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2006-11-20

Paper presented to Conference on the Place of Participation in a democratising South Africa, IFAS, HSRC and CUBES, Wits, 20-21st November, 2006.

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/11648

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Decentralising voice: women's participation in Integrated Development Planning processes in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Paper presented to Conference on the Place of Participation in a democratising South Africa, IFAS, HSRC and CUBES, Wits, 20-21st November, 2006.

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Introduction

The appeal of decentralisation is based on the belief that it will foster participatory democracy, introduce more responsive service delivery and advance the rights of citizens. It is also assumed that decentralisation processes will promote gender equity and benefit women. International experience, however, has begun to show that social transformation does not necessarily follow decentralisation processes, and that the increased autonomy enjoyed by local government can roll back advances secured by national government as local elites entrench their power in ways that exclude and disempower marginalised and vulnerable groups. Against a backdrop of ambivalent evidence feminist scholars have cautioned against an uncritical acceptance of the supposed benefits of decentralisation for women.

In the context of debate about the impacts of decentralisation process on women this paper considers whether decentralised planning processes in South Africa have expanded the space for women's participation in municipal governance and have the potential to transform gender relations. This paper presents findings from recent research that investigates the impacts of Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) on women in KwaZulu-Natal. Fieldwork has been conducted in three types of municipalities. eThekwini Municipality is a metropolitan area with extensive IDP capacity and expertise, and considerable resources at its disposal. Hibiscus Coast Municipality comprises several small and medium towns surrounded by peri-urban settlements and rural areas. Its IDP capacity is relatively limited, but stronger than many other municipalities. Msinga Municipality is located within an isolated rural area, characterised by traditional political structures and conservative cultural practices. It has extremely limited resources and weak IDP capacity. In each municipality, interviews and focus group discussions were held with municipal officials and councillors, and representatives from women's civil society organisations.

This paper comprises three parts. The first part reviews recent literature on decentralisation, IDPs and participation through a gender lens. The second part outlines experiences of participation in IDP processes in the three municipalities, focusing on the way in which these processes involved women, and the perspectives of women councillors, women's organisations, and the wives of traditional leaders. The final part provides concluding comments that consider these findings in the light of current debate on decentralisation's gendered impacts and the extent to which IDPs accommodate the voices of marginalised women. The findings indicate that in the three municipalities IDP planning processes have increased the space for women's participation in municipal governance. Women are becoming more active, and many

of them are actively seeking opportunities to address issues in whatever ways are available to them. Through the catalyst of the IDP participatory processes, historically unequal gender relations are being affected, suggesting some scope for social transformation. Many of these spaces for women's involvement, such as representation on council and ward committees and participation in public meetings, are determined by national guidelines, which establish the conditions for the way in which decentralisation is practiced. In other words, IDP processes appear to take the form of 'decentralised centralism', serving to carve out spaces for women's involvement that local elites and traditional systems cannot simply ignore.

Part I
Decentralisation and gender

Since the 1990s decentralisation has been regarded as a cornerstone of good governance. Proponents have argued that decentralisation improves efficiency and transparency, deepens democracy, promotes equitable development and creates more responsive local government. It promises a closer fit between the needs and aspirations of citizens and the services and support of government, and fosters opportunities for participatory democracy and local empowerment. Decentralisation is expected to benefit women, by creating greater opportunities for women to express their views and exert influence in decision-making at the local level. By extension it is assumed that decentralisation processes will catalyse women's empowerment and promote gender equity.

