Local government for gender equality

Letters to the Editorial Board

Issue 39 of *Capacity.org*, 'Behaviour and Facilitating Change', evoked some enthusiastic responses from practitioners and scholars who are working on similar or related theses.

Communication common sense

We took special note of your introduction to the May 2010 issue of *Capacity.org* dedicated to behaviour and facilitating change. We are practitioners in the communication field, so this issue was of particular interest to us. We noted several references that are particularly important to us:

- the central role that **champions** play in facilitating change by 'doing' and 'being' (namely the articles by Ingrid Richter and by Mohan Dhamorathan);
- the emphasis on **listening** and understanding contexts (as explained by Leng Chhay from Cambodia, and also the column by Jenny Pearson);
- the length of **time** it takes to gain trust and learn to become immersed in a local situation (Jan Morgan's piece on AusAID in Papua New Guinea); and
- the **danger of importing solutions** when every situation is different (contribution by Doug Reeler and Sue Soal).

For a long time, those of us who belong to the cult of communication practitioners have believed that good communication makes good development. In broad terms, when we say 'good communication' we are talking about participatory communication. Participatory communication emphasises 'listening', while mainstream communication focuses on 'telling'. We think of participatory communication as something that shapes the very nature of development. We think of conventional communication as something that simply promotes the desired development outcome.

Last autumn, we published the book *Communication for Another Development: Listening before Telling* (Zed Books, 2009).
In this book, we reflect on our experience as consultants and trainers. So often we agreed to work under project conditions that were less than ideal. We have been blind to the conditions. We have been practicing in what we now refer to as the 'grey zone'. Being realistic about what is possible helps us to assess reality and adjust our expectations and methodology to fit that reality. We think of this as communication common sense. We navigate in the grey zone using three coordinates: champions, an understanding of context and a match-up of the two with appropriate communication functions. By looking at champions and context, we can fit functions to the reality of the situation, and we can adjust our expectations and methodology. We illustrate this navigation with examples from our practice, and we celebrate the achievements of pioneers and current practitioners.

We are pleased to see that we are not alone!

Sincerely,
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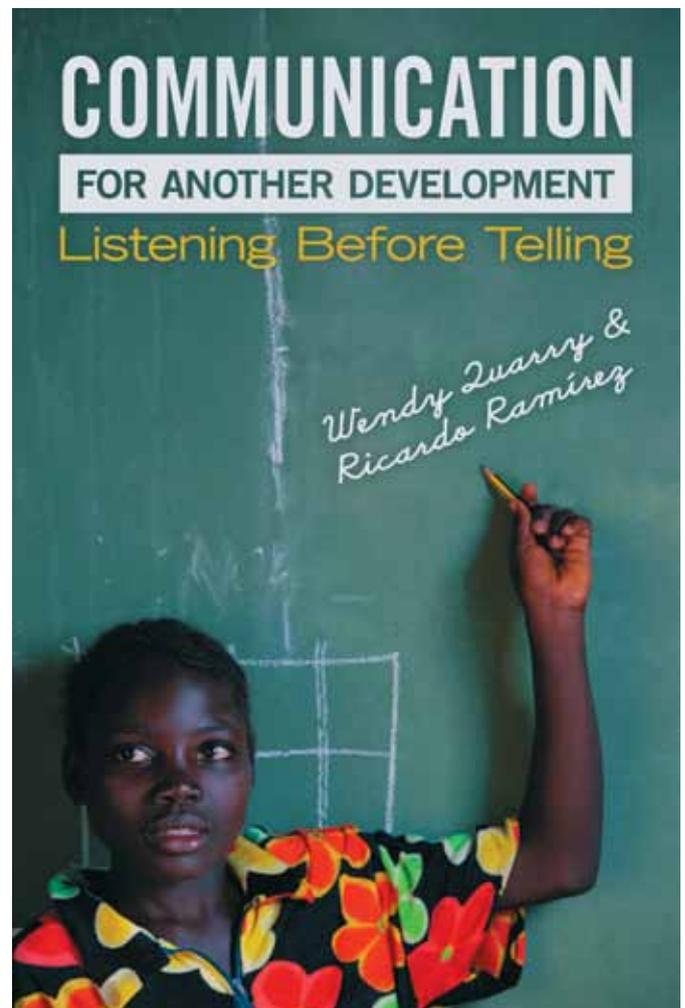Ricardo Ramirez
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Being over doing

I am a tropical agronomist who has worked for more than 20 years in eastern and southern Africa. Recently I read with great interest Ingrid Richter's article, 'The unfolding practitioner', in issue 39 of *Capacity.org*. Her article had the apt subtitle: 'Capacity development from within'. It's rare to hear people talk about the difference between 'doing' and

'being' in circles of development cooperation. I fully agree with you that capacity development (CD) practitioners ought to pay more attention to 'the deeper layers of who they are ... to their inner state of being'. The quality of our 'doing' depends on the quality of our 'being'. In foreign aid, the addiction to 'doing' is indeed rampant and causes great harm. As a multi-disciplinary agronomist, I have always tried to combine the natural and social sciences in my work, as small farmers in sub-Saharan Africa inevitably do in daily practice. But on top of that, I have been practicing Transcendental Meditation since 1972 as a way to stay grounded and 'unfold' capacities from within. You ask whether the behaviour of exceptional CD practitioners is a technique that can be acquired through training. If the Self is the layer that spans 'doing' and 'being', then it is necessary to align body, mind (or intellect) and spirit in order to develop excellent behaviour. The level of the spirit (pure being) has not received enough attention yet in development activities. In my view, the ability to access the deeper layers of our being can be systematically trained – through meditation techniques, for example.

In 1998 I completed my PhD thesis, in which I attempted to put the potential contribution of spirituality (gaining access to the deeper levels of being) in a scientific context. And for those interested in spirituality in our field of work, I recently explored this subject in more detail in my book, *Civic Driven Change through Self-Empowerment*.

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Local government for gender equality

Despite signs of progress in some regions and countries, the overall pattern of gender inequality remains unchanged. In most countries women work more hours than men but earn less. This is because they often perform unpaid work and are over-represented in lower income groups. To make matters worse, they often earn less than men for identical work. In rural areas few women own land, which reduces their access to income from agricultural produce. And cultural factors contribute to girls being discriminated against when they want to go to school, which diminishes their career opportunities.

In many cultures, power is wielded by men, and women enjoy far less freedom, even within their own households. Men often abuse this power. In 2005, the World Health Organization published its *Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women*. It focuses on 24,000 women in 10 countries and reveals that – depending on the country – between 15% and 71% of women aged 19-49 are physically or sexually abused by intimate partners.

Women are under-represented in political office due to a lack of income, education and freedom, not to mention gender divisions of labour. Male-dominated leadership often lacks the political will to address gender inequality, making it a vicious circle that is difficult to break.

Gender inequality in developing countries is one of the key factors hampering wealth creation, poverty reduction and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. While international policy has made some progress towards addressing gender inequality, it needs to be converted into concrete changes on the ground, especially at the local level.

In this issue of *Capacity.org*, we look at the capacities that local governments need to address gender inequalities effectively. We look specifically at the issue of decentralisation, which increases the power of local governments and, by extension, their capacity to boost gender equality.

The feature article by Helen O'Connell provides a general overview of the capacities local governments have or need to effectively promote gender equality. She also explores to what extent decentralisation can enhance this capacity. Rebecca Smith reports on the findings of an IDRC research programme regarding the impact of decentralisation policies and women's participation in local government on women's rights and access to public services.

