

DECENTRALIZATION, LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: INNOVATING KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

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The relationship amongst decentralization reforms, local development processes and women's empowerment is the main theme of this issue of *Universitas Forum*. In launching the call for experiences that led to most of the case studies published here, we were interested in understanding, from the perspective of the women and men directly engaged in such processes in their countries, whether and how, they actually contributed to empowering women socially, economically and politically and if they created new or better opportunities for women to be agents of positive change in their communities. We were also interested in identifying innovative practices, tools, methods and approaches that could facilitate this, and the role of intermediaries and allies such as international networks and cooperation agencies, research institutes and universities.

The articles, videos and radio broadcast included in the "In Practice" section speak for themselves, and to a large extent, do so directly through the voices of the women and men whose experiences they illustrate. The round table discussion with members of the editorial advisory board and contributions to the viewpoint section offer a vision from a different angle: these voices are those of international donors, senior officers in UN agencies, international networks, international research institutes and academics, all engaged in women's empowerment and development issues at the international level. What common themes and answers emerge from these different perspectives?

Decentralization and women's empowerment

Decentralization should be understood as the transfer from centrally-held authority (decision-making and resources) to a local level of government, implying an increased autonomy and capacity to determine policy and use of resources at that level. Decentralization reforms are promoted as a means of deepening democracy, improving the quality and effectiveness of the development process and enhancing citizens' participation in governance mechanisms and development processes that affect their lives (Cos-Montiel, 2009).

Empowerment "refers to gaining or recovering one's own power or giving power to someone else (...). Empowerment in any sense that really matters must result in a substantive transfer of resources" (Mendell, 2010). Empowerment is also defined as a process of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups, shifting social power 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

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reinforce and sustain existing power structures (such as the family, state, market, education, and media) (Batliwala, 1993). Key UN Conferences of the 1990s defined women's empowerment as having five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

In many countries, decentralization reforms have granted local institutions more autonomy and responsibility in several areas such as health, education and local economic development. They have opened new institutional spaces for citizen consultation and participation regarding priorities for local planning and resource allocation. Yet much academic and policy research to date has concluded that decentralization has had only marginal, if any, positive impact on women, both in terms of protecting and promoting their rights and of empowering them, socially, politically and economically. In part, this conclusion is based on the recognition that governance mechanisms at local level do not, *in and of themselves*, significantly modify existing power relations, because “competing interests for power and resources at the local government level operate in ways that exclude women. Formal and informal systems [such as traditional leadership] and relationships cut across local governance, limiting the space for women’s participation and for taking up issues important to them” (Cos-Montiel, 2006). As Cos-Montiel rightly implies, without putting in place democratic practices and spaces at the local level, empowering processes remain an unfulfilled promise.

This is not necessarily a linear process, however, and the experiences of women from Africa, Asia and Latin America recounted in this issue of *Universitas Forum* seem to confirm this. They show how women are seizing the opportunities offered by decentralization reforms in important ways. They speak of women’s work, as farmers, caregivers within and outside their families, producers and vendors of traditional medicines, entrepreneurs, paralegal practitioners, community workers and organizers. Their work is having an important impact on the well-being and security of their families and local communities. It is guaranteeing agricultural diversity and nutritional security, protecting natural resources, generating livelihoods and savings to be invested, and preserving traditional knowledge.

Through their work, these women - often very poor and marginalized women - are organizing collectively through farmer’s groups, organic community gardens, self-help groups, service centres for women entrepreneurs, savings and credit schemes or “tontines”, and through local networks and associations. In these ways, women’s leadership and solidarity are mobilized. These women increasingly occupy the institutional spaces at local and intermediate levels that have been created as part of the architecture of decentralization reforms, and are acquiring the skills, the confidence and capacities to do so effectively. They are using that space to voice their collective needs, building alliances with the men of their families and communities, gaining their respect and being elected to local councils to represent the interests of the community at large. In occupying these new spaces, in many cases they are also transforming them.

Of course there are still many obstacles: in rural areas, lack of access to land is a major impediment to women, both in terms of their rights and livelihoods; lack of access to

credit, technology, infrastructures, technical assistance and other needed instruments limit many women from fully developing the economic potential of their work and from having a deeper impact on local development indicators; difficulties in accessing opportunities for education, training and capacity building limit their full expression of personal and economic potential. Women's often triple work load, especially in rural communities, makes it difficult to find the time to travel distances to attend meetings or workshops and risk losing a day's income; because of language and literacy barriers, many women in rural areas are not able to read the material necessary to prepare for meetings; they face stereotypes, hostility, harassment and even violence, including sexual violence. Violence, in fact, is a gross abuse of women's human rights and hampers women's full enjoyment of citizenship and the ability to express their agency.