However, with little empirical evidence to support these expected outcomes of decentralisation processes, commentators have argued that there are no convincing reasons why localised forms of government should be more just, equitable and inclusive than centralised forms. Feminist scholars have raised concerns about the unequivocal ability of decentralisation processes to contribute positively to the enhancement of women's rights and interests (Beall 2005). Evidence suggests that the local level is often characterised by more unequal gender relations than at the national level. Patriarchal cultural systems and masculine constructs of political authority are often dominant at the local level, strongly influencing the nature of institutions and closely defended by local elites. These systems tend to offer little or no space for women's authority and agency, and by making it difficult for women to participate or raise controversial gender issues, they serve to exclude or minimise the effective participation of women in development processes (Mukhopadhyay 2005). In allowing these systems to continue unchecked the effect of decentralisation may be to entrench and reinvigorate existing patriarchal institutions and local elites, making it unlikely that resources, institutions and sources of power become more accessible to women. Thus, many feminist scholars and other commentators would hesitate to advocate decentralisation unconditionally as the panacea to promote social justice and the empowerment of marginalised groups.

In order to counteract the unintended outcomes of decentralisation, it has been suggested that special measures need to be taken by government to ensure that women participate in municipal processes. These could include provisions to encourage women's participation in public meetings and council committees, facilitate caucusing on matters of importance to women, earmark funds for them to allocate, build the capacity of women councillors, and ensure that local accountability mechanisms are geared to answer to women (Mukhopadhyay 2005, Goetz and Hassim 2002). Social

transformation is not only dependent upon the policy commitments and actions of political parties and government institutions, but also the pressure brought to bear on them by organised civil society (Mukhopadhyay 2005). Thus, a strong and autonomous women's movement is regarded as a necessary condition for effectively pursuing gender equity interests. Despite the achievements of the Women's National Coalition in the early 1990s, a powerful women's movement no longer exists in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead, women's organisations are fragmented into three types of associations - national policy advocates, networks and coalitions, and community based organisations – but linkages between them are very limited (Hassim 2004, Goetz and Hassim 2002). Least visible but most numerous are community based organisations (CBOs). A major part of their work is concerned with women's practical needs, particularly related to health, welfare, care of dependents and income-generating activities, and as such rooted strongly in a maternal tradition of household and neighbourhood responsibility. As such, they are not usually explicitly feminist in orientation and as they are weakly associated with national women's organisations and networks, they also appear to be adrift from any politically cohesive project (Hassim 2004). They are also largely isolated from local government and thus they are generally unable to access resources and influence decision-making. To a large extent, their isolation is due to their members' lack of time, expertise and resources to engage with other organisations and structures, but it also reflects their lack of knowledge of these institutions and the opportunities that they can offer.

IDPs and participation

Recent studies have suggested the progressive potential of Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) in galvanising processes of participatory democracy in South Africa (Adam and Oranje 2002, Harrison 2005, DPLG 2005) and creating new spaces for women to voice issues of concern to them and to contribute to processes of planning and decision-making (McEwan 2004).

National legislation requires that municipalities prepare, implement and monitor IDPs. They are five year plans which are designed to give strategic direction and content to guide municipal operations in fulfilment of their developmental mandate. The first round of IDPs was prepared in 2002, and each year their performance has been reviewed. IDPs represent a key feature in South Africa's decentralisation processes, functioning as a starting point to co-ordinate and align public sector resources and programmes within the emerging system of inter-governmental planning (Harrison 2003). Through their IDPs municipalities are expected to implement national and provincial policies, guidelines and programmes in a manner that reflects local priorities and responds to local needs. The notion of 'decentralised centralism' captures the process of top-down direction for bottom-up implementation that embodies IDPs (Harrison 2005).

IDPs are designed as participatory planning processes, facilitating and encouraging the involvement of all stakeholders to ensure faster and more appropriate delivery of services, and to allow for local processes of democratisation, empowerment and social transformation (DPLG 2001b). The IDP Guide Packs advise that participation should be undertaken as a structured and institutionalised process, involving ward committees, registered stakeholder associations, advocates for unorganised groups, and municipal structures such as the IDP Representative Forum and IDP committees, who should become involved at specific planning phases, such as needs analysis,

project planning, and ultimately approval. In other words, the IDP participatory process invites specific groups of people to participate in a premeditated process, or 'officialised spaces' (McEwan 2004).