As Cecilia Kinuthia-Njenga points out in the guest column, it all starts with leadership and political will. Probably the best way to mobilise political will to address gender inequality is to get as many women as possible in powerful positions. One way of doing this is through affirmative action – by reserving a certain percentage of council seats for women.

Whether affirmative action really increases women's influence in policy making depends on the way it is institutionalised. Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, Elsbet Lodenstein and Evelien Kamminga explain that one cannot expect much from affirmative action at the local level if the actual powers remain centralised, especially on budget issues. Helen O'Connell also points out that decentralisation often involves a devolution of responsibilities, while decisions regarding resources stay firmly in the hands of central government.

Sohela Nazneen and Sakiba Tasneem argue that affirmative action has little effect if women are nominated – as opposed to being elected – to their seats. Nominated women lack a constituency, and hence legitimacy. This makes them far less powerful than elected (male) councillors. In Bangladesh, affirmative action really started making an impact when women had to be elected to their seats. But even in this case, cultural issues, such as the gender division of labour, put women at a disadvantage in their efforts to gain political office. Not surprisingly then, the majority of elected leaders in Bangladesh, and in most other countries, are still men.

As long as women have not acquired a critical mass of powerful positions, male leaders need to become gender sensitive. They have to learn to understand and appreciate situations from the perspective of the opposite sex. They need to be aware of and recognise the differences, inequalities and specific needs of women and men. And they have to act on this awareness.

In the web edition of this issue, Susan Tolmay and Abigail Jacobs-Williams highlight a wonderful example of a men's organisation in Zimbabwe seeking to popularise men's involvement in creating gender equality and addressing issues related to gender violence.

Evidence of gender inequality is a powerful resource for generating gender sensitivity and essential for developing effective gender policies. Monitoring mechanisms and gender analytical tools are therefore core capacities that local governments need to acquire. Celia Reyes explains how a Community-Based Monitoring System, in tandem with Gender Responsive Budgeting, is now used by three quarters of the provinces in the Philippines, generating a wealth of information and insights regarding the situation of women and what can be done to improve their plight. This is a tremendous achievement, which needs to be widely replicated.

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Cover photo
Women played a very visible role in the 2008 elections in Ghana.
Alamy / Olivier Asselin

High hopes for local government

Preserve status quo or promote gender equality?

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Women's rights activists and gender and development practitioners have high hopes for local government as an arena for promoting gender equality and respecting women's human rights. However, gender equality can only be achieved through radical structural change.

Local government, it is hoped, will provide women from the most marginalised communities with the chance to engage politically – to vote, to lobby and to stand for election. It is perhaps easier for women's and community-based organisations to influence local government than national government. In theory at least, local government is in the front line of public service delivery, providing education, health care, transport, water and sanitation, electricity and security. It is also a stimulator of local economic development. These are all vitally important for gender equality. The key questions are: which capacities do local governments have or need to effectively promote gender equality, and does decentralisation enhance this capacity?

Policy focus on local government

For too long, bilateral and multilateral donors neglected to support the building of democratic local governance, concentrating instead on the central level. Many large international NGOs set up parallel service delivery mechanisms, which further weakened any existing local authority.

But local government can play a key role in reducing poverty, promoting greater equality and building inclusive societies – and donor policy focus is shifting. International agencies working in countries affected by conflict are refocusing on the local level. This is in line with the OECD's *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations*, published in 2007, which stresses the importance of focusing on state building at central and local levels. A 2007 policy paper from the UK Department for International

Development, *Governance, Development and Democratic Politics*, also places new emphasis on local government. Meanwhile, decentralisation processes are taking place in numerous countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The extent to which decentralisation contributes to increased capacities of local governments should not be overstated. Local government codes governing decentralisation are more likely to decentralise responsibilities than power and resources. Usually, little power is devolved from central government and few financial resources are transferred. Furthermore, local government can be a highly politicised, contested and conflict-prone site. Local powerful elites, who controlled the locality through patronage and fear before decentralisation, usually continue to hold sway afterwards until challenged by democratically elected local councillors and civil society.

Nevertheless, evidence from the Philippines (see the interview with Celia Reyes on pages 8-9) and Honduras (see Rebecca Smith's article on pages 14-15) suggests that local government – providing it is democratic and has adequate staff, funding and authority – could provide gender-responsive public services, including policing and social support. It can serve as a training ground for national-level democracy as well, if public political awareness generated at the local level can stimulate greater interest in national politics. This would encourage women who are successful local politicians to stand for national elections.

Effective local government

Decentralisation has to be accompanied by mobilisation and advocacy if it is to effectively establish gender equality and equity. It needs to rally the support and expertise of a range of actors for this, including women's organisations, political parties, local councillors and the media. The political will of national government is also

essential to the emergence of a conducive environment for local government to flourish. The challenges and opportunities differ in each locality. These are explored in a little more detail below, drawing on the experience of One World Action, a UK-based NGO, where I worked until April 2009.

Local government would benefit by adopting a triple-track approach to promoting gender equality and protecting and respecting women's human rights. First, it would need to thoroughly integrate gender analysis into all its political, organisational and administrative functions. Second, it should provide political and practical support to women's organisations and movements and establish dialogue with them. And third, it should support specific strategic initiatives with men on gender and masculinity issues.

Implementing meaningful gender integration (or mainstreaming) is an enormous challenge. The 2008 UN-HABITAT report, *Gender Mainstreaming in Local Authorities: Best Practices*, provides useful information on how to overcome this challenge. It points out that successful gender mainstreaming requires senior leadership, clear analysis, strong policy commitments with corresponding organisational structures and resources, gender-skilled staff, training and monitoring. In other words, it is a long-term political project.

Furthermore, formal state institutions at the local level need capacity in a number of linked administrative and political areas to fulfil their role as duty bearer and perform their core functions in effective and gender-responsive ways.

Building the capacity of local government administration

The administrative aspects of local governance are fundamental to its effectiveness and accountability in general, and gender responsiveness in particular. Local government needs administrative and organisational competence and human and

Pakistan's Progressive Women's Association demands equal political rights.

financial resources to deliver on the diverse expectations of women and men for security, access to justice, public services, participation and economic well-being.

Local councillors and officials need to develop gender expertise and capacity, especially in key local administration units such as planning, budgeting and service delivery. Local governments need to know how to establish meaningful consultation mechanisms to gather information from a wide range of women at the community level on their gender-specific needs and interests. Local government staff need the skills to perform gender-sensitive analyses in order to understand the information they collect and devise policy, programmes and budget plans accordingly.

It is important when developing competencies in gender analysis to train people to recognise gender power imbalances. These imbalances could be present in areas such as informal decision making, access to justice and other services, and access to land and other resources. In short, it is vital to identify the social, economic and political barriers to gender equality.

It is also important to comprehend women's diverse experiences of citizenship and the factors that determine women's ability to be and to act as citizens. And it is essential to develop proficiency in gender-responsive budgeting, and gathering and analysing sex-disaggregated data.

In El Salvador, for example, a women's movement association and One World Action partner called Las Melidas trained women councillors from 11 municipalities how to implement gender equity policies and embed gender equity in the councils. The Children's Dignity Forum in Tanzania has created a local network comprising local government representatives, teachers, health workers and traditional leaders that addresses the problem of child marriage and female genital mutilation.

Another example is the Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic Adjustment Policies (MIMAP) project in the Philippines. This project, which enlisted researchers from two higher education institutes, developed the Community-Based Monitoring System combined with a Gender Responsive Budgeting initiative.

International donors and NGOs also have a major role to play in supporting local government to develop these capacities through training programmes, funding recruitment and employment (or secondment) of skilled staff, research capacity, study tours and other forms of national, regional or international learning exchanges.

