

SOME PROGRESS **BUT** **ROLE OF WOMEN** IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT **OFTEN MARGINAL**

INTERNATIONALLY, decentralisation has become part of the standard policy recipe for good governance. Decentralisation advocates argue that it fosters participatory democracy and results in more responsive service delivery, and that it benefits women since local government, which is more accessible to them, deals with issues of central importance to women. Critics, however, argue that decentralisation can undermine rights won at national level by giving power to local elites hostile to gender equality.

Some form of decentralisation is occurring in South Africa. Since 1994, local government has become a more important player with a wider mandate than before. Yet local government is required to give effect to national policies and guidelines, and to link with other spheres of government in the context of cooperative governance.

Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), produced as a statutory requirement by all municipalities, play a key role in this context. IDPs are local planning processes that are intended to give strategic direction to the work of municipalities (their programmes, budgets and projects) and to activities undertaken by provincial and national government departments operating in their areas. Increasingly, they are being seen as a forum for achieving links between spheres of government and facilitating coordinated planning, budgeting and implementation.

The South African Constitution is one of the most progressive in the world with regard to gender equality and women's rights. These constitutional commitments are taken up in several government policies, and are expected to be carried through in local government as well. The key question is what happens to women's rights and entitlements, as defined at national level, in this context. Are national gender policy directives and guidelines adhered to within local government, in IDP processes and outcomes, and in implementation?

National guidelines and targets are helping to ensure that women benefit from local projects even where local politics and governance processes marginalise women's voices, ALISON TODES, PEARL SITHOLE and AMANDA WILLIAMSON found during a research project that formed part of an international initiative by the International Development and Research Centre, Canada (IDRC).

These research questions were addressed through analysing national and provincial (KwaZulu-Natal) support to local government on gender and integrated development

planning, and through three case studies of municipalities of different sizes, capacities and local politics (Msinga, Hibiscus Coast and eThekweni).



The local research examined the place of gender in local government (in terms of representation and special structures), gender in the IDP and its linked participatory processes, and the extent to which projects and implementation reflect national gender policies, and whether they benefit women. Overall, some 70 interviews and 51 focus groups were conducted. The results of the research were presented and debated in workshops, funded by the European Union, at local, provincial and national level.

The research found that although some attention was paid to gender at the national level (in IDP support documents), in practice this emphasis was not sustained. For a few years after local government was amalgamated in 2000, the focus was on the 'basics' of getting local government to work, and 'cross-cutting' issues were marginalised.

Within local government, the focus has been limited mainly to the representation of women as councillors and within management, rather than on informing and transforming the work of municipalities. Nevertheless, even getting a more equitable representation of women and men in councils has not been easy. The recent local government elections were strongly contested, and there was resistance in some quarters to the idea of specifically promoting women as candidates.

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Even when women are represented in a council or are part of the management, they do not necessarily take gender issues forward. Structures to deal with the needs of vulnerable groups, including women, have been established in some local governments, but for the most part they are marginal and have little impact.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), many of which take up issues of key concern to women, feel isolated from IDP participatory processes. IDP processes are also inaccessible to the many small organisations that provide important local services to women, and are often run by women. Even where fairly extensive participatory processes occur, these are often divorced from IDP resource allocation and implementation processes.

In the IDP documents themselves, gender remains a side issue, and the national guidelines produced on gender and IDPs are generally not followed. The specific needs raised by women in participatory processes and by NGOs taking up women's issues are neglected. On the positive side, many everyday needs of women may be addressed through IDP priorities, particularly the emphasis on service delivery. Still, they are considered in a gender-blind manner, and attention is needed to ensure that they are implemented in a gender-aware way. Most IDPs include an emphasis on economic development, but the differential effects for men and women of various strategies are not considered.

Despite the limitations of IDPs, women are very involved in municipal projects concerning poverty alleviation, basic service delivery, development of community facilities and infrastructural development. This is partly the effect of national guidelines that insist on women benefiting. Project managers, councillors and communities now see women's involvement as normal and even desirable.

Although quotas and the like are blunt instruments, they help to ensure that women are represented on committees and that they benefit from the work generated by projects. Women's increased involvement is also because many projects relate to what are seen as women's responsibilities, an extension of their 'normal' roles as carers and homemakers. In some cases, the income from working on these projects is too low to entice men.

Although there is evidence of progress, the role of women is frequently marginal or

tokenistic. In the larger flagship projects, women and small contractors are hardly present, which is a worrying pattern, given South Africa's emphasis on large-scale infrastructure-led growth for the next few years.

Most projects associated with women's traditional roles or designed to facilitate their economic empowerment have displayed disappointing results. Nevertheless, they do contribute in some way to reducing the vulnerability of poor households and improving quality of life at a basic level.

The research suggests that decentralisation that is beneficial to women also depends on a strong centre that emphasises women's rights. It shows that the existence of national guidelines and criteria that insist that women benefit from projects, and are included as workers and contractors, is making a difference, even if it is not perfect.

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Since women's rights and entitlements are best established at national level, and women's position in local politics is contested, further decentralisation needs to proceed with caution. Variations between municipalities in terms of capacity and local politics also mean that the consequences of decentralisation will be uneven across space. The government, however, is starting to pay greater attention to gender and local government, and the increase in numbers of women represented in local government after the 2006 elections may make a difference.

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in awarding of Child Support Grants