STRATEGIZING FOR CHANGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS:
WHY NOT START FROM WOMEN'S AGENCY?

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The economic crisis and development policies

The financial crisis and the widespread economic recession are and probably will be in the foreseeable future, responsible for setting back development goals in many countries. It is already possible to envisage that the impact on the real economy and on the lives of people will be even more serious than the impact on the financial market and will be felt by all developing countries. The features of the crisis, therefore, question the overall economic architecture of globalization as well as the current patterns of development: thus it is crucial to recognize the inevitable asymmetries which can be determined by different responses to the crisis. In the present situation the risk of increasing existing disparities between North and South, in turn bolstering human insecurity, migration trends and armed conflicts, is clear and presents a specific challenge for aid policies, especially in light of the recent shifts on how aid is delivered. Poverty reduction and growth strategies will need to be redressed and major attention should be devoted to national and local responses to the crisis so as to best understand how to interact with its multiple causes.

In the last two decades globalization made the claim of creating the conditions for guaranteeing "quality of life" (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993) for the population of the whole planet and indeed, this ambition underlies the structure of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Development cooperation has set itself as the main tool for fulfilling this potential, notwithstanding recent mutations ignited by the increasing recourse to emergency aid in response to armed conflicts or natural disasters. Such is the responsibility, that development cooperation must continuously be tuned to questioning its own actions and its capacity to improve everybody's quality of life. This critical (and self-critical) approach could open a new cycle that would be very helpful in speeding up the exit from the current crisis. But more importantly, it would shift and widen the scope of the new aid modalities from mere changes in the framework for transferring economic resources, to a conception that focuses on critical issues about rights and rights-bearing subjects and paves the way for new forms of citizenship (Sassen, 2007: 277).

The current economic crisis which, at the same time, is social, political and cultural, reveals the impossibility of emerging from the worldwide destabilization produced by globalization without taking into account the centrality of human life as the result of interdependent relationships both in the public sphere (organized by institutions and markets) and in the private sphere (structured by religions, cultural regimes and customary practices). Indeed, it is generally recognized that recent technological

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developments and economic processes have changed the modalities which organize the biological and psychological cycle of human life. In fact, "(…) while generally theorized as the product of economic restructuring, globalization also restructures cultures and societies and therefore the ways in which people construct their identities" (Bergeron, 2001: 985).

In the present economic crisis, therefore, the changes which have occurred in the domain of non-market work, social reproduction and cultural backgrounds need to be investigated to better determine the salient fields of development interventions and activities. This requires the capacity to unveil the complex interrelations between economic, social and cultural powers which organize societies. In other words, "biopolitics" as defined primarily by Foucault (1978: 121) should become an important field of analysis for aid policies because it captures not only the traditional focus on public sector and economic management, but also the interaction of the state with peoples' lives. Such a vision exactly corresponds to what women's transnational movements have tried to take forward in the context of development cooperation over the last three decades.

Gender relations and development

In most cultures, "personal" life care - intended as the biological and psychological cycle of human beings - has been attributed to women, whose task consists of managing the private and family life; whereas the public space, the destinies of communities and, therefore, politics, have been reserved for men. Only a few countries in the world have considered the public space accessible to both sexes as is the special case of industrialized countries, mainly as a result of the ground-breaking struggle of women's and feminist movements. The western feminist movement in the early twentieth century wanted to obtain women's right to vote and to enter the sphere of political representation; whereas the second wave of the feminist movement - in the 1970s - strove to achieve gender equality in the public sphere while transforming sexual roles in the private arena. In most cases, this meant highlighting where women were located and how they could express their agency.

Starting from that point of view, women in many countries of the world have shown how their role can be crucial in the survival of the whole community even if they still do not have sufficient autonomy nor the possibility of assuming their role, especially at the decision-making level. However, the qualitative and quantitative increase in women's agency that has been taking place worldwide over the last thirty years has led many women to debate what the best avenues are for promoting the political and cultural changes needed to achieve quality of life everywhere. Indeed, most of them have questioned the idea of development itself from the perspective of women's agency.

Nowadays, and particularly in the context of development cooperation policies and the possibility of getting through the current crisis, that perspective seems especially necessary to understanding how to intervene in most developing and less-developed countries. This implies not only an analysis of the gender policies of the state, but also of the different impacts of institutions and markets at multiple levels and especially at the local one where globalization trends seem to be significantly influencing the life choices of individuals.