Inclusive local government politics

Political willingness is a primary capacity, and hence the development of inclusive political decision-making processes, systems and structures is critical. Building capacity into the political structure of local government is essential for strengthening administrative competence. More inclusive political decision making creates greater legitimacy and accountability for raising local revenues.

Many feminist and women's organisations in the global South focus on strengthening the political participation of women from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. The literature unanimously agrees that proportional representation in electoral systems, together with some form of quota, is the 'best-fit combination'. While proportional representation systems do not guarantee the representation of women and marginalised communities, they do facilitate it because they create a closer alignment between votes cast and seats won.

Political parties, as the main gatekeepers of women's political participation, must be engaged formally to seek their compliance with quotas, since they frequently ignore quotas in the heat of election contests. Electoral commissions need the power, capacity and will to monitor the implementation of quotas and to impose sanctions for non-compliance. Although quotas are not without problems – for example, they can brand and isolate women within political structures as 'second-class' – they are essential for breaking through the barriers blocking women's participation.

HH / Roel Burgler

Poster proclaiming everyone's right to participate in democracy (Guatemala, 2008).

Women candidates need support – in addition to political inclusion – in the form of awareness raising, confidence building and practical assistance. In many countries, the presence of women in political structures makes it clear that participation does not translate automatically into gender-responsive policy making. Once elected, women local councillors need capacity building in gender-responsive policy development, policy and budget analysis, organising and understanding political procedures and much more.

Strong links with women's organisations and movements in the community are vital to local governments if they are to successfully promote a gender equality and women's rights agenda. The forging of cross-party alliances can greatly strengthen respect for women's civil and political rights. As Felicity Manson-Visram writes in her unpublished report for One World Action, *Central American Women Exercising their Political Rights*, 'support to such cross-party political networks is critical in countries where politics is severely polarized and where the women's agenda is easily forgotten'. Cross-party alliances are not possible in all contexts, and are, of course, very unpopular with political parties.

A 2009 One World Action report, *Women's Political Participation in the Philippines*, highlights the importance of moving beyond numbers, but also moving beyond politics. The report argues that important questions like leadership and decision making cannot be addressed simply by enabling women to vote and hold political office. Rather, the report suggests, 'Substantive changes leading to women's empowerment in the areas of economics, culture, and even at a personal or family level, must also take place'.

Without this, politics will be open only to privileged women. Hence, we have to recognise that efforts at the local government level to make progress towards gender equality have to be accompanied by national policies on women's rights, in areas such as family law, domestic violence, inheritance, political parties, education and employment.

Political violence against women

Violence, or the threat of violence, against women is an intractable barrier to women's political participation at local and national levels. Violence, or the threat of violence, perpetrated by partners, community leaders, the police, politicians or the media can dissuade women from standing as candidates in the first place. It will also prevent elected women from carrying out their political responsibilities and functions properly and deter women from standing for re-election.

To date, there has been little research on the incidence and impact of violence against women in political life, but there is ample anecdotal evidence. In my view, the four oft-cited barriers to women's political participation – culture, confidence, cash and caring responsibilities – conceal the actual experience or threat of violence that restricts women to the private sphere.

However, research conducted by the Association of Women Councillors of Bolivia (ACOBOL), in alliance with women parliamentarians and civil society groups, documented cases of violence against women in the five-year period from 2000 to 2005. The research found that of the 155 cases recorded, around 40 were cases of physical, emotional or sexual violence, 56 were threats and in 27 cases women councillors were obstructed from carrying out their official work. ACOBOL believes that under-reporting is responsible for concealing the real figure, which is likely to be about four times higher.

ACOBOL has worked with others to press for a legal definition of political violence. A law against gender-based political violence was adopted by the Bolivian chamber of deputies in 2006, but it still needs approval from the senate. Passing a law is just the first step in a long battle to challenge the impunity enjoyed by those who perpetuate systems that commit political violence against women. ACOBOL is calling for a public body with the authority to act on instances of violence. The association is working with municipal authorities and political leaders to seek formal commitments on gender equity and a violence-free political culture.

Building a robust civil society

Women's organisations and movements can impact the development of inclusive, democratic and accountable local governments at many levels. They can help raise awareness on rights and mobilise

women to voice their needs, claim their rights and engage politically. These organisations can also lobby for changes in the law to respect women's human rights, monitor the implementation of legislation and policy, stimulate public debate, and liaise locally, nationally and internationally with other women's organisations to strengthen their network.

Women's organisations are leading the way in raising awareness about women's interests and rights, and they are mobilising women to raise their voices and engage in consultation and electoral processes. If women's organisations are well rooted in marginalised communities, they can encourage disabled women, women living with HIV/Aids and women from ethnic minority communities to participate in informal and formal local politics, and support elected women. In Malawi and Zambia, for example, women's organisations are working to increase the political participation of poor and marginalised women and reach the Africa Union target of 50% women's representation.

The women's movement in Central America is pressing for respect for secular state institutions and laws in order to guarantee women's rights. They are doing this by stimulating public debate through public protest and the use of the media. Women's organisations are in a good position to provide advice and expertise for training the political and administrative arms of local government, and for complying with international human rights standards.

A good example is the Women's Legal Aid Centre in Tanzania. It is working closely with local government (in areas where refugee camps are based) to train them to use a variety of international instruments and domestic laws to protect the rights of women refugees. Furthermore, women's organisations can engage in local, national and international networking to build strong women's movements at all levels.

Women's organisations and movements need support to build their own capacities

Consolidating strengths

The Central American Network for Gender Equality in Local Development brings together six Central American women's organisations. Their members include women local councillors and mayors, women from cross-party groups, and women from different countries, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. The network has been operating since 2008 to increase and strengthen the political participation of marginalised women in rural and urban areas, to press for legislative and policy reform favourable to women's political participation, including electoral reform, and to strengthen the political voice of women's organisations.

Training journalists in Sierra Leone

Following six months of consultation to ascertain journalists' needs, UNDP funded a two-day training and consultation workshop for 40 carefully selected journalists from across the country. The workshop covered the journalists' role and mandate and how they report sexual- and gender-based violence, with the aim of building their capacity to report and publicise cases in a professional, balanced and sensitive manner, and become participants in the campaign against gender-based violence. Media practitioners provided the training. The production of a journalists' handbook is in the pipeline, which will contain guidelines on how to work with the police, the courts, government and civil society and outline the media's watchdog role. The intention is to use it for further training in different regions.

in some key areas in order to be effective. These areas include organisational and management skills, technical expertise, analytical skills and research. It entails support in monitoring and developing gender-sensitive indicators for scrutinizing local government, security and other public services, and building local, national and international networks.

The need to build the capacity of communities and their leaders, especially women, to engage with local government bodies was one of the lessons that emerged from a three-year democratic urban governance programme in 2006-09. The programme was implemented by the Institute of Politics and Governance (IPG) in the Philippines with partners in seven of the country's municipalities. The partners, in turn, worked with over 100 local organisations (including organisations of urban poor women). The 1991 Local Government Code – at least on paper – gave local government 40% of internal revenue and the power to raise taxes and borrow money. It also acknowledged the crucial role played by civil society.

IPG's programme enabled previously excluded women to enter politics through community organisation and the promotion of inclusive political participation. It developed the capacities of local and urban governance actors in participatory district and municipal planning to broaden the access of poor urban women and men to equitable and gender-responsive decision making and service delivery.

Establish support structures

The media, if free and gender aware, can play a huge role in informing public opinion, stimulating public debate on constitutional and policy matters, such as appropriate policing, and in scrutinising and holding to account local governance institutions. Gender awareness will enable it to play a critical public education role in debunking gender stereotypes, and creating a conducive policy environment for gender equality and women's rights.