Women as agents of local economic development

From West to East entrepreneurs, practitioners of traditional medicine, farmers and many other key occupations in society are declined in the male gender. If we consider the cases presented here, however, we see that women not only take on productive and reproductive roles in their communities, but also widely contribute to local economic development, acting simultaneously to promote economic and social wellbeing and political change. Women's work not only generates livelihoods for their families and economic development for their communities, but also systems that are more respectful of and in harmony with traditional knowledge, local cultures, ecosystems and biodiversity.

Experiences such as those of the Service Centres for Women Entrepreneurs (CSEM) in Honduras, women farmers and producers of community gardens in India, women producers of traditional medicines in Mali and the savings and credit groups in South Africa show us that women simultaneously exert their agency in spaces that are traditionally separated, but that in women's lives are intertwined: the private realm of household and family, the public political arena, where they are lobbying and advocating for policies, the market, where women fully transact with men, even if from a disadvantaged starting point.

There are concrete means to facilitate women's economic empowerment and agency. The first step remains formal recognition of women as economic actors, as farmers, businesswomen and in general, agents of human development and change. Without this fundamental first step, women's economic contribution remains invisible, relegated to the informal economy and without the possibility of formal association, access to technologies, credit, infrastructure, training and last but not least, to better and fairer markets. The cases also illustrate that unequal access to endowments, especially land and formal property rights, is a further and fundamental obstacle to be overcome.

There is an increased demand for systematic and sustainable services at the local level, by women in particular. Local Economic Development Agencies (LEDAs) offer high quality services tailored to women's needs, be they training, credit, access to fairer markets, infrastructures, personal empowerment or facilitating the creation of associations. The example of a Women's Business Service Centre (CSEM), linked to the LEDA in Valle, Honduras, is a case in point. Women passionately respond to the challenge of scaling up their businesses and opening to the outside world. They take part in workshops, study tours and fairs to increase their social and human capital and they value collective participation

in savings or self-help groups. The cases illustrate that often with few, but well-directed resources these obstacles are rapidly overcome and material and immaterial benefits for women and their communities clearly perceived. The South African experience sheds light on the importance of abating stereotypes on women's economic agency: economics happens not only in the market; it starts with household economic management and has much to do with human relations. Empowering women on how to negotiate, use their money and savings and prioritize investment, whether in education, health or production, helps them apply invaluable coping strategies that save them from becoming trapped in poverty and deeper exclusion.

Recognizing women's agency is particularly important in undermining the discourse on women as victims, vulnerable groups and in need of external help, particularly from men. But if economic development can promote women's agency by improving the conditions that allow that agency to be exercised - such as higher incomes, greater access to services, and expanded infrastructure - it cannot happen without political empowerment and the transformation of written and unwritten social norms.

Innovating practice

The many tools and practices illustrated in these experiences have been designed to respond to the obstacles mentioned earlier, that women face. Often, these practices are drawn from other similar experiences, but in the process of contextualizing and adapting them they are innovated in important ways, introducing new methods, ideas or approaches.

The practices that have been used by women to take advantage of and contribute to the opportunities offered by decentralization and local development, are numerous and would merit a more in-depth analysis than is possible here. Several refer to tools for democratic practices such as gender budgeting and engendering planning processes and include the introduction of such practices at the local level in Kerala, Mozambique and Guatemala, of women's engagement in urban planning in "Women Plan Toronto" and the participation of women's associations such as REDMUCH in the departmental development councils in Guatemala. They encompass the use of women's safety audits to map issues that affect women's sense of safety in their homes, workplaces and in public spaces, and to advocate for policy and practical solutions. Women's safety audits, pioneered in Toronto, have been adapted to a very different urban reality in Guatemala City and Livingston, on the Caribbean Coast. Mapping was also used in Central America to bring to light the network of women's informal and invisible economic activity, and foster the creation of associations that advocate their needs, generate value chains and impact on policy. Here, the support of local universities with knowledge of geographical information system (GIS) software, was central.

Others have introduced elements of innovation to improve women's access to the formal economy. Enhancing women's traditional knowledge permitted women vendors of medicinal plants in Mali to challenge the hegemony of male traditional practitioners and guarantee the preservation of this knowledge from generation to generation. By introducing a simple infrastructure, such as a kiosk in the market, not only were working conditions for these women improved but their status as businesswomen consolidated, their revenues augmented and the quality of the plants sold to their clients, and thus their health, improved. Another important example is the creation of women's business service centres

(CSEM) in Central America. These have built on existing LEDAs, but have tailored those services to the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. Recognizing that the vast majority of credit applications made to the LEDA were coming from women, but that the amounts requested were generally much smaller than those requested by men, led to the detailed mapping of women's businesses, mostly informal activities run out of their homes. In Honduras, the collaboration between the LEDA of Valle and the University of Zamorano, was seminal in putting in place a multisectoral approach to strengthening women's entrepreneurship. This included an analysis of existing and potential value chains and bottlenecks and finally, the proposal to provide women entrepreneurs with concrete high-quality services such as training, access to credit and, importantly, opportunities to build self-esteem and learn about rights to fully participate in governance at the local level. This resulted in personal empowerment and scaling up of women's businesses: from running successful hostels in areas with tourist potential to organic agriculture, traditional art and crafts production and more.