Gender policies and women's empowerment

Although extensively discussed and fitfully defined[1] since the 1990s, the concept of empowerment[2] as related to women's agency has a particular significance in the present situation. It does not point towards the fulfillment of an objective and static criterion of equality between men and women. Rather, it opens up to the wealth of 'differences' and interlinking changes between men and women in political, relational and social processes across differing economic and cultural contexts.

Unfortunately, women's empowerment "(…) like many other important terms that were coined to represent a clearly political concept, (...) has been 'mainstreamed' in a manner that has virtually robbed it of its original meaning and strategic value" (Batliwala, 2007: 557). The main reason for the theft is that women's empowerment has been seen as a target *only* of women's presence in public institutions, always calculated as a percentage in comparison with men. This has often forced women to comply with the "bureaucratic relations that dominate institutional places and where women are caught in the web, loosing their transformative power" (Porter and Judd, 1999: 11). One could say that women's empowerment, like gender equality,[3] is under threat of being manipulated by development institutions whose technical discourse misrepresents the practices and the experiences of women. Exactly for this reason, I am convinced that professionals who work in development institutions, and especially gender experts, should assume responsibility for preventing commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment from being manipulated. Only by taking up this responsibility can their presence help in transforming current approaches *inside* development institutions and

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[1] Parpart *et al.* (1999) look at the changing role of women in developing countries and call for a new approach to empowerment: an approach that adopts a more nuanced, feminist interpretation of power and em(power)ment, recognises that local empowerment is always embedded in regional, national and global contexts, pays attention to institutional structures and politics and acknowledges that empowerment is both a process and an outcome. Moreover, the authors warn that an obsession with measurement rather than process can undermine efforts to foster transformative and empowering outcomes. It concludes that power must be restored as the centerpiece of empowerment. Only then will the term and its advocates provide meaningful ammunition for dealing with the challenges of an increasingly unequal, and often sexist, global/local world.

[2] Batliwala (1993) defined empowerment as a process of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups, shifting social power in three critical ways: by challenging the ideologies that justify social inequality (such as gender or caste); by changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural and intellectual resources; by transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (such as the family, state, market, education, and media). She argued that ideological and institutional change was critical to sustaining empowerment and real social transformation. Batliwala also emphasised that transformatory empowerment could not be achieved by tackling any one of these elements of social power - even at that early stage, its architects were clear that there was no "one-shot" magic bullet route to women's empowerment, such as providing women access to credit, enhanced incomes, or land-titles.

[3] Bhavnani *et al.* (2003) explain that: "(...) aid agencies and development practitioners tend to use the concept of gender in reductionist ways, failing to grapple with issues of power, conflict, and the larger social, cultural and political contexts that frame women's ability to resist conditions of oppression. Indeed the use of narrow, rigid understanding of gender, despite the seeming focus on the inequality generated within notions of masculinity and femininity can lead to an over-emphasis on structures and institutions at the expenses of seeing the agency of women, an agency that may not just perpetuate inequalities but also challenge them".

produce more effective policies that actually tackle the multiple causes of the current economic situation.

One way to build on "aid effectiveness" could be to look at development as a process of inclusion which offers new players the possibility of expressing their "agency" and of contributing to the public good. This would imply transforming the present approach and may require some examples, so I would like to cite my own experience.

An approach to women's empowerment in the Mediterranean region

I recognize myself in the definition of "femocrat" (Phillips, 1998: 210),[4] being a western feminist who has been working for several years in the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation as a gender advisor. From this "situated" point of view I have been able to analyse the growing internationalization of the Italian women's movement. I think that a first such attempt to explain that process was made with the international seminar "*Women's networking across borders: cooperation, diaspora and migrations between Italy and the Middle East*" held in 2006 in Rome in partnership with the ART Initiative of UNDP, UNIFEM, UNOPS and other UN organizations.

The seminar, whose papers have since been published,[5] was for me the point of arrival of a long journey, begun in the late 1980s by the feminist and women's movement in Italy. Until then, scarce attention had been devoted by Italian women to the critiques of transnational feminist groups raised during the first two UN Conferences on Women (namely in Mexico City and Copenhagen) as well as to the changing context of development.

