

**POLICY DIALOGUE ON “EMPOWERING WOMEN IN AUTONOMY
AND DECENTRALIZATION PROCESSES”**

**Organized by the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia
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**General Observations by
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I would like to begin by congratulating Ambassador Hidayat and the Mission of the Republic of Indonesia to the United Nations for taking the initiative to organize a policy dialogue on this important topic, and expressing my appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to this dialogue.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 the empowerment of women was identified as critical for the achievement of the goals of equality, development and peace. The concept of empowerment of women arose from an understanding that increasing women’s participation in development processes, without fundamental changes to these processes themselves, would bring about little change. Linked to this was the recognition that provision of resources and services could not tackle the root causes of gender inequality. Women need to be able to assert their own agency to break out of gender discrimination. Empowerment involves awareness raising, building of self-confidence and expansion of choices. However, no amount of self-awareness and self-confidence training will be useful unless the systemic and structural causes of gender inequalities are also identified and specifically addressed.

Empowerment is much more than facilitating an increase in women’s participation. It must also include processes that lead women to perceive themselves as having rights and entitlements and to be able to voice their demands, as well as provide improved access to decision-making opportunities. Empowerment should lead to concrete action to bring about changes in laws, in access to resources, and in public and private institutions that reinforce women's subordination.

Empowerment of women cannot occur in a vacuum; men must be also brought along in the process of change. Resistance from men can be strong when women compete for power in the public sphere, or when the rights, and privileges of men within the family are questioned. Empowerment should, however, not be seen simply as a zero-sum game where gains by women automatically imply losses for men. There are gains from women’s empowerment for men, as well as for families, households and communities and society at large, which need to be better understood.

Governance refers to the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences. Governance touches upon issues such as the interaction between the state and civil society, the legal framework, public

administration, economic development, development policies, and peace and security – all of which have important gender perspectives.

Decentralization processes, as part of strategies for effective governance, should aim to ensure greater transparency, accountability, consultation and participation in decision making at local levels. Decentralization can be promoted from above or from below. While decentralization is mainly used to refer to the transfer of responsibilities and/or resources from central level to regional or local levels, in some parts of the world popular movements have successfully pushed from below for more influence in local politics generally or in specific critical sectors. Decentralization can, however, also be used to refer to the push by central governments for local government /communities to raise revenues for their development needs. In such contexts there may be little real transfer of “power” and the result can be a serious loss of human security. The rationale or motivation for decentralization is important as it affects the potential for incorporating gender perspectives into the process.

Decentralization may facilitate local governance structures and processes which are more open to public scrutiny, more accountable to communities as a whole, and more responsive to the concerns of specific groups, including women. This is not, however, automatic. Decentralization may simply involve transfer of power and resources from a male-dominated elite at national/regional level to a similar elite at local level. In small, traditional and relatively closed communities it may be extremely difficult to ensure consultation, participation, transparency and accountability, and particularly to ensure the participation of women and adequate attention to their needs and priorities.

A major challenge in decentralization processes - whether driven from the top or from the bottom - is the management of competing needs and demands of different groups in society. This challenge can only be met if there is sufficient knowledge of the social realities of the different groups involved, including both women and men. Decentralization can only strengthen women’s constituency if there is an explicit focus on empowerment strategies. Important elements of decentralization processes which can be empowering include: information dissemination to all groups in society; consultation with all stakeholders; and development of effective participatory approaches. Supporting the development of a vibrant, well-organized civil society at the local level is another precondition. In all of these elements there must be an explicit goal to reach and involve women as well as men.

Even when governance is decentralized, government officials can be quite removed from ordinary people, and particularly from women. It is sometimes difficult for poor and marginalized groups to know about and influence the policies their elected representatives pursue. Some experience from projects to promote the inclusion of gender perspectives in local budgets has shown, however, that women can be considerably empowered in these processes. "Budget literacy" - basic understanding of what a budget is, how it is developed, what limits there are on the power of elected officials, and what rights citizens have in relation to resource allocations and budget processes - can lead women to make unprecedented demands for information and accountability. Examples

from the Philippines show that women have been empowered to make concrete demands on local officials for resource allocations to their priority needs of health and education.

A major concern in decentralization processes in many countries is the continued exclusion, or token representation, of women in political decision-making. Many different strategies have been put in place to increase women's participation, such as the introduction of quota systems. In India and in Pakistan, for example, one third of local government seats are reserved for women. This allows large numbers of women to enter political life for the first time. It is important to note, however, that the local context in which political decentralization occurs is not necessarily democratic or open to women's involvement. Experience illustrates that, while decentralization has allowed for increased participation of women in the local governments structures in some countries, women's inclusion is often hard-won and achieved in the face of significant resistance.

Considerable specific support is required to ensure that women can participate effectively even at local level. Firstly, because women may have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes and thus not understand the processes and rules of engagement, and secondly, because women's participation is a recent innovation the local environment may be hostile to their involvement. Strategies to deal with this have included extra training for women and support to the establishment of networks of women in similar situations; efforts to create positive environments; and advocacy in support of women's involvement among local leaders.

Participation of women - in any sector and in any form - is almost always discussed as inherently positive for women. The costs of participation for different groups of women are rarely addressed. Another important and often forgotten element is consultation. Not all women can be involved in political decision-making bodies. All women should, however, be consulted so that their needs and priorities are known. A broad consultation process is important since women are not an homogenous group.