Existing power relations, such as the dominance of local elites, the weakness of women's organisations and the subordinate position of women in the public sphere are likely to thwart the intentions of inclusive participation. These power relations have been anticipated and municipalities are tasked with giving active encouragement to social groups which are not well organised and which do not have the power to articulate their interests publicly, notably women and poverty groups (DPLG 2001b). Municipalities are thus required to challenge existing power relations, specifically gender relations, and facilitate social transformation by playing an interventionist role in drawing otherwise excluded and disempowered women into the planning process. IDPs can be seen to offer new spaces of citizen participation, and with it the potential to open up new possibilities for voice, influence, responsiveness and accountability (McEwan 2004).

An initial assessment of the IDPs found that one of the most valuable outcomes of the IDP process was that it achieved more public participation in municipal planning than ever before, and that people in general were satisfied about their involvement with the IDP (Harrison 2003). Another assessment concluded that municipalities have grasped the importance of community participation and that great strides have been achieved in deepening democracy and participatory development at the local level (DPLG 2005). However, there are concerns that the IDP participatory process risks becoming an officialising strategy, used to tame participation and deflect attention away from other forms of citizen action (McEwan 2004).

The legislation and guidelines appear to emphasise the importance of establishing governance structures and institutional procedures to facilitate communication between municipalities and citizens. By focusing on institutionalising participation, IDP processes have become heavily reliant on formal, municipality-initiated structures and mechanisms (i.e., Council committees, ward committees, IDP Steering Committees, *izimbizo*). This has had the effect of entrenching processes that are not primarily concerned with capacitating civil society to engage in participatory democratic processes. An underlying assumption is that once decentralised institutions have been established, then participation and empowerment of marginalised groups will automatically follow. Associated with this is a technocratic rationalism that is eager to keep decision-making insulated from the messy world of politics and to keep democracy in check (Mukhopadhyay 2005).

The initial assessment urged that participatory processes move beyond the discourse of consultation and participation towards a conception of the IDP as an instrument for the mobilisation of civil society (Harrison 2003). Despite this appeal, community participation remains a token process in some municipalities, and the voice of civil society is conspicuous by its absence (DPLG 2005). While officials and councillors recognise the importance of participation, their commitment to it is usually reduced to fulfilling minimum statutory requirements.

South Africa is generally characterised by its lack of strong civil society structures. IDPs, like other decentralisation processes, often overlook the fragmentation and

disorganisation within civil society, assuming levels of organisation and capacity that do not exist. Thus, the voices that are heard are often not representative of all interests, especially those of the marginalised or disempowered. Further, elites in control of local government are often more overtly and defensively patriarchal than at national levels, with obvious consequences for women's participation (Goetz and Hassim 2002).

Simply creating new spaces, inviting people to meetings and collecting voices is not sufficient to empower citizens or bring about greater participation in – and commitment to – municipal planning, decision-making and resource allocation (McEwan 2004). Participation should be regarded as an end in itself in deepening South Africa's democracy and empowering its citizens. For this to be achieved, sustained commitment is required from both the government and civil society. On the one hand, this implies increased levels of organisation, capacity and political engagement among civil society. On the other hand, it requires that government provides information, assists with capacity building, creates spaces for participation, especially for marginalised groups, and is committed to actively engaging with civil society in both 'officialised' and non-institutionalised spaces.

Part II

This section summarises the experiences of women in the three municipalities. First, it outlines the way in which IDP participatory processes have involved women, highlighting the way in which they have been drawn into the process, how they have participated, and the extent to which their voices have been heard. Secondly, it explores the nature of women's organisations and the extent to which they have the capacity and strength to become involved with municipal processes. Thirdly, it examines whether women councillors represent the interests of their women constituents, and the extent of their influence in council structures. Finally, the section explores the experiences of the wives of traditional leaders, and the space that they have to articulate and act upon women's interests.