In reality, the media in many countries have little capacity and few resources, and are hampered by restrictions to press freedom. A training initiative for journalists in Sierra Leone, part of a UNDP-funded programme, demonstrates what can be achieved (see box).

The media's role can help change attitudes and raise awareness, but local government is still a key player in promoting gender equality and respect for women's human rights. International development cooperation bodies need to adopt a coherent and strategic approach to help local government fulfil this role, one that links local and national democracy building to capacity building in local and national political processes and institutions, and that establishes support structures for women's organisations and movements. There is much to be done – nothing short of a complete overhaul of political structures – but that does not mean it cannot be done. <

Further Reading

- International IDEA (2005) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers.* Revised edition. www.idea.int/publications/wip2/
- OECD (2007) *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations.*
- Santos-Maranan, A.F., Parreño, N.E. and Fabros, A. (2009) *Women's Political Participation in the Philippines: Conversations, Reflections and Recommendations.* One World Action. www.oneworldaction.org
- UK Department for International Development (2007) *Governance, Development and Democratic Politics.* www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/governance.pdf
- UN-HABTIAT (2008) *Gender Mainstreaming in Local Authorities: Best Practices.* www.unhabitat.org

Links
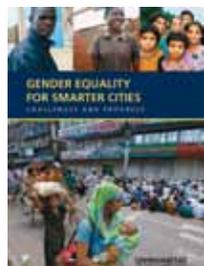
- UNDP trains 25 key journalists: www.sl.undp.org

PUBLICATIONS

This section offers a selection of publications related to capacity development. A more extensive list can be found at www.capacity.org.

Gender Equality for Smarter Cities: Challenges and Progress
UN-HABITAT, 2010

Local governments can make a difference to the lives of women in a variety of areas, including access to land, housing, water and sanitation, and security. This publication describes the challenges local governments face, as well as a number of promising achievements that have been realised. The penultimate section devotes special attention to building capacity for good governance.
www.unhabitat.org/pmss

Gender Mainstreaming in Local Governments: Best Practices
UN-HABITAT, 2008

At the 2006 substantive session of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, gender mainstreaming was defined as 'the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes … and a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres … The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality'. This UN-HABITAT publication explains how to apply gender mainstreaming in local governments.
www.unhabitat.org/pmss

Assessing Gender Responsive Local Capacity Development in Indonesia
UNDP, 2009

Indonesia is making steady progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. This report about research conducted on the Indonesian experience of gender-responsive capacity development at the local level provides insights into what has worked, what hasn't and why. The report concludes with lessons learned and recommendations.
www.capacityisdevelopment.org/un.html

Local Philippine governments tackle gender inequality

To know is to be empowered

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If you want to effectively tackle gender inequality, you need to measure its indicators and identify its underlying causes. Putting local governments in the know is half the battle.

Celia Reyes is senior research fellow at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, and is affiliated with the Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies at De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines. One of her major research interests is the impact of policies and programmes on poverty and equity. She directed the Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic Adjustment Policies (MIMAP) project in the Philippines, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

During that project, she and her colleagues developed the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS), which is an organised way of collecting information at the local level. This information can be used by local government units, national government agencies, NGOs and civil society organisations for planning, programme implementation and monitoring.

CBMS helps to improve transparency and accountability in resource allocation. Its proven effectiveness in improving governance has led it to be actively promoted by the Philippine Department of Interior and Local Government. Now CBMS is applied in three-quarters of the country's provinces. An integrated part of CBMS is Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB). *Capacity.org* interviewed Celia Reyes to find out how CBMS-GRB has impacted gender equality at the community level.

Who was the driving force behind the integration of gender/GRB into the CBMS programme, and what were the preconditions to make it possible?
We initially developed CBMS in 1994, but we really started scaling up CBMS in the Philippines in 2000. It was initially a research initiative funded by IDRC, but local governments now pay for the implementation of the system. CBMS was part of a project looking at the micro-impacts of macro-level adjustment policies. It was difficult, however, to trace the impact of these macro-level policies at the local level due to the absence of disaggregated information. So we needed to put in place a monitoring system that would allow us to capture the impact at the household and even at the individual level.

That is how CBMS came about. It was also very opportune because the Local Government Code was adopted and implemented in 1991. This resulted in a substantial push for decentralisation and a significant demand for information that could be used by local governments.

Initially, CBMS was not gender-disaggregated, but we noticed during focus-group discussions that there were differences in school attendance rates, for instance. We found that more girls attended school than boys in some communities because the boys were asked to work to augment the family income. But there were also villages where girls did not attend school because they were asked to stay at home and help with household chores.

We also realised that in addition to facilitating planning and budgeting at the local level, we could use CBMS to facilitate gender-responsive budgeting as it provides a rich source of gender-disaggregated information. For example, we noticed that labour-force participation by women was very low in one community, mainly because they had to take care of the children. So they set up child-minding centres where women could breastfeed in between their work, and this enabled more women to enter the labour force.

Actually, many GRB initiatives around the world are being practiced at the national level following budget preparations. But people would benefit more from GRB if it were used to formulate local government plans and budgets. We have managed to fully integrate GRB into CBMS and local planning, saying that every local development plan should be gender responsive.

CBMS automatically generates gender-disaggregated indicators. In the Philippines, a 5% allocation of the total local government budget for Gender and Development (GAD) was in place before the CBMS-GRB initiative was launched. But we found that neither local governments nor the national government really knew how to use this budget efficiently. I think the 5% budget increased the demand for the CBMS-GRB programme by local governments, because now they had the information to plan programmes that could be classified under the 5% budget. Of course, in the Philippines we view the 5% GAD budget as just a tool to ensure that gender concerns are mainstreamed, also in the remaining 95% of the budget.

What factors contributed to the scaling up of the programme?
The Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) has released several policy statements in support of CBMS. It has been implemented in about 59 of the country's 80 provinces and is still on the rise. We are quite surprised at this exponential growth.

It is striking to note that the provinces fund the implementation themselves. Together with us, DILG provides free training, as well as the software and the system. They also spend money on data collection and processing. I think the demand for local information, which has not been addressed by the official statistical system, is one of the reasons why the programme is in such demand.

One feature that has attracted local authorities to CBMS is the system's maps. Local chief executives respond better to information in colour-coded maps than to tables or figures. This has enabled them to appreciate the situation better and set the right priorities. Red areas on a map alert them to pressing needs. The second feature is a system that automatically generates indicators in a table format. This enables local chief executives to generate additional information and cross-tabulate it. So it doesn't take much to learn how to use the system and generate the necessary information.

A third feature is that it's good value for money. The programme can easily be funded by creating savings through improved planning, budgeting and targeting. Finally,

the system was designed so that it would not need new structural requirements. It has been incorporated into the Local Planning Unit, and the system is maintained even when there are changes in leadership.

Have you been able to measure results in terms of gender outcomes?

