

PRE-CONFERENCE MEETING

Women in Local Authorities' Leadership Positions:
Approaches to Democracy, Participation, Local Development and Peace

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It is an honour to represent the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs at this important conference. I congratulate the organizers, and in particular the Regional Council of Tuscany, the Commune of Firenze, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Euro-African Partnership, for this initiative. I welcome the participants from so many different countries and I look forward to hearing about the practical experiences of increasing women's involvement and increasing attention to their priorities and concerns in decentralization processes and local governance.

I welcome the opportunity that this important Pre-Conference Meeting provides to discuss critical issues related to women's participation and representation, including the ways in which the "decentralized cooperation" between local authorities in Europe and Africa have strengthened the role of women. The holding of this Pre-Conference Meeting the day before the Second Conference of African and European Regional and Local Authorities on "The Impact of the Economic and Financial Crisis on Decentralized Governance in Africa. The Response of Local Authorities to the New Development Challenges" allows for the transmission of the outcome of the discussions here to that Conference.

I will focus my presentation on a global overview in relation to the three elements of this meeting – the importance of (value-added) and progress in achieving women's effective participation in decision-making at the local level; the need to give priority to women's economic empowerment in the informal sector, including through increasing their access to economic and financial resources; and the value of decentralized networking.

This meeting is very timely in the context of the 15-year review of implementation of the global framework on gender equality, the Beijing Platform for Action in March 2010. Women's participation in decision-making is one of the critical areas in the Platform where reliable data and information is lacking (with the exception of information on representation in national parliaments). Women's participation in decentralization processes and local governance is one area on which there is still very little easily accessible information. Improved data collection and dissemination is critical.

Both the global policy and legal frameworks on gender equality and empowerment of women – the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - place great emphasis on women's equal participation in decision-making. These two frameworks clearly indicate the need for both increasing the participation and representation of women and influencing the agendas, processes and outcomes of decision-making bodies from a gender equality perspective.

Significant development and democracy benefits/gains are achieved when women are empowered politically, socially and economically and can actively participate in public life, including at local level. Increasing the participation of women in decision-making constitutes

an important step towards democracy – among other things, women’s participation ensures diversity in contributions to policy-making and can offer new perspectives and priorities. Broader participation of women at local levels may also be an important first step towards increased political participation at the national level – although this is not automatic.

Around the world, however, women are still not systematically brought into consultation and dialogue around local planning and management. Women are far from being represented equitably as elected officials and government employees at local level. The 2006 figures from United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) indicate that women constitute only 9 per cent of mayors and 20 per cent of councillors globally. As a result, local-level institutions, facilities, and services are not always conceived with women’s needs, priorities and contributions in mind, which can result in, among other things, neglect of critical areas or inefficient public infrastructure and services.

It needs to be noted that decentralization does not automatically ensure increased participation of women. The local context is not always inherently more democratic or more open to women’s involvement. Because women’s participation is a recent innovation in many contexts, the local environment may be very hostile to their involvement. Prejudices against women’s involvement can be more strongly held at local than at higher levels. Local government in many areas has been shown to be particularly responsive to informal institutions and relations of power, rather than more formal rules and procedures, which often advantages men rather than women. Considerable specific support is required to ensure that women can participate effectively.

It is also important to keep in mind that representation of women in different bodies and processes does not necessarily ensure their effective participation. Ensuring that both women and men will be able to influence decisions and resource allocation requires going beyond increasing the numbers of women in different positions to providing real opportunities for influencing the agendas, institutions and processes of decision-making.

In addition, the presence of women does not in itself guarantee that gender equality issues will be placed on the agenda or that outcomes will be gender-sensitive. All actors – men as well as women – must have the awareness, commitment and capacity to bring attention to gender equality perspectives. Women may need training just as much as men. Men must become active partners in achieving the goals of gender equality and empowerment of women, including the increased involvement of women in local government. Progress is dependent on men’s willingness to question gender stereotypes and change existing structures and processes, including redefining the roles of women and men in both public and family life. Awareness-raising and capacity-building must be specifically targeted at men, including public officials.

