the management of Isis International still grapples with this knot that tugs right where it hurts. Women managers are readily accused of not keeping with feminist principles. Isis has sought a model whereby the management functions as a collective while the organisation runs on the basis of consensus building. This is never easy though. There have been, over the past years, institutional decisions taken by the management that meant radical changes for other Isis women, which has caused great angst and unhappiness.

Given that the revolution never arrived in the way we

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once imagined, and that NGO work is less of a vocation and more of a career, Isis International, like many other women's organisations are trying to find a balance between our accountabilities to the movements for women's advancement and to the needs of our individual staff members. It takes time, as all such processes do, and we do our best to create an atmosphere where such questions can be discussed openly and in inclusive ways. Isis International remains committed to further developing feminist management structures that work for us and for the women we seek to serve.

HEADING OUT...

Isis women are endlessly engaged in discussions, evaluation and planning at all levels. We had one such evaluation recently where we looked at where Isis might be in the future. It was funny, we laughed a lot at the ideas some of the break out groups had—crazy things like Isis setting up a resource centre on the moon, and launching our own satellite. From that exercise we understood that the current Isis women remained committed to see Isis International to the point where such an information and communication service is one day rendered redundant. We believe that there is still a lot more work to be done in training and upgrading the skills and analyses of women and women's groups to be able to communicate with each other, to influence the societies and spaces around them in ways that bring about greater social justice. Women's networking and solidarity building needs to occur across social movements. Women need to be organised for greater access and control over resources and services, and exchanges and information sharing can contribute significantly to this. We need to continue to find common platforms for organising together with greater respect for the diversity of our experiences and identities.

Isis would like to be a part of the movements towards women's advancement and we would like to do this by doing what we do best: information and communication work. ❯

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