

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, MEXICO CITY, 2008

Decentralization, local power and women's rights

Global trends in participation,
representation and access
to public services



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Preamble

1. Decentralization 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 varying degrees of political and fiscal autonomy to regional, local, or municipal governments, decentralization can provide new opportunities for women and men to participate and be represented on the matters that most closely affect their lives.
2. Decentralization reforms are promoted as a means of deepening democracy and improving development. However, these processes have not been sufficiently gender sensitive, negating governments' global commitments and obligations, *inter alia* the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Millennium Development Goals, and relevant regional instruments that reaffirm that gender equality and equity, including women's full and equal participation and representation in public life, and their full and equal right to meet such basic needs as access to clean water, health care, education, and economic opportunities, are critical to achieving sustainable democracy and development.

3. Within this context, an international Conference on “Decentralization, Local Power and Women’s Rights: Global Trends in Participation, Representation and Access to Public Services” was held from 18-21 November 2008, in Mexico City. The Conference was organized by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Government of Mexico, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), and in cooperation with the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-ECLAC).

4. The Conference brought together over 500 policy-makers, national and local government officials, researchers, civil society and grassroots activists, and representatives of international agencies from more than 50 countries, to discuss their research and experience in this field. Building on research findings and policy recommendations from a series of projects supported by IDRC in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the Conference critically examined decentralization and local governance with regard to women’s participation, representation, and access to public services; and provided a forum for representatives of government, civil society, international development agencies, and others to share their experiences of implementing decentralization and local governance policies, and identify gaps and entry points for further research.

5. The present document emerged from the analysis and experiences shared during the Conference and the work of IDRC-supported researchers. It comprises a set of policy recommendations that, for the first time, define a global agenda on gender and decentralization. It is intended as a resource for action, to be taken up by policy-makers, politicians, multilateral, bilateral and donor agencies, and civil society organizations seeking to promote and protect equal, equitable, and effective citizenship for all people.

Findings

6. Decentralization has the potential to empower citizens, including such historically excluded groups as women, poor people, and racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities. Many women and men are enthusiastic about the opportunities decentralization affords for participation in public life and are committed to pressing for greater gender equality and equity in decentralized systems.
7. However, the research and experiences shared at the Conference demonstrate that decentralization is not a panacea and does not automatically benefit women and men equally.
8. Decentralization can reinforce elite power, including discrimination against women. It frequently fails to address not only gender discrimination, but also other structural divisions and inequalities. Research shows that such discrimination and inequalities may be manifested through verbal and physical violence against women representatives, including those from marginalized communities.
9. In the context of current food, energy, financial, and climate change crises, local participation in areas such as water, land, and natural resource management, sanitation, health, education, and planning is often shaped by market-oriented policies, formulated at higher levels

and associated with an increasing transfer of the burden of payment and care for families and communities to civil society, especially to women. Such participation often reinforces traditional gender roles and extends women's unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities into the public sphere.

10. Political and sectoral decentralization are taking place simultaneously in many places, but research shows that they are often poorly linked. Often, the governance of decentralized sectors such as water and sanitation, health, education, and natural resources bypasses democratic local political institutions and procedures, and fails to respond to the needs and rights of local people, including women and the most disadvantaged.
11. Research shows that sectoral decentralization systems are often closely tied to the privatization of natural resources and services, which can lead to pricing systems and user fees that are prejudicial to the most marginalized citizens, including poor women.
12. Decentralization is likely to contribute to sustainable development when it is linked to the democratic aspirations of women and men, and responds to local political, social, economic, and cultural needs and conditions.
13. Research and experience demonstrate that decentralization has a political character that goes beyond its technical aspects. Promoting gender equality and equity in decentralization therefore involves political processes such as advocacy, negotiation, networking, constituency building, collective mobilization, and contestation by grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, and others.
14. Legal and policy frameworks, traditional practices, and social-structural obstacles, including various forms of political violence against women, affecting or limiting their access to and influence in decentralized spaces of governance must all be addressed, recognizing the priority of women's rights.

