



TOPIC 2

Governance reforms

- opportunity & challenge for gender equality & women's rights

Introduction

Most developing countries are currently in a process of establishing and consolidating governance systems with elected governance structures at both the national and decentralised levels. This creates new opportunities for integrating gender concerns into local level policies and planning, just as it creates opportunities for getting more women involved in defining local policies, plans and budgets. Active involvement of local interest groups and community-based organisations (CBO's) as counterparts and/or watchdogs towards local government is often referred to as a viable path for ensuring local accountability and due account taking of the interests of marginal and weak groups in the local community.

This optimistic perspective on the potentials for integrating gender concerns in local governance is met, though, by harsh realities: gender discriminatory institutions and norms, resistance to change, and governance reforms that repeatedly overlook gender concerns. The local governments currently in place in developing countries are mostly very weak in terms of both financial resources and human resources and skills. Women themselves may be weakly organised, poorly represented in community-based organisations and/or may simply not have the time to participate. Many Mayors and Municipal Counsellors are illiterate, and local government administrations are poorly equipped with staff and administrative tools. Likewise, community-based organisations in general, and organisations representing the interests of local poor women in particular, are similarly weak in both human and material resources. Moreover, the lack of willingness to address gender issues in local level policies and in governance risk to result in drawbacks on gender equality and further exclusion of women.

Questions

- What are the real possibilities for local governance structures and planning processes to take up the challenge of putting gender balanced development high on the agenda? To what degree does capacity vs. social norms and practices play a role? Are the current institutional frameworks adequate for channelling gender equality and women's rights concerns?
- What are the pitfalls and challenges when wanting to promote gender equality and women's rights in processes of decentralisation?
- How do national developments influence the promotion of gender equality and women's rights within local governance structures and by local government officials?
- How can one best support capacity building of local government officials in being responsive and accountable for gender equality and women's rights?
- How can one support the active involvement of local interest groups and community-based organisations as counterparts and/or watchdogs towards local government on gender equality and women's rights concerns? What limitations do they face or have?
- What are the lessons learned from integrating gender concerns into local level planning and what tools and approaches have proved effective? In particular, how can gender and gender rights concerns be better integrated into budgetary prioritisation and monitoring?
- How do the former power structures vis-à-vis the new powers influence local level planning for gender equality? How were gender considerations made by the former power structures and what is the influence hereof on the new powers?