

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.

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,
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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, .0806 .,0806 ,3n right