Women's involvement in IDP participatory processes

The institutionalised arenas or 'officialised spaces' for participation in the IDP process fall into two broad categories: public meetings (community meetings and large-scale public events) and committee meetings for representatives of organisations (IDP Representative Forum and ward committee meetings). In all three municipalities, women have not been invited to participate in IDP processes as a distinct constituency. Public meetings rely on attendance through broad-based invitations, and municipalities use the local media and loudhailers to broadcast the dates, times and venues of their meetings. For its large-scale events, the eThekwini municipality extended invitations to umbrella non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and relied on them to select appropriate organisations to attend the public meetings. This technique attracted several welfare organisations, but generally most women's NGOs did not attend. In contrast, community meetings attracted many women's CBOs. In Hibiscus Coast formal invitations were not extended to organised business or civil society organisations, resulting in very limited engagement by these organisations in the IDP process.

Women's attendance at public meetings has been noteworthy in all municipalities. In eThekwini and Hibiscus Coast women were often in the majority at community

meetings. In Msinga many women have made the effort to attend IDP meetings, despite being strongly discouraged because of the IDP's perceived party political associations. Their participation in the IDP process is strongly linked to their recognition of the opportunities it presents for accessing services and resources for household and community development. While gender issues have not been discussed explicitly at workshops, women are increasingly raising issues that affect them directly, such as infrastructure provision, social services, women and children's safety and HIV/AIDS. In themselves, these issues do not challenge gender stereotypes, but they do hint that women have some awareness of the unequal gender relations that underpin their domestic circumstances.

Women are increasingly contributing to discussions in the public realm, and they are often willing and vocal participants in community meetings. In rural areas in Hibiscus Coast, older women are more vocal than the youth, and they raise issues and lead discussion, whereas in the urban areas, a smaller proportion of women attend and older men dominate discussion. However, patriarchal cultural values persist, and women often find it difficult to express their views. Even in eThekwini, women still need to be encouraged to talk, and usually women's voices are not as strong as those of men. In Msinga traditional protocols remain very strong, and women are not expected to express their opinions unless they are asked specifically to do so. As a result, they are reluctant to express their opinions, and rely on other people to raise their concerns as a sign of respect to the male leadership. However, there are indications that this situation is changing. Younger women are beginning to engage around issues that affect and could benefit them, and there is evidence that they are prepared to contribute to discussion, unlike older women. In a context of often extremely conservative cultural norms and limited spaces for voice, giving expression to their needs marks significant progress for women.

Women have been far less visible in committee meetings. Generally, IDP Representative Forum meetings have a desultory record, with very limited participation by civil society representatives, their narrow scope of discussed issues, and high levels of discontinuity. In Hibiscus Coast, there has been little involvement by women or women's organisations in these meetings, and in Msinga, very few women attended these meetings. It would appear that there has never been discussion on gender-specific issues within these meetings.

Additional participatory mechanisms are emerging in municipalities, and they appear to foster more inclusive forms of governance and may function to increase the spaces for women's voice. In Msinga the primary mechanism for participatory governance is the *isixaxambiji*, which functions as a monthly stakeholder forum involving the municipality, provincial departments, traditional leaders and NGOs. Department and NGO representatives are often women, and they sometimes raise women's issues and call for the involvement of women. However, there are no gender-specific issues on the agenda, and often development issues are discussed in a gender-neutral manner. In eThekwini community-based planning processes have included efforts to organise participants into interest groups, such as women, youth and single parents, and they have had the opportunity to raise their specific needs and contribute to the preparation of a locally-based plan. Generally, however, development issues and strategies have been presented as affecting both men and women equally, and include skills

development, sustainable job creation, safety and security, improved health and a sustainable environment.

These community-based initiatives appear to be designed to complement the IDP process and deepen participatory governance. It should be a straightforward conclusion that these initiatives alongside IDP processes serve to confirm commitment to participatory governance and deepen its practice. However, in all municipalities the IDP participatory processes have become abridged over the last couple of years. Extensive and well-intentioned processes have been reduced to exercises in legislative compliance or opportunities for political mileage. Interactive and in-depth discussions have often replaced by more easily organised public events, and they tend to be dominated by presentations of technocratic information, and allow little opportunity for meaningful discussion. eThekwini NGOs argue that the public events do not give people the opportunity to express their views, people are not empowered to participate, and facilitators do not adequately capture people's contributions. They assert that civil society is simply required to endorse municipal resolutions, and that the IDP participatory process provide neither sufficient opportunities for NGOs to submit constructive input, nor genuine attempts to report-back to them after these workshops. For many the minimal participation techniques used in the IDP process demonstrates that the municipality is only interested in complying with national requirements rather than actively involving civil society in the development process.