This attitude of Italian feminism - due to a number of historic and cultural reasons, not least the late formation of the Italian state - nevertheless provided a radical starting point in the national political arena. In the middle of the 1970s, the movement extended its reach, claiming women's right to choose their own sexuality and criticizing patriarchal attitudes inside the family and the whole of Italian society, thus contributing, in a significant way, to transforming the private and public relationships between women and men. The political relevance of the women's movement within the specific context of the Italian public space was constituted by the practice of *autocoscienza*, which indicated a process of discovery of the self - both the self of the individual woman and a collective sense of the self - (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 20) and *sexual difference*, that is, the difference between woman and man, as the basic and universal difference in humankind (Lonzi, 1971). The very features of Italian feminism, however, deeply linked to the Italian cultural and political context, led the feminist vision to be restricted to national borders for a long time, where development and international issues were on the agenda of only a few women, mostly those involved in political parties or trade unions.

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[4] Phillips uses "femocrat" to indicate a sort of representative power of feminism within the institution, whereas my interpretation is the femocrat should be responsible for catalysing the critical point of view of feminism within the bureaucracies.
[5] See Macchi and Zambelli (2007).

The change in the Italian feminist attitude was initiated by the women's pacifist movement in the middle of the 1980s when some Italian women's groups started their activities of cooperation and solidarity in the Mediterranean region, precisely during the first Palestinian Intifada. In 1988 a group of feminist women called "Women Visiting Difficult Places" began to promote dialogues between women living on different sides of the Mediterranean sea. A growing number of Italian women's networks, often organized at local level and supported by local institutions, created and maintained programmes and mutual visits not only to Israel and Palestine but also to Algeria, Former Yugoslavia, Maghreb and Mashreq. The work of these women's networks created an enabling environment for discussing the best practices for the empowerment of women in their societies on an equal footing, starting by asking what all the partners could learn from each other. Many discussions focussed on how women's movements could strategize for change while fighting for their human rights. From this perspective the concept of empowerment as related to women's agency was invested of a particular significance.

The idea of a Mediterranean approach to women's empowerment was raised during the preparatory process to the UN Beijing Conference of 1995 in one of the countless international meetings held in Bologna, where a very active group of women called "Orlando" invited women from Former Yugoslavia, Algeria and Palestine as well as from other Italian cities to discuss new forms of cooperation. The issues raised at these meetings challanged, from a feminist point of view, the very nature of what is called "democracy", which, in Mediterranean countries, is always biased by a male vision. In many cases the discussions raised the need to transform the public space, not just by including women as such, but by questioning the roots of gender relationships in each culture. The aim of the meetings was to find new ways not only to redress the assets of power relationships within institutions but also to transform the dominance of males over females in any context by promoting the "agency" of women. Emphasizing the similarities in the practices of the Italian feminist movement with the women's movement coming from countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa helped in developing these approaches.

In this regard, the question of religious and secular attitudes was examined, as well as the role of women as guardians of community morals, as "carriers of traditions" (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 61). Something that was examined further was the space left for women's individual and collective choices within and across communities, and also women's possibility of negotiating for control over public resources and their own rights. From this perspective it is important to recall that during these meetings in Bologna *transversal politics*[6] was conceptualized as a practice of involving the complementary processes of rooting oneself into her/his own position, standpoint or identity while shifting and achieving empathy towards the other; an approach that takes into account differences while nonetheless emphasizing commonalities (Ray, 2002).

As a consequence of this approach, which was shared by many local groups of women involved with decentralized cooperation (see Carrino, 2005), some development

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[6] The definition "*politica trasversale*" was first used by Elisabetta Donini during one of the meetings in Bologna and translated by Nira Yuval Davis in *transversal politics* (Macchi and Zambelli, 2007: 9).

programmes for the empowerment of women were launched in the Mediterranean region on the basis of the previous experiences of solidarity realized by women's networks in the Maghreb and Palestine. These programmes had a common framework based on what was called the "Mediterranean approach to the empowerment of women" because it dealt with women's experiences as highlighted and acknowledged through the reinforcement of dialogue among and across women's movements and civil society organizations from Northern and Southern Mediterranean borders. The common and main features of these programmes were: to bring to the fore the submerged individual and collective agency of women; to focus on women's economic and political empowerment at local level to enhance individual and collective agency of women in negotiating with local and national institutions; to forge strategic cross-national and inter-regional partnerships among local women's groups from the North and the South so as to respond to regional and global commitments and frameworks for women's rights. This meant a shift in the scope of the institutional development cooperation approach to women's empowerment (Pomeranzi, 2001) and an attempt to transform it on the basis of the experiences and practices of interested groups of women.