We do have baseline information in the form of CBMS data taken a few years ago and data taken now. We have not used the data to assess the impact on GRB. Rather, we have used it more to look at the impact of shocks such as the financial crisis and the price shock we had in 2008. We have not yet had a close look at the impact all the programmes have had in decreasing gender disparities, but this is something that could be done. We have looked at some specific programmes, such as water and sanitation, but we have not looked at the scholarship programme yet.
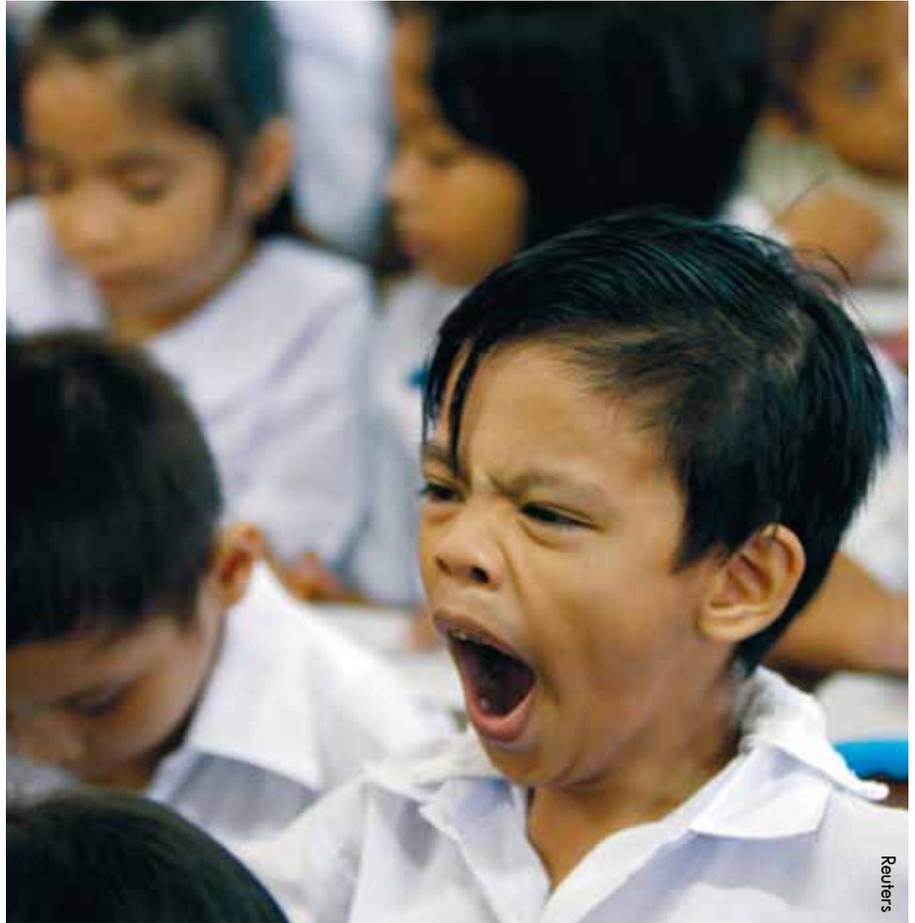
But in general do you think that the GRB–CBMS programme has contributed to greater gender equality?

Yes, we see this in focus-group discussions, which are part of the CBMS process. Members of the community try to explain the situation and come up with potential solutions. When they find differences in school participation rates, they now have a way of explaining the differences in their situation. For instance, why were girls dropping out of school? That can be explained by the fact that in some villages girls leave school to work as maids. So the problem can be discussed and solutions found to keep them in school longer. We now have cash-transfer programmes to prevent girls from leaving school so early.

Local governments actually formulate plans based on CBMS. If they find that there is no access to water and sanitation, for example, they develop programmes to address the problem. After some time, they may see access rise by 20%, which gives women more time for things other than fetching water. This also positively affects their health status. There will be fewer cases of diarrhoea in the area, for example. The impact on the water and sanitation situation is quite easy to identify. But school attendance is also influenced by several other factors, so it's not possible to just look at the numbers and pinpoint one reason.

Is it true that CBMS has helped governors reject political favouritism?

Yes, the system of political favouritism used to make it difficult for governors to reject certain requests. In other words, they risked losing local political support at the next elections. But since they now have data for all the *barangays* (villages), they can easily argue that a given *barangay* does not need another water and sanitation project since there are plenty of others worse off. This information might persuade a village chief that there is some basis for the governor's

'When they find differences in school participation rates, they now have a way of explaining them.'

refusal and cause him to accept it more readily.

I think in certain places village chiefs are attracted to certain projects that do not necessarily address the community's needs. Basically, they just don't know whether one project is better suited than another. Since there is more capacity at the provincial level, the governor can say 'OK, what you need is not this project but this one, which will address your more pressing needs'. And since the information becomes more transparent, the project implementation is monitored and evaluated more effectively.

The CBMS process requires community involvement in terms of identifying priority problems and potential solutions. When a community knows what it needs, it becomes more empowered. It has relevant data to fall back on. For example, the community might be aware that 50% of its children are unable to go to school, but that better roads would go far to solve this problem. In other words, they are in a position to demand the services they really need.

What are the main challenges in institutionalising and scaling up this GRB–CBMS initiative?

I think the main difficulty initially is that local governments are reluctant to admit that their locality has a gender issue. So I guess the real challenge is to be more specific. If you tell them that girls are leaving school to

work as maids, then they start to realize that there are in fact issues that need to be addressed. I think there is a need for more advocacy and more information campaigns explaining these issues, to make it clear that more gender-disaggregated information can help solve these problems.

The difference between an ordinary CBMS and a GRB–CBMS is that we're trying to highlight the specific gender issues by providing more gender-disaggregated information. The challenge is to come up with more context-specific indicators because the issues could differ across locations, even within one country. In some areas, for example, male school attendance is low because they work as seasonal sugar cane workers, while in other areas the girls are the ones at a disadvantage. <

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Links
- Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies: www.dlsu.edu.ph/research/centers/aki
- Community–Based Monitoring System (CBMS) Network: www.dlsu.edu.ph/research/centers/
- Philippine Institute for Development Studies: www.pids.gov.ph

Local capacity building for women in Bangladesh

Legitimacy enhances capacity

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Political culture in Bangladesh has been traditionally a male-dominated sphere. Has the introduction of affirmative action measures and the training of women politicians given them stronger voices and led to change on issues that are relevant for women?

Historically, women's participation in formal representative politics in Bangladesh has been low. It is true that Bangladesh has elected only women prime ministers since its democratic transition in 1991, but the legitimacy of the two women leaders from the two major parties is based on kinship ties. Party and political culture remains male dominated. Gender issues do not carry much weight in Bangladeshi politics, even though a vibrant feminist movement can be traced back to the anti-colonial nationalist movement against the British and then later Pakistan.

Direct election to the 30% reserved seats in local government bodies was introduced for women in 1997 to ensure women's representation. This led to a radical shift in local elections to the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest tier of local government. Whereas women were previously nominated to the reserved seats by the chairperson of the UP, the new system of direct elections linked the women representatives to a personal constituency.

This measure boosted the legitimacy of women politicians. In the 1997 and 2003 elections, more than 40,000 women

contested constituency seats, and around 12,000 women or more were directly elected to these reserved seats in the UP. The number of women contesting general seats was low. It affected how the communities viewed these women representatives and created greater social legitimacy for women. The table below shows women's participation in the 1997 and 2003 elections in Bangladesh (the elections scheduled for 2008 were postponed for political reasons).

Despite this provision of reservations, women face various structural and attitudinal barriers that limit their capacity to act as effective representatives. Gender division of labour places the burden of household work on women and limits women's time and ability to participate in formal political activities. Restrictions on female mobility and notions about gender-segregated spaces affect women's access to and presence in the formal political sphere and public space.

Women also lack knowledge about government functioning, which limits their ability to be effective once elected to office. Meanwhile, the prevalence of male resistance to female candidates and workers within the political parties limits women's scope to run for elections, rise up party ranks, and bolster support for women's needs and concerns. And yet the provision of reservations has clearly created space for women to challenge some of these barriers.