In spite of the concerns that women have raised in meetings, their needs are often not incorporated into the IDP or addressed in its implementation because other issues claim higher priority. eThekwini officials admit that the outcomes of workshops are not reflected in the IDP itself, and it would appear that women's voices are ignored. In Msinga women's needs are often not addressed because government departments and the municipality are pursuing other priorities with limited resources. Women often request interventions that tend to have limited visibility and political value, such as crèches and safety improvements. By contrast, men call for the construction of roads and taxi ranks, and these are often addressed the projects that receive approval. Civil society organisations have commented on the apparent irrelevance of consultation process in the face of excessive politicisation of development processes. Resource allocation is perceived to be politically determined and civil society organisations despair at councillors' dismissal of urgent community needs in favour of party politics. Women's interests can be subordinated to men's interests or political opportunism, and in both instances, the influence of local elites and patriarchal systems is evident.

Women's organisations

In all the municipalities women's organisations comprise some NGOs and numerous CBOs. NGOs are usually more capacitated and articulate than CBOs. They typically provide women with practical support, with particular focus on accessing social grants, and addressing the impacts of HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence. As NGOs tend to be based in urban areas, their activity is limited in rural areas. In Hibiscus Coast there are several long established social welfare and faith-based NGOs. Many of the eThekwini NGOs operate beyond the municipal boundaries, and have provincial, national and international agendas. There are only a few NGOs active in Msinga, and they are closely linked to the provincial Department of Social Welfare

or local churches. While few NGOs admit to a feminist consciousness, they understand the impact of unequal gender relations and to a greater or lesser extent they are working towards improving the situation of women.

There is a plethora of women's CBOs in all municipalities. None of them are organised specifically along gender lines, but most of them have been formed to address the needs of poor women. The CBOs are typically small-scale groupings, which are mainly involved in care (crèches, HIV/AIDS, elderly), savings (burial societies and *stokvels*) and income-generation (baking, block-making, farming, sewing, poultry and beadwork). However, the impacts of their efforts are weakened by their tendency to operate in isolation from one another and without linkages to support structures. They are further hampered by their lack of capacity and resources. Despite some apparent awareness of unequal gender relations among some women in these organisations, they do not exhibit any explicit feminist content. Because these small-scale activities are regarded as extensions of their traditional domestic roles, they neither threaten men's positions nor have much consequence or value for them.

The experience in Msinga and the traditional areas in the other municipalities is one of low levels of organisation and activity around women's issues. Several factors account for this situation include the highly conservative and dominant cultural systems, the preponderance of female-headed households and the deep impact of poverty. In combination these factors exert a powerful disincentive to collective organisation around women's issues. While poverty and excessive household demands reduce the time and the resources that women have at their disposal for community activities, the ideological burden of subordination and inferiority engendered by the patriarchal value system has a profound impact on women's perceptions of their rights, entitlements and the opportunities available to them to realise them. Culturally, women are treated as children. Their responsibilities lie within the domestic sphere, in caring for their husband and children, and attending to household duties. Men are involved in the public sphere, and they are responsible for making decisions relating to the community at large and women are expected to follow them. Women appear reluctant to assume leadership positions and there is little evidence to suggest that women are actively struggling for increased power and autonomy. Educated and professional women usually do not subscribe to this cultural ideology, and are able to give expression to their opinions and voice women's issues. However, there are very few women in this position, and visible gender champions have not emerged in traditional areas.