It needs to be kept in mind that women can have the same difficulties in gaining access and voice in local NGOs and civil society groups as they do in local government bodies. Even if women become members of local groups they may be excluded from leadership positions. The special needs and priorities of women may also be neglected on the agendas of these local-level organizations. While women-specific organizations and networks will continue to play an important role in promoting women's empowerment in decentralization, it is critical that women are equally represented in all civil society organizations, and that relevant gender perspectives are identified and addressed as an integral part of the agendas of these organizations.

Examples from the area of water resource management can illustrate some of the issues which need to be addressed, and the challenges that emerge, in attempting to give more attention to gender perspectives in decentralization processes. These examples show that as long as gender perspectives are neglected, decentralization policies and processes risk being both discriminatory and ineffective.

While often seen as a purely technical process, water resource management includes many very political aspects, involving decisions on use, access and affordability of resources critical to sustainable livelihoods. Discussions over the past decade have given increasing attention to governance and decentralization issues and there are many interesting examples of efforts to engage local communities more fully in these decentralization processes. One key slogan has been “management at the most appropriate level”.¹ It has been assumed that decentralization processes - bringing decision-making and management closer to the communities – would be automatically positive for women. This was often based on a poor understanding of the social realities for women in communities in many parts of the world. Without explicit attention to their needs and priorities, and specific strategies to target their participation, there can be limited potential for the increased involvement of women in some contexts.

The equally popular slogan "Water as an economic good" did not usually take into account the fact that those who manage household water supplies (the women) are not those who make the political decisions or control resources in many parts of the world. Critical issues which emerge in this context include rights, particularly property rights. The issue of pricing policies raises questions about which uses of water are visible to, and valued by, political decision-makers. There are clear gender perspectives to be addressed where women's domestic uses of water are overlooked by male politicians and where women have limited opportunities to put forward their views in political decision-making bodies. In some cases user fees are introduced in the water sector (as in the health and education sectors) with clear detrimental impacts on women's responsibilities for ensuring adequate supplies of water supplies for their households. Without women's active involvement in water committees, local councils and other key decision-making bodies, political decisions can be taken which are extremely detrimental for women, and in the long run also for the wellbeing of families and communities.

The types of strategies which have been put in place to allow women to influence, participate in and benefit from decentralization processes in relation to water resource management include consultation, information dissemination and technical training as site managers and pump attendants. In addition, attention has been given to mechanisms for including women in decision-making bodies, such as water committees, in order to give them the opportunity to influence critical decision-making on a resource which is central to their lives. These efforts, including through the use of quota systems, have had mixed results. Often, although the numbers of women have increased on these bodies, real power has remained with the male members of the committees or even with the husbands of female committee members. Experience has shown that women need significant support to be able to participate effectively in these bodies. In some cases where successful efforts were made to involve women in decision-making bodies at local level, such as local water committees, an interesting phenomena was observed. The power gradually shifted from these more gender-balanced bodies to other bodies, such as district councils, where women were not represented. What resulted was a sometimes impressive numerical representation of women in a body which had less and less real power.

¹ Sometimes expressed as "management at the lowest appropriate level".

In conclusion, there has often been an assumption that gains in terms of inclusiveness, responsiveness, equity and equality would occur automatically with decentralization. There has been a certain complacency about social equity issues and a serious neglect of gender equality. The potential for more effective and equitable governance does exist, but only if equity and equality issues are directly addressed. The fact that attention to gender perspectives in decentralization processes is not only good for women and gender equality, but can also make a huge contribution to achieving other development goals, should be better understood. Gender analysis - which focuses on roles and responsibilities as well as rights, relations and power – should be utilized more broadly in decentralization planning and implementation processes in projects on the ground. The costs of not including a gender perspective in decentralization policies and processes should be emphasized.

At a very general level, Governments, NGOs and civil society groups, including women's groups and networks and other national and local level stakeholders, with support of the United Nations and other international bodies, can facilitate the removal of social and structural barriers to women's empowerment and political involvement - such as inequitable access to education and training, the absence of jobs and income, health constraints and persistence of stereotypes that devalue women. This can be achieved through appropriate economic strategies (that create more and better paid jobs); through public investments in infrastructure (that make health, education and other services accessible to women); as well as by through changing laws and societal norms and stereotypes (that ensure women's human rights, prevent discrimination and facilitate women's ability to define their own goals and strategies).

Increased access to ICT is an effective means to increase women's potential to be involved in and shape political decision-making at all levels, including in particular local levels. It is also important to educate women about their rights, through, for example, organizing campaigns on legal literacy and training on the importance and usefulness of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as an instrument to prevent discrimination against women and promote more active involvement in political decision-making, including in the context of decentralization processes.

Decentralization processes can indeed be empowering for women but only if empowerment is an explicit goal and well defined strategies, adequate resources and commitment at top levels are in place. For some time to come there will have to be specific support mechanisms to allow women to play an effective role in political decision-making processes. Increasing number of women on decision-making bodies will, however, not be enough. Gender perspectives need to be identified and addressed as an integral part of all analyses, policy development and planning and implementation processes in decentralization.

Thank you.