Pros and cons of large constituencies

A UP comprises one chair and nine general members, each representing an electoral ward, with three reserved seats for women. Each reserved seat represents one electoral zone consisting of three general wards. As a consequence, women have to campaign in a much larger area than men.

Recent studies, such as Emma Frankl's 2004 working paper *Quotas and Empowerment: The Use of Reserved Seats in Union Parishad as an Instrument for Women's Political Empowerment in Bangladesh*, show that women UP members experience tough campaigns because they have to interact with an extensive group of people. They also have to operate far from their political home bases, in places where they have scant opportunity to interact with their constituency on a daily basis.

There is a growing sense among women representatives, however, that as representatives of a constituency, they have a right to make claims about policy making. This is further substantiated by the fact that they were directly elected as representatives of a larger constituency than male UP members.

Women's post-election agenda

Besides strengthening women's ability to enter 'male' space, the advent of direct elections has enabled women to channel their voices through local administrative processes. About 78% of the 641 women interviewed for the study conducted by Zarina Rahman Khan and Amena Mohsin for their 2008 paper *Women's Empowerment through Local Governance* reported that they had participated in budget discussions. And 58% stated that they had made suggestions to reverse a number of UP decisions.

Women representatives have also made significant gains in establishing their legitimacy as political actors by resolving family disputes through informal dispute-resolution bodies, called *shalishes*. Both UP members and local communities prefer women to settle disputes related to marriage, divorce, polygamy and dowry. The general perception is that women members are more likely to relate to the difficulties faced by women in society.

The fact that women are directly elected by the constituency also legitimises their right to act on behalf of other women. Given that male members are not in a competing position with the women members regarding settling family disputes, there is little male resistance to women playing a prominent role. The solutions offered by women members tend to be pragmatic in nature and

Women participating in local government elections. Source: Khan and Ara (2006)

Election year	Total women candidates		Elected chairman and number	
	Chair	Member	Chair	Member
1997	102	43,969 (456 contesting in general seats)	23	12, 828 (110 elected to general seats)
2003	232	43,764 (617 contesting in general seats)	22	12,684 (79 elected to general seats)

Women's rights groups demand that women should become members of parliament only through direct voting in elections, not by nomination by parties represented in the assembly. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

do not challenge gender power relations. The women members interviewed explained that their solutions are offered keeping in mind the social costs and the constraints faced by rural women in Bangladesh.

Radical solutions are often untenable as a result of these social obstacles, but these obstacles do ensure that women are able to secure their customary claims and protections under the existing system. Whether this increased legitimacy would allow women to promote women's interests effectively in matters related to

infrastructural development or social safety net programmes remains to be seen.

These are areas where women are in direct competition with male UP members, so there is clearly a potential for resistance. Nevertheless, very few women have played a prominent role in local *shalish* systems in the past. Their gain in social legitimacy as political actors is a significant development that will increase women's visibility and set the stage for a discussion of women's issues in the public domain.

Strengthening women's capacities

Gains in legitimacy by women and their ability to have a stronger voice have been supported by the different training programmes administered primarily by the NGOs and women's organisations, since government capacity to provide training is limited. The majority of the NGO training focuses on roles, responsibilities, legal awareness and human rights issues. A 1999 World Food Programme study, *Elected Women Members of UP: A Socioeconomic Study*, showed that about 90% of the female members interviewed were unaware of the different government bodies and their functions, which indicates the need for training.

Certain types of training have proved to be more successful. For example, CARE Bangladesh, a humanitarian organisation, trains both male and female members, unlike some of the larger NGOs, such as the Khan Foundation or the PRIP Trust. The latter focus exclusively on women members. CARE's project is designed to raise cross-gender awareness among councillors and community members, and empower female members by informing them of how UPs function and what their roles are as political actors.

The CARE project also develops the capacity of entire villages by training the community in capacity building. This training includes both men and women with

different socio-economic and occupational backgrounds. Participatory rural appraisal and social mapping processes prior to the training ensure that the people receiving the training have these different backgrounds.

The assessment of these trainings by Democracy Watch in 2002 showed that CARE's approach was more effective in creating a level of acceptance for women in the wider community and allowed them to function more effectively. However, women who received training (whether specifically targeted or not) reported that it allowed them to change the attitudes of male members, who assumed they were unaware about various issues.

Interestingly, assistance and training provided by movement-oriented NGOs, such as Nijera Kori, or women's organisations, such as Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, have created a high level of consciousness among women who belong to these organizations – in contrast to other women UP members – about social problems and women's practical concerns. These concerns vary from dowry or early marriage to polygamy, women's security in the public sphere and water collection. These women are more willing to raise difficult issues in the public sphere, and the support they receive from their organisations has allowed them to tackle administrative and other types of resistance.

The Bangladesh case shows that the advent of direct elections has established a direct link between the constituency and women members. This, in turn, has given women a stronger voice and more legitimacy as political actors. It also indicates that the way in which quota systems are implemented affects women's capacity to act in local governments. Whether women are able to 'act for' other women depends on the support structures that exist for women, particularly the types of training and links with other actors, such as NGOs and women's organisations that strengthen their knowledge and ability to negotiate resistance. <

Women's rights in the constitution of Bangladesh

The following articles in the Bangladesh constitution safeguard the right of women to engage in political participation and enjoy equal opportunities.

- Article 9: The State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women.
- Article 10: Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life.
- Article 19: The State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens.
- Article 27: All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law.
- Article 28:
  (1): The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
  (2) : Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.

Source: Khan and Ara (2006)

Further reading

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Capacity for effective participation

Affirmative action measures aimed at enhancing women's participation as political representatives in decentralised government bodies is a growing field of research and development practice. Several issues need to be addressed first, however, to realise these goals.

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Affirmative action has made it possible in some countries for women to be included in significant numbers in local government. At the same time, devolution policies are granting more powers to local government. Do these combined policies improve the effectiveness of women's participation in decision making? This article explores the institutional and capacity development issues that need addressing in order for elected women to participate substantively in local government.

Whether or not women will effectively exercise participation and power in practice at the local level depends to a great extent on the terms of their inclusion (the specific features of affirmative action, for example), the extent to which the rules and decentralisation encourage gendered participation, and the strength of women's organisations in civil society at the local level. This article analyses these issues in a number of countries, based on research conducted by the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in collaboration with IDRC.

Terms of inclusion

In Bangladesh, women representatives are disadvantaged by structural constraints related to the way quotas for women are incorporated into the electoral system. The *Union Parishad* (a rural local government institution) is made up of nine wards, and the electorate in each of these wards elects a general member. The quotas for women provide three additional seats within each *Union Parishad*, and potential women representatives of these seats are elected by and responsible for three wards.

This means that women candidates have to canvass and oversee an area three times the size of the area covered by a general (male) member. Women are further disadvantaged by resource constraints. Although they receive the same budgetary and other resources as general members, women have a wider area to cover. There is also role confusion, as the role of women representatives in given constituencies, which also have three general members, is often ambiguous.

In India, where women receive 33% reservation at all levels of local government, the seats reserved for women rotate during every election. Thus a ward reserved for all-female competition becomes a general ward (in which women and men can compete) in the next election. As a result, political parties simply do not take women's candidacy seriously nor do they invest in the elected women, knowing very well that in the next round of elections these women will be of no use to their electoral prospects.

In Uganda, the 1997 Local Government Act requires 30% of local council seats to be reserved for all-female competition. However, these seats are an *addition* to the council body, not part of the existing seats. New wards are created for women's representation, combining two to three regular wards. In effect, this at least doubles the constituency which women are meant to represent compared to regular ward representatives.