How to improve the effectiveness of development policies

The main development and financial institutions are now recognizing that the global economy has deteriorated dramatically in recent months, especially in the developing world where the recession has forced more than 53 million people into extreme poverty, particularly women and children. In the present situation questioning the effectiveness of development policies becomes extremely urgent and requires the capacity to focus on what could produce a real change in responding to the multiple causes of the economic crisis.

I would like to stimulate some reflections on the current state of international cooperation institutions, whereby the achievement of the eight MDGs by 2015 - ranging from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, to providing universal primary education - constitutes the main framework which attained the consensus of all the world's countries and leading development institutions. Today, however, the international community lags far behind in achieving the MDG targets, especially target 3 concerning gender equality and women's empowerment. More than ten years have passed since the Beijing Conference; 185 countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the Millennium Declaration have been adopted. Nonetheless, when it comes to fulfilling promises to advance these goals, women in the UN and in most countries are facing a crisis of implementation. Whereas the interest in fostering gender equality has steadily increased on paper, progress in implementation is affected by continuous under-investment and by the marginalization of women's networks and groups both at national and international level. The scarcity of results tends to put the whole approach to the third MDG at stake, risking transforming it into a tool for the exclusion of the different and critical voices of women, rather than an effective means for their advancement.

Looking at the whole process for the implementation of gender equality and women's empowerment, one could agree with those critiques that underline that "(…)UN strategies and development cooperation activities have been driven, especially in the

years after 9/11 2001, either by the increasing recourse to emergency plans to respond to armed conflicts or by a rigid agenda which introduced global frameworks and externally-induced paradigms as the reference for formulating country development plans, often detached from the organic structural ties with national priorities. In this context, women's rights have become more limited to legal reforms which often result in loosing the original internal homogeneity and genuine dynamism of women's empowerment. This may be a strategy to co-opt women into the international agenda, instead of fostering a responsive relevant local agenda" (Kuttab, 2008: 2).

Launched in 2005 by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Paris Declaration and a host of new aid modalities are reshaping development partnerships.[7] Unfortunately, as commitments to gender equality, women's empowerment and other globally agreed goals are conspicuously absent from these frameworks, their potential to spearhead more equitable partnerships and resource allocations may not be fulfilled. As the architecture that drives development assistance changes, that which supports gender equality and women's empowerment must be strengthened to meet new challenges.

Currently, and under the pressure of the economic crisis, there is a huge amount of work to do in order to radically change the existing approaches, especially at the international level. The aid architecture needs to change, but the ongoing reform of the whole UN system is proceeding too slowly and without challenging the economic paradigm of the Washington Consensus which is considered by many outstanding economists[8] as part of the problem. A priority should be to overcome the overwhelming power of the dominant economic institutions and mechanisms which shape the lives of people without taking into account their capacities and their experiences or the contradictions of current development processes.

In rising to these challenges, women's networking outside and, in a few cases, within institutions can prove to be a powerful ally because in fighting for their economic empowerment women need to demonstrate the multiple links between the economy and those factors - ranging from power relationships within families and communities to those within cultural and governance systems - which shape public life at all levels. Regretfully, however, women's voices are far away from international and national bureaucracies, in whose hands the decision-making power almost exclusively lies.

Development cooperation institutions should try to cross the gap and help in strengthening women's agency to meet the new challenges. For their part, transnational and national women's associations and institutions should assume their responsibilities - and this is particularly true for those who work within these organizations - critiquing international development policies from a gender-based perspective in dialogue with UN institutions and bureaucracies. Only then, could a new approach to women's rights

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[7] The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness emerged from the meeting in Paris in 2005 and was followed, in 2008, by the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra, Ghana, which reinforced the idea of partnerships with civil society and is considered the main text for next ODA bilateral policies.
[8] See for example Joseph Stiglitz, Jean Paul Fitoussi and Paul Krugman.

become an important topic of the UN Reform and return to being a priority for development.

A timely opportunity is offered by the 15th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action which will be celebrated during the next meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2010. The political climate is ripe because of the renewed multilateralism which the US Government seems to be adopting. The ongoing debate for a new UN gender entity, instead of being restricted to a lobby of interested professionals, could provide the opportunity to launch a debate on how to promote more effective policies, those most pertinent to the experiences of women and which do not misrepresent the concept of women's empowerment. Such policies could contribute to resolving the development crisis at the root of the present economic and political one.

I truly hope transnational networks of women will find their place in the preparatory process to strongly put forward the tensions between the present institutional "gender equality paradigm" and the different forms of women's agency which have been experienced in many places, such as by Mediterranean women's and feminist groups.

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