Steps to increase women’s participation and attention to gender perspectives

Three broad strategies can be identified for increasing women’s participation in local and regional governance, under which specific actions/measures need to be taken. Firstly, equal representation in political decision making must be promoted. Successfully implementing this strategy requires political will by local and regional authorities and clear targets, backed if necessary by legislation, for example legislation to reserve a percentage of seats in local bodies for women. Secondly, women must also be given the opportunity to participate as employees of local governments in the management of local services.

Municipal councils, for example, must develop measures to encourage women to take up key positions. These measures must ensure that the workplace is secure and non discriminatory, with clear policies on equitable promotion procedures, prevention of sexual harassment and promotion of safe working environments. A third strategy is to facilitate women's involvement as citizens by making public consultation procedures more accessible to women, and finding ways to engage and channel the energy and action of women in local informal associations and networks.

In discussing women's participation, representation and influence, it is important to not to neglect women's role as citizens. Women are frequently actively engaged as leaders and participants at community level. They have demonstrated considerable enterprise in addressing the challenges of poverty, providing some of the most creative grassroots initiatives and organizing efforts to engage and co-operate with local authorities around access to services. Women are often the first to find the user fees required or provide community labour, and they are invariably involved in maintenance responsibilities associated with community management of utilities and services, particularly when these functions are unpaid.

In an increasing number of countries, quota systems have been introduced to increase the number of women in formal decision-making processes. In some cases, one third of local government seats have been reserved for women. This has allowed large numbers of women to enter political life for the first time. Some challenges have, however been noted. The extent to which women councillors have been able to influence decision-making has depended on the way the quota system was designed. In some cases, women were elected through special ballots or party lists and did not have their own constituencies. Where women were nominated and elected by their parties, they were beholden to party leaders and had no power base of their own. This led to their marginalization.

Quotas also bring women into predominantly male structures and systems and do not necessarily tackle traditional patterns of power which can hinder the effectiveness of women's participation. The procedures, structures and functions of local governments often remain heavily biased towards participation of men and attention to their priorities and needs. Values, norms, and practices can effectively restrict women's potential to participate effectively and make efforts to give explicit attention to relevant gender perspectives very difficult. Affirmative action measures may not be sufficient by themselves. Sensitization campaigns may be necessary to promote men's acceptance of increased participation of women, and to assist women take on new roles.

The contributions, priorities and needs of women as well as men must be considered on an equal basis from the beginning of planning processes, so that both women and men can be involved and fully benefit. This is the important strategy of gender mainstreaming. No decisions should be taken or resources allocated without analysis of the existing roles and contributions of women and men and the potential impact of planned actions on both women and men.

Obstacles to women's participation and attention to gender perspectives

A number of persistent obstacles to women's participation in decision-making, and to fully incorporating their priorities and concerns into decision-making processes, have been identified. Among the most common and persistent barriers to increased representation of

women are stereotypes on the roles and expected behaviour of women which confine women to subordinate positions in public life. These barriers limit women's opportunities in public life at all levels, including local government, including by reducing their self confidence and self esteem.

In many countries, poverty also negatively impacts women's ability to participate in public life. In relation to elected positions, the high cost of seeking and holding public office may also be a constraint – both in terms of financial and time costs. Women may lack the required finances for campaigning.

The unequal division of unpaid domestic work, including care-giving, between women and men also constitutes a significant barrier for women in all regions of the world, constraining the time available for involvement in political processes and limiting opportunities for full-time employment outside the home.

Among the most pervasive factors limiting women's participation in many countries is their lower levels of education and training. In low-income countries, women may continue to be constrained by illiteracy. Women's limited participation in decision-making in all areas results in a lack of the required skills and experience.

The role of local authorities

A lack of gender sensitivity on the part of local authorities, and a lack of capacity to work effectively with local women's groups and networks, may result in neglect of attention to women's needs, priorities and in the failure to recognize their contributions. This is a net loss for communities as the potentials of women go unutilized.

Many recommendations have been made on ways to ensure that local and regional governments increase the participation of women and attention to their needs, priorities and contributions. Measures to increase the participation of women include:

- legislation reserving seats for women in local legislatures;
- the development of transparent criteria for decision-making positions;
- the development of explicit gender equality policies, strategies and action plans, including affirmative action policies and equal employment opportunity policies;
- awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns, including through the media, to develop positive attitudes among the general public to women's participation in public life and recognition of their leadership roles; and
- provision of support to women candidates in elections.