15. In order for decentralization to contribute to gender equality and equity, women's effective participation must be facilitated through special measures, such as quotas and reserved seats in political bodies, and through support for women's capacity development and networking. Resources must be provided to respond to local women's priorities, and structures, practices, and beliefs that disempower many women must be addressed.
16. In order for decentralization to contribute to gender equality and equity, central governments must promote and protect women's access to local governance, ensure the availability of financial and other resources to meet women's practical and strategic needs, and create structures of accountability that enable women to exercise their rights, particularly their rights to productive resources such as water, land, credit, and labour. Local levels of government must also adopt specific practices and mechanisms to support and facilitate women's participation.
17. The importance of women's movements in promoting women's rights, political participation, and access to services must be recognized and resourced. Women's rights organizations, non-governmental organizations, and political parties must mobilize for gender equality and equity through advocacy, networking, partnership building, capacity development, and other actions.
18. The support of international agencies and donors is a key contribution to national and sub-national governments as well as civil society, in implementing these actions in many countries.

Recommendations

Design and review of decentralization policies

19. Ensure that gender equality and equity are explicit goals in all legislation, policy, and other mechanisms related to decentralization and local governance, to address persistent gender gaps in areas such as participation and representation, health care, education, employment, access to property rights, credit, environmental vulnerability and migration.
20. Ensure that decentralized systems respond flexibly and accountably to the diversity of women's identities, needs and interests, as well as the diversity of contexts of decentralization, for example, conflict and post-conflict situations, and indigenous forms of local self-government.
21. Require governments, international and donor agencies, and other actors involved in the design or monitoring of decentralized systems to convene gender-inclusive, multi-stakeholder reviews to contribute to the design, monitoring, and evaluation of decentralization policies and mechanisms.
22. Support the institutionalization of gender-responsive planning and budgeting in regulations and guidelines for local government.
23. Strengthen women's movements', organizations', and other advocates of women's rights' influence over the design of decentralization from a gender equality and equity perspective.

Roles and responsibilities

24. Allocate functions and responsibilities for promoting gender equality and equity among various tiers of government and institutions in decentralized systems, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, balancing sub-national autonomy against the national state's constitutional and international obligations to protect and promote the full range of women's rights across decentralized systems.
25. Create and democratize national gender machineries and mandate them to promote and protect women's rights and participation across the decentralized system, through monitoring the implementation of national gender equality and equity policies at local levels, supporting sub-national gender machineries, and cooperating with autonomous women's organizations and other civil society bodies to promote the full range of women's rights in the local sphere.
26. National autonomous women's organizations to collaborate with local and community-based women's organizations, to support their efforts to promote and monitor gender equality and equity in local government institutions and sectoral decentralization systems.
27. Recognize the roles of grassroots women's and community-based groups and other citizen actors, who hold a vast amount of knowledge and practical experience as planners, providers and disseminators of information, and monitors, rather than simply as passive recipients of services, and ensure that these roles are adequately resourced.

Women's participation and representation

28. Implement mechanisms to raise women's awareness of their democratic rights so that they can exercise them through thoughtful, independent and strategic use of the ballot to effect change.
29. National and sub-national governments to introduce or expand quotas and reservations for women in all institutions of decentralized governance, including local bureaucracies, and implement mechanisms to ensure women's active and effective presence in leadership roles within them.
30. Political parties operating locally to promote gender-inclusive internal democracy through quotas or other mechanisms, and promote women in key decision-making roles, and national and sub-national governments promote gender inclusiveness within political parties through quotas, incentive systems, or other mechanisms.
31. Select local electoral systems (such as proportional representation or ward systems) with reference to their impacts on the election of women, undertaking electoral reforms aimed at increasing effective and diverse women's representation.
32. Ensure state funding for political parties and candidates is equitably distributed to women candidates.
33. Implement mechanisms to facilitate women's effective political participation, such as quorum rules requiring a minimum presence of women in decision-making sessions, and women-only forums that are clearly linked to mixed forums.