Elections for the women's seats are held separately, a good two weeks after the ward elections. In the 1998 local government elections, irritation with this unwieldy system, as well as voter fatigue, resulted in a failure to achieve quorum for women's elections all over the country. Many reruns were subsequently held, but the process undermined the perceived legitimacy and credibility of women politicians.

In Niger, very few women become councillors, despite a law stipulating a 10% quota of women councillors. Action research by a local NGO (Alternatieve) shows that during the 2006 and 2009 election processes in the Zinder Region of Niger, all political parties complied with the law by running women as 10% of their candidates. On some occasions, they even put women with strong voter appeal at the top of the list.

Women are systematically pushed to the bottom of the list as soon as the elections are over, however, thereby destroying any chance of their becoming councillors. Political parties abuse the quota law in that sense, taking advantage of the fact that it does not prescribe a quota for the number of seats in the council, only for the party lists.

Affirmative action clearly helps women to access local and national power structures. However, these examples show that the credibility and legitimacy of elected women as political actors can also be undermined by policy design issues or the partial implementation of affirmative action measures.

Affirmative action will only succeed in getting more women into office if more attention is focused on three levels of policy:
- the clear definition and formulation of affirmative action policy (the quality of the quota law);
- the translation of the law into regulations, procedures and accountability mechanisms (e.g. terms of inclusion); and
- the actual implementation of the policy.

Decision making about resources

Decentralisation processes have been seized upon to enhance political participation among poor women. Decentralisation has introduced measures giving women greater representation in some contexts and has led to civil society initiatives that focus on building the capacity of women elected to local government bodies, organising women's constituencies, introducing gender audits and using existing institutional spaces. In Latin America, for example, participatory budgeting (a statutory requirement in Peru and Brazil) is being used both as a political tool for mobilisation and for increasing local government accountability towards poor women's interests.

Experience shows, however, that women's participation in decision making depends on

a number of factors. They include the specific institutional rules governing planning, the extent of devolution of funds and other resources to the local level, and the extent to which power is decentralised so that the use of resources can be monitored and audited by local government bodies.

A common problem in India, for example, is that not all states have devolved financial and administrative powers to the lowest-level local government bodies, the *panchayats*. In many instances, *panchayats* are merely the implementing agency for national poverty eradication and other related programmes and have no role in their planning.

There are similar obstacles in many other countries, where citizens participate in development planning through major consultation processes, and yet local governments still only have limited autonomy and control over revenues and resources to implement their plans. A lack of decision-making space undermines the integration of citizens' priorities, in particular women's interests that may also undermine local government legitimacy in the long run.

Even if local governments have the power and resources to implement their plans, few mechanisms exist that enable citizens to hold their local government accountable for budgeting and implementation decisions, in particular with regard to gender equality. No state in India, with the exception of Kerala, has actually earmarked a percentage of its budget for women's development, making it even more difficult to press for decisions that would further women's agendas.

In her 2004 essay, *Decentralization and gender equality*, Anne-Marie Goetz provides examples of institutional innovations that have made women's participation possible in different national contexts and rendered planning and monitoring functions more accountable to women's interests. These innovations include earmarking a percentage of the budget for women-only deliberations, gender-sensitive local revenue and spending analysis. These are some of the measures that should amplify women's voices in local deliberations, and support spending on women's needs.

Focus on individual capacities

There is no getting around the fact that affirmative action in local governments in South Asia has given rise to what has been termed 'de facto' politics. De facto politics refers to a political situation where a person, despite being an elected representative, does not actively participate in governance processes. This is not to suggest that all women always find themselves in this situation, nor that it is irreversible. There is ample evidence to suggest that rural and urban women, as well as low caste, tribal women elected to local government institutions have functioned and are functioning as elected representatives.

Although Ugandan law requires 30% of local council seats to be reserved for women, men continue to dominate the elections.

NGOs and civil society organisations continue to support women in local government by enhancing their capacities and voices. In India and Bangladesh they do so on the assumption that women's political inexperience, and their lack of skills and information, constrains their political participation. Governmental training programmes for elected representatives share these assumptions. Many civil society organisations, especially those representing women's interests, have also realised the importance of support networks for women's survival and continuance in public office.

Institutional constraints often ignored

Several research studies on participation in local government institutions by elected women view them as independent agents or rather as women unaffected by gender inequality. According to an assessment carried out by the Asian Development Bank in 2004, *Gender and Governance Issues in Local Government*, more than 70% of women councillors interviewed in Bangladesh were not aware of their rights and responsibilities as representatives. An even higher percentage – more than 80% – expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to conduct meetings. In Pakistan, only 22% of women councillors reported that they attended council meetings regularly, and less than 30% had any knowledge of the council agendas of the last two sessions or of the council budget.

While participation rates of elected women in local councils are low, they are also contingent on several factors, such as gender norms, family, caste, class and religion. This inadvertently points to the 'incapacity' of women, or their 'indifference', to get involved in politics and local councils. The solutions offered are generally measures to

make up for women's deficits rather than measures that tackle the institutional conditions that constrain women's participation, such as the terms of inclusion and the features of the decentralisation reforms discussed above.

Therefore, increased political participation requires a thorough understanding of a country's political context and its terms of inclusion, and an integrative approach to empowerment, institutional development and the formalisation of spaces for citizen participation and accountability mechanisms. <

Further reading

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Links

- KIT Information Portal – Gender, Citizenship and Governance: www.kit.nl/eCache/FAB/23/624.html
- KIT Information Portal – Rural Decentralization and Local Governance: www.kit.nl/eCache/FAB/33/050.html

Decentralisation and women's rights in Latin America

A magic bullet for gender equality?

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Successful decentralisation should make government more accessible, accountable and responsive to women. But does it? Have decentralisation processes increased women's decision-making power at the local level?

Decentralisation has sometimes been presented as a magic bullet for developing countries seeking to achieve both development and democracy. Based on the principle of subsidiarity, decentralisation is acclaimed for placing greater powers in the hands of local governments. World leaders, NGOs, donor agencies and multilateral institutions agree that development and democracy both fail unless women are included on an equal footing with men, and that successful decentralisation should make government more accessible and accountable to women.

But does it? Since 2006, research teams in Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Paraguay have been exploring this question as part of a multiregional research project supported by the Women's Rights and Citizenship programme at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada. In coordination with the Regional Training Programme on Gender and Public Policy at the Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Argentina, the four research teams asked whether and how decentralisation processes during the past two decades have increased women's decision-making power at the local level. Two central themes framed the research projects: women's political participation and women's access to public services in decentralised systems.

Women's political participation

Latin America has a long history of women's activism for citizenship entitlements. However, gains in formal equality have not always translated into substantive gains. The heterogeneity of women throughout the region means that the benefits of advancements in gender equality concerns are not enjoyed equally by all women.

In El Salvador and Honduras, the National Foundation for Development (FUNDE) analysed how organised women have contributed to the creation of local governance mechanisms that promote gender equality and women's rights. In recent years, deepening inequalities in the two countries have meant increasing poverty rates, gender-based violence and a deteriorating quality of life for women.

Both countries' political systems are characterised by democratic and institutional fragility, and the implementation of public policies regarding women has been very weak. The advent of decentralisation in the mid-1990s presented a significant challenge for local governments.

Strategies for mainstreaming gender equality at the local level included establishing policies aimed specifically at addressing issues of interest to women as well as creating institutions dedicated to advancing women's rights.

A case study of Santa Tecla, a city in El Salvador, demonstrates how a local government can work with women's organisations to create bottom-up institutional mechanisms that promote gender equality. In 2002, municipal authorities initiated the Participatory Strategic Planning Process, which created thematic groups to facilitate relations between citizens and the local government, including a Women's Citizenship Committee.