Recommended steps to increase the effectiveness of women in local government positions include:

- the organization of leadership training and mentoring for women to build their self-esteem and negotiation and communication skills; and
- provision of orientation and training programmes for newly elected/appointed women to increase their knowledge and capacity on critical issues such as municipal legislation, budgeting and taxation, service delivery systems, environmental management, and special programmes such as poverty alleviation schemes or shelter programmes.

Actions to ensure adequate attention to the concerns of women as well as men in

decentralization policies and local governance include:

- the incorporation of gender perspectives into policies, strategies and action plans in all policy areas, for example health, transport, security and the environment;
- establishment of requirements for consultation with and participation of women in decision-making processes;
- development of gender-sensitization programmes for all public officials, including in regular training institutes;
- collection, compilation and utilization of sex-disaggregated data in all policy areas;
- development of women-specific mechanisms – such as networks, committees, and summits - as appropriate; and
- establishment or strengthening of collaboration with and support to women's groups and networks in civil society.

An important recent innovation in some local government contexts has been to more effectively utilize the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Awareness-raising seminars have been organized – for municipal staff and civil society actors, and implementation plans developed. A further development could be to ensure that the national reports to the CEDAW Committee include evaluations of the extent to which local governments have worked to implement the articles of the Convention.

Increasing women's access to resources

The second important theme of this Pre-Conference concerns increasing women's access to resources, including in the informal sector and in agriculture. Women are a dynamic force in the informal sector in local economies but are constrained by lack of access to resources. Focusing on women's economic empowerment would both sustain their livelihoods and enhance their contribution to local economic development.

Women are at a significant disadvantage compared with men in terms of the ability to participate in and benefit from economic development processes. Women are disproportionately represented in informal work which is often vulnerable, poorly-paid and uncovered by labour legislation and social protection. The persistent unequal sharing of unpaid domestic work between women and men, including caregiving, hinders women's choices in the labour market. Women's livelihood strategies also require access to a range of productive resources but women in many countries face discrimination in access to land, common resources, property and other productive resources, as well as to the infrastructure, services and technologies needed to facilitate their effective use of these resources.

Women's access to financial resources, including savings and credit, which are essential to allow them to fully benefit from economic opportunities, is often limited. Microfinance institutions, while more successful than formal finance institutions, in reaching women at local levels, have not always reached the poorest women and have also failed successful women entrepreneurs who want to expand their businesses. In addition, many women at local levels, particularly in rural areas, cannot access the economic resources provided through social protection systems – such as child allowances, unemployment and disability pensions and health insurance – and, as a result, they are unable to insure themselves against ill-health, disability, old age, unemployment and other life crises.

Even when economic rights for women do exist, they may not be enforced; women may not know about these rights; or social norms and practices may make it impossible for women to claim their rights.

The value of networking

Networking – the third issue you will address today - remains a key strategy for ensuring women’s effective participation in local governments and securing the required attention to their concerns and interests in decentralization processes and in the work of local authorities. The Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance has already done significant work to develop common goals and approaches and to enhance the sharing of information on strategies and outcomes on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women between local and regional authorities in Africa and Europe. I look forward to hearing more of your practical experiences on how this has supported the participation of women and attention to their concerns and interests in your local contexts.

There are a number of specific areas where strengthened networking and increased sharing of experiences, lessons learned and promising practices would be useful. In particular, innovative measures are urgently needed to address the stereotypical attitudes and practices which hinder the participation of women in decision-making. Efforts should be made to engage educational institutions and the media in actively promoting positive change. The achievements of women in leadership roles in local governance should be made visible and celebrated.

Change in attitudes is needed among women as well as men. It is therefore critically important that women who have achieved leadership positions in local government actively support other women and promote gender equality and empowerment of women. Mentoring programmes should be used to provide positive role models for younger women. Career guidance should provide information on potential openings in local and regional authorities.

Another important gender equality issue which local governments should give increased attention to is the unequal burden of unpaid work, including caregiving, carried by women. This is particularly critical in the context of HIV/AIDS. Without support through the provision of necessary infrastructure and services, and more equal sharing of these responsibilities between women and men, women’s productive capacity is severely restricted, with significant consequences for local development. Steps to address this problem can be taken at national and regional levels, but the role and inputs of local government is critical. This issue must be urgently addressed at local level to release the full economic potential of women as employees, entrepreneurs and as farmers.