Access to decentralized services and resources

34. Adopt a rights-based approach in sectoral decentralization, ensuring that women and men, as well as people of different castes, classes, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and other identities have equitable access to, and democratic control over natural and financial resources and quality services.
35. Institute measures to ensure and protect women's land and property rights in local systems.
36. Link user committees and other institutions for managing decentralized services and resources to democratic local government institutions to ensure that decisions about service and resource management, allocation and use, respond to democratic processes.
37. Adopt practices such as meetings timed conveniently for women, women-only meetings, compensating women for attendance, and establishing gender quorums in local services committees, user groups, planning processes, and similar institutions to facilitate effective participation by women and other marginalized groups.
38. Develop standards for locally managed services that ensure consistent quality and accessibility across localities, while respecting local autonomy and facilitating diverse responses to local needs and conditions.
39. Encourage collaboration between civil society and local authorities on carrying out local functions.
40. Ensure women are recognized and fairly compensated for work they do as part of local service provision systems.

Fiscal decentralization, access to finances, and remuneration

41. Ensure fiscal decentralization arrangements provide sub-national governments with adequate resources to carry out the functions allocated to them without placing undue or regressive burdens of payment or labour on vulnerable groups, including women.
42. Link transfers to local governments to poverty, gender equity, and other indicators to ensure spending that benefits women and other disadvantaged or minority groups.
43. Governments to implement gender-responsive fiscal policies, including compensatory measures to guarantee equity across territories, paying special attention to the differing capacities of sub-national governments to generate and allocate funds to gender equality and equity initiatives and provide basic services to women as equal citizens.
44. Address the lack of resources dedicated to programs and projects of special concern to women by ensuring both gender-specific and gender-mainstreamed allocations in local budgets.
45. National and sub-national governments to enact and respect laws requiring public disclosure of national and local budget information.
46. Remunerate all work done on local councils by elected representatives.
47. Governments to support specific funding mechanisms to promote local gender equality and equity, such as making funding for local initiatives conditional on their gender-responsiveness, and providing national financial support to local women's organizations.

Capacity building

48. Implement capacity building and other measures to promote and empower local women's participation in formal and informal political processes and to enhance national and local governments' capacity to promote gender equality.
49. Fund capacity development for women in areas such as public speaking, literacy, awareness of legal mechanisms, citizenship education, mentorship, and technical matters relevant to local government.
50. Address social and cultural norms inhibiting women's effective participation by implementing mandatory gender-awareness education for relevant bodies and groups such as elected councillors, local bureaucrats, state or national ministry officials and bureaucrats involved in matters of decentralization, and all those involved in administering programs aimed specifically at women.
51. Support the capacity of local government to formulate, implement, and monitor gender-responsive planning and budgeting.

Communication, dissemination, and support networks

52. Disseminate information on quotas, and other mechanisms and policies that support women's participation in local governance, and ensure that women, once elected, have equal access to the information they require to effectively promote gender-sensitive policy objectives.
53. Document and give visibility to female role models and positive experiences of women in decentralization by publicizing and recording women's challenges, struggles, and victories in the political field through radio, TV, print media, and the Internet.

54. Support the formation of cross-party associations of locally elected women to monitor and lobby for gender-sensitive policy at national and local government levels and to support each others' efforts in sub-national spheres, with special platforms for women of disadvantaged groups.
55. Support federations of municipalities through training in gender equality and equity, and facilitate the sharing of resources and experiences on gender equity in municipal government and civil society. Where federations or associations of municipalities do not exist, support their formation.

Monitoring and evaluation

56. Include transparent, gender-responsive indicators and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in decentralized systems, ensuring specific institutions are mandated and funded to collect gender-disaggregated data, monitor, and regularly evaluate and report on the gender-responsiveness of various aspects of the decentralized system, including monitoring local budget performance in relation to addressing gender gaps.
57. Systematically integrate the views and proposals of citizens and civil society groups in the monitoring and evaluation of decentralized systems.
58. Women's rights advocates in political parties, bureaucracies, and civil society to monitor local budgets and spending through local gender audits.

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