The municipality also collected baseline data on the status of local women to inform evidence-based policy making and the formulation of proposals for activities to reduce gender inequalities. The data from this survey fed directly into the Municipal Policy on Gender Equality, which the city council adopted in 2003.

As a result of coordinated advocacy efforts between the Women's Citizenship Committee and local women's movements, a municipal Gender Unit was created to execute the policy, and to build municipal institutions' capacities to respond to the needs of local women in the communities. The Gender Unit was an innovative effort driven by civil society and taken up by local councillors to build municipal institutions' capacities to respond to local women's needs.

One focus group respondent from the municipality said that the creation of the Gender Unit 'generated many opportunities, opened doors, for Santa Tecla was valued as an innovative city'. This demonstrates an evolution in popular conceptions of gender

equality as a key element of democratic governance.

Gender Unit projects also raised greater awareness of women's rights and helped local women benefit from empowerment programmes. The municipal government also instituted reforms, such as establishing a quota of 35% women's membership on the boards of community associations. One local woman stated that participation in various public activities, organisational processes and trainings sponsored by the Gender Unit allowed women to integrate into local political life and understand their rights as citizens.

Achieving substantive gender equality remains a challenge in El Salvador and Honduras. Women continue to face resistance in establishing their legitimacy as skilled and able political actors, whereas men are assumed to be prepared to enter political roles. Women's rights advocates also claim that local mechanisms can go further in challenging unequal power relations and structural sources of women's disadvantage, rather than focusing on practical demands and creating conditions for women to carry out traditional social reproduction functions.

Although governance in both countries is still highly centralised, FUNDE found that women's organisations have provided critical assistance to local governments in such areas as budget analysis and generating data on gender inequality. The Santa Tecla experience also demonstrates that state decentralisation is not necessarily driven from the executive – it can also be initiated from below. The contribution of these mechanisms and forums has facilitated the participation of women in municipal management and has helped to institute more democratic practices at the local level.

Women's access to services

Advocates of sectoral decentralisation argue that reforms can make water management, health, education, local economic development and other public functions more efficient and accountable to citizens. Citizen participation in the user groups and local management committees that often accompany decentralisation is also intended to empower citizens while improving service delivery.

In Paraguay, efforts to decentralise health care were understood by the government to be a technical mechanism for improving the management of resources and increasing the ability to identify and solve local health problems through increased community participation. From 2000 to 2007, local health councils were established throughout the country to formally manage the distribution of health-care resources, often comprised of members of civil society as well as public and private institutions.

Researchers from the Paraguayan Centro de Documentación y Estudios undertook a comparative study of ten cases to assess how the process of decentralising Paraguay's

The banner reads: 'International women's march, all Women all Rights'. Mexico City, 2008.

health system impacted gender equity. They found that in municipalities where local health councils truly strengthened citizen participation, the provision of health services was often better. Researchers found that women were able to use the councils to articulate local health priorities, although local women often found it difficult to challenge the dominant authorities and demand better health services.

A factor beyond the power of the councils that impacts women's access to health services is the national health financing policy. For Paraguayans that relied on the public health-care system, and for poor and indigenous women in particular, access to health services was limited by the imposition of a cost-recovery model for public health care, based on the payment of user fees. At the start of the project in 2006, only 20% of the country's population enjoyed health insurance. This changed following national elections in 2008 when the new coalition government identified decentralisation as one of its primary strategies to ensure universality, equity and citizen participation in health care.

Several members of the research team assumed decision-making positions within the new government in 2008, and one of the first actions taken was the establishment of a progressive approach to provide free, decentralised health services. In 2008, the National Equality and Decentralization Fund was established, and it pledged US$5 million to 100 health councils for the execution of health programmes relevant to local communities.

Enabling decentralisation

The projects in Latin America demonstrate key factors that may enable democratic decentralisation:

- an active and organised civil society;
- the provision of capacity-building training for female elected officials;
- targeted government efforts at reducing systemic inequalities;
- the inclusion of women and men in planning processes and governance;
- government recognition of diversity; and
- greater involvement of women in budgeting and controller capacities.

Also, local and national governments need to invest more in strategies to reduce gender-based violence in order for women to be able to realise their full political, economic and social rights.

Decentralisation has changed the political and institutional context for promoting the full and equal rights of citizens in many societies around the world. By transferring functions, resources and greater political and fiscal autonomy to local governments, decentralisation can provide new opportunities for women and men to participate in matters that closely affect their lives.

It is more than just a technical exercise; it is a political process that is shaped by local culture, history and priorities. One cannot assume that local governments will be inherently more effective or interested in advancing gender equity. Political will and concrete actions are required to make decentralisation a truly democratising and empowering process that promotes gender equity and meaningful citizen participation. <

Links

- Women's Rights and Citizenship programme at IDRC: www.idrc.ca/womensrights
- FLACSO: www.flacso.org

GUEST COLUMN

Women's representation in local government in Africa

A matter of political will

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As the level of government closest to citizens, local authorities can play a vital role in addressing gender inequality and in building the capacities of women by involving them in local decision making, planning and management. The importance of that role was recognised by the International Union of Local Authorities and in the 1998 Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government. Earlier, increasing the participation of women in politics and decision making was a central theme of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). This was reaffirmed in 2000 in the third Millennium Development Goal, to 'promote gender equality and empower women'.

African governments are signatories to a number of regional and international agreements relating to women's political participation. These include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), and the African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004). African countries are also obligated to give women equality of opportunity in law, under the law, and in administrative practice, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

But despite these commitments, the representation of women in local authority leadership positions in Africa is still limited. In 2005, the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) network, using data from 60 countries, found that a mere 9% of all mayors and 21% of local councillors were women. The UCLG identified some major obstacles to women's political participation, including cultural and traditional prejudices and the persistent unequal division of labour and responsibilities within households.

Women are hampered by their lack of financial independence, inadequate education, and by the burdens imposed by the HIV/Aids epidemic, civil wars and serious economic problems. Many authorities are failing to enforce quotas and affirmative action policies, or to carry out gender-sensitive research. But perhaps the most serious obstacle is the lack of political will to address the situation.

Addressing inequality

As part of its work in the Lake Victoria region of East Africa, UN-HABITAT is supporting local authorities in recognising that gender equality is not only a human right, but crucial to the entire process of local development. One of its objectives is to support a regional strategy for mainstreaming gender issues in local development planning. A recent assessment by UN-HABITAT revealed that many local authorities have achieved little in the area of gender equality because they lack the necessary capacity for strategic planning. For instance, very few collect the gender-disaggregated data that are essential for integrating gender perspectives in the design and delivery of services such as education, water and sanitation.

If local authorities are to address gender inequality, they need to be able to:
- integrate gender perspectives in local legislation, policies, programmes and projects based on gender-sensitive analysis;
- develop conceptual and practical methodologies for incorporating gender perspectives in local planning processes, including the development of indicators;
- collect, analyse and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information, including statistical methods that recognise and make visible the unremunerated work of women, for use in policy and programme planning and implementation;
- integrate a gender perspective in the design and implementation of sustainable resources management mechanisms, production techniques and infrastructure projects; and
- formulate and strengthen policies and practices to promote the full and equal participation of women in planning and decision making (Habitat Agenda, 1996).

Development agencies should continue to enhance the capacity of local authorities to address gender inequality, while also supporting women leaders to acquire the necessary skills and capacities. In this, however, a key requirement is political will, which is to a large extent determined by men who are over-represented in leadership positions. Achieving gender equality is not just a task for women, but also requires male leaders to advocate for equality. Sensitising them to the need to support gender equality is therefore crucial. <