The context of the financial and economic crisis

Allow me to also briefly address the theme of the Conference tomorrow – the financial and economic crisis. The goals of promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment through decentralization processes and in local and regional government take on increased urgency in the context of the current financial and economic crisis. There is a risk that it may become more difficult to achieve many of the desired policy responses at local level because of the impact of the lack of resources, or because an alleged lack of resources may be used as an excuse for not taking action on gender equality and

empowerment of women. A challenge will be to keep the focus of the response to the crisis at local level on social development and gender equality.

Experience from past economic crises has indicated that the unemployment of women may increase, although they may not be the first group to be affected. Even in contexts where male employment is more significantly affected, experience shows that women often increase their work outside the home to compensate for the income loss in the household. In many cases, this work is in the informal sector and may be in vulnerable sectors with low wages and poor working conditions. Economic crises often also result in reduction of, or increase in the cost of, services such as health, education and child- or elder-care. This may result in significant increases in women's unpaid work as they compensate for the loss of essential services. Work programmes established to create employment and social protection measures may ignore the priorities and needs of women and target only men. Given women's critical roles for the welfare of families, and in particular children, it is critical that responses to the financial and economic crisis, at all levels, including the local and regional levels, are carried out in a gender-responsive manner, giving due consideration to the ways in which planned interventions will meet the specific needs and priorities of women and men and will impact on women compared to men.

The effective use of gender-responsive budgeting becomes more important in the context of the crisis. Gender-responsive budgets allow local governments to integrate gender analysis into expenditure policies and budgets in different sectors. This does not imply separate budgets for women, but rather the political will to disaggregate expenditure according to its impact on women and men, with the aim to increase resource allocations in support of gender equality and empowerment of women. Gender-responsive budgets provide a unique opportunity to link policy commitments on gender equality with resource allocations and to hold governments accountable. There are many areas of concern to women in local government in relation to budgets, for example in the areas of infrastructure and services as well as local revenue collection (such as licenses and site fees for street traders) which also affect women, particularly low-income women in the informal sector.

“Budget literacy” is therefore one critical area where capacity needs further development. This involves increasing the understanding among ordinary citizens – women as well as men - 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. Increased capacity in this area at local level can empower women to make unprecedented demands for information and accountability.

It is also important to note that, in the African context, attention to women's access to resources in agriculture is critical for effective responses to the food and fuel crises and the challenges of climate change – in both a short and long-term perspective.

Conclusions

Fundamental to the promotion of gender equality is the opportunity for women as well as men to participate in all aspects of political, economic, and social decision-making, including in decentralization processes and at local level. Women in decision-making positions contribute to redefining priorities, placing new issues on the agenda that reflect and address women's specific values, experiences and priorities, and providing new perspectives

on mainstream issues. The broader the base of participation in power structures and decision-making processes, the greater the transparency and accountability.

The impact of efforts to bring gender equality perspectives to bear in local and regional government must be assessed not only in terms of the number of women in decision-making positions, but also by the extent to which their participation results in outcomes which promote gender equality and empowerment of women and bring needed change in the lives of women and girls.

The positive links between gender equality and empowerment of women and effective and sustainable decentralization and local growth and development are increasingly clear. Women represent half the resources and half the potential and are important agents of change at local and regional levels. The development and democracy losses/costs of not consulting and involving women, and of not including gender equality perspectives in policies, legislation, programmes and activities, must be highlighted.

The conviction expressed by the Heads of State in the United Nations in 2005 that “progress for women is progress for all”, is also true in the context of decentralization and local governance. The full involvement of women and gender-sensitive development is needed to ensure that local and regional governments contributes to equitable, effective and sustainable development for the benefit of all.

In conclusion, I would suggest that there are three areas where increased decentralized cooperation – South-South and North-South – would be very beneficial for increasing the participation of women in decision-making and attention to their priorities and needs at local level:

- identifying and addressing gender stereotypes related to women’s participation;
- introducing gender-responsive budgeting processes in local budgets; and
- effectively using the CEDAW Convention to promote gender equality and empowerment of women at local level.

Thank you.