Still other approaches have addressed women's role as farmers. Women's group farming experiences in Kerala and Maharashtra, India, to give another example, have further developed the experience of self-help groups by creating neighbourhood groups that are systematically linked to local government institutions, innovating this practice that is common to many countries in Asia and Africa. Community gardens in Tamil Nadu, India, have built on the widespread practice of having backyard gardens, but have innovated this practice by introducing and reviving indigenous vegetables that have contributed to conserving biodiversity and also to the nutritional, financial and health security of the women farmers involved, their families and communities.

A common thread throughout the experiences contained in this issue is collaborative work between researchers and poor rural communities, and this 'contamination' of knowledges has led to many of the innovations already mentioned. The cases from Mali and Chile are particularly significant from this point of view. Describing forms of participatory learning and research, in one case related to seeds, and in the other related to a new training model, we see how this contamination has not only innovated development practices; it has also generated innovations within the universities themselves.

Knowledge, research and the role of universities

Knowledge is central to empowerment, and this theme is treated from different angles in many of the case studies. Women's knowledge, and that of poor rural women in particular, is often not acknowledged as such, and as part of the processes to strengthen women's personal, economic and political empowerment, much effort has been made to help existing knowledge emerge and gain legitimacy, especially at the local level. This, in turn, has produced concrete benefits for the women involved and for their communities. Women's knowledge about traditional plants and indigenous vegetables are just two examples among many.

In galvanizing this local knowledge, research has played a fundamental role. Not only have researchers documented and analyzed existing processes, they have been directly engaged with rural communities in conceptualizing and accompanying new initiatives, and in the process have contributed to innovations that have produced positive benefits in many ways. This has required adopting methods such as partnership research, participatory

action research, participatory mapping, and others that give equal dignity to the many different kinds of knowledge and the ways they are transmitted, beyond the written word. This co-construction of knowledge is an important tool of empowerment and it has generated significant policy and social innovation.

This also implies renewing the role of universities, and the cases from Mali and Chile offer some examples of this. Universities have an important scientific and *political* role to play in uncovering and legitimizing the knowledge embedded in local communities and in helping them to transmit this knowledge outwards and upwards into national and international policy arenas. This requires, amongst other things, reconsidering traditional approaches to scholarly research and intellectual property. Universities also have an opportunity to take up this new knowledge and incorporate it into innovative teaching and capacity building that respond to felt needs of local communities, as in the experiences already mentioned and many others.

International cooperation and networks

In the experiences published here, international cooperation actors – donors and international NGOs – play a leading part in only a few cases. This was not a conscious editorial policy, and testifies to the richness and pervasiveness of endogenous processes that are thriving with the support of local and national institutions, amongst which universities, research centres and NGOs play an incisive role.

So what, then, is the added value of international cooperation? An obvious answer is the additional resources donors bring to bear on national and local processes in contexts where such resources are very scarce and priorities are given to sectoral issues such as health, education and infrastructure development. However, donor interest in local development and women's empowerment, although increasing, remains marginal.

Still, several opportunities emerge and could be seized. First, international cooperation is an opportunity to experiment new approaches, as is illustrated in the experience of GELD in Mozambique and the projects associated with the MyDEL programme in Central America. If used strategically, international cooperation can open new doors and stimulate innovative ways of doing things. But doing so successfully appears to depend on the capacity to identify and build on promising local processes and accompany them with technical and other support over an extended period of time. This has certainly been the case in Central America, where the CSEMs and LEDAs in which they are integrated, began their history with the peace process in the late 1980s and continue today. If international cooperation is to lead to significant policy innovation, it must recognize, mentor and support the facilitating role of local and national institutions. Amongst these are universities, research centres and, importantly, national government institutions.

Another important opportunity comes from international networks. Many experiences, such as the Groots experience in Kenya, the experiences in Uganda, the LEDAs and CSEM in Central America to name some, are part of national, regional and international networks. These networks facilitate peer learning and dialogue, exchanges of experiences, practices and instruments beyond providing opportunities to bring local experiences and lessons into the policy arena at international level.

Closely linked to this networking is the role of south-south cooperation, often facilitated strategically and practically by international research centres, universities and decentralized cooperation. South-south and triangular cooperation is generating networks where innovative practices, tools and technologies are exchanged, lessons are shared and long-term practical and knowledge alliances are established and nurtured.

We hope that this issue offers some new perspectives on this important debate and look forward to continuing the dialogue!

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