Despite some activity, civil society is generally weakly organised in all municipalities. While individual organisations have been established and they network with one another to some extent, women's organisations have not cohered at any strategic level. They do not engage with each other around gender-specific issues, and they have not come together to form a unified sector or constituency, or to formulate their agendas for engagement with other structures. Instead of focusing on a central unifying cause, women's organisations in the municipalities have reflected the tendency throughout the country to focus on specific issues or to address locally-specific problems experienced by women. Thus, women's organisations are disorganised and fragmented, with few co-ordinating mechanisms and no collective voice. Despite being numerous, women's organisations have become largely invisible.

Women's organisations are not only isolated from one another, but they are also poorly linked to municipal structures. The relationship between NGOs and local government is sporadic and distant, and there are few areas in which they have constructive working relationships despite the apparent overlap of aims and interests. On the one hand, this is a result of their distrust for the motives, political agendas and *modus operandi* of each another. They both claim that they are the true representatives of the people, and they each work towards undermining the efforts of the other. In eThekwini and Hibiscus Coast, the degree of alienation is high, and NGOs feel bitter and disillusioned with the limited support and partial engagement permitted by municipalities. On the other hand, this situation may have arisen because many of the interests of poor, marginalised women that NGOs represent fall beyond the mandate of local government. Instead, the NGOs engage directly with provincial and national departments, which have been specifically tasked with the responsibility of addressing these interests. These include identity documents (Department of Home Affairs), social grants (Department of Social Welfare), gender-based violence (Department of Justice, South African Police Services), HIV/AIDS (Department of Health), child care (Department of Education), training (Department of Labour) and food security (Department of Agriculture). It would appear that despite repeated assertions, local government might not necessarily be the closest level of government to meet the most pressing needs affecting women.

Women councillors

Many women councillors claim to represent the interests of women. They feel that they have a good understanding of the issues that affect women, because they can relate to the problems of poverty and development with which most women are faced. Other women councillors regard themselves as representing the community at large, and not just women. However, they are aware that as women, women constituents find it easier to relate to them, because they are appear to be more accommodating and sensitive to issues, such as HIV/AIDS and rape, which they are reluctant to discuss with men councillors. Women also raise other concerns, such as household services, community infrastructure, employment and food security with women councillors because they feel that they understand their importance and will be able to intervene appropriately. In traditional contexts, women are often unable to voice their opinions in public meetings, but they make informal contact with women councillors to voice their problems and needs. Women prefer to raise their concerns with women leaders rather than men, and thus women councillors fulfill an important role in listening and responding to women's needs.

Many women councillors most effectively demonstrate their commitment to addressing women's needs through their efforts to actively foster women's development within their wards. In all the municipalities, women councillors have often been centrally involved in promoting women's rights, HIV/AIDS awareness, poverty alleviation initiatives, establishing co-operatives and crèches, accessing funds and training, and sourcing farming equipment on behalf of women.

Many women councillors ensure that ward level meetings are held at times that are suitable to women, and venues that are accessible. Others conduct issue-based meetings with relevant local groups when needs arise. These meetings include representatives from women's organisations, and tend to be dominated by women. In Hibiscus Coast women councillors remarked that "women are more interested in

development than men", and as a result issues raised at the ward level largely reflect women's concerns.

The efforts of women councillors in representing the interests of women are less effective within council structures. In Hibiscus Coast there are no strong gender-focused women in the Executive Committee (Exco) who can confidently raise women's issues. In Msinga the two women councillors in Exco try to ensure that gender considerations are incorporated into the committee's decisions, but they seem resigned to accept that women's needs are not going to be addressed in the short-term given the municipality's financial constraints. Women councillors in eThekwini and Hibiscus Coast are able to give greater expression to women's needs in specially created gender committees. However, it appears that these structures lack influence within council and have not been effective in promoting gender interests. Many women councillors appear reluctant and even embarrassed to be associated with municipal gender structures and prefer to invest their energy in more influential committees. Many of them prefer to become practically involved in meeting women's needs through direct interventions at the community level.

Despite shared experiences women councillors have not drawn together in collective groupings to deal with women's issues. They do not interact with one another, and they largely address women's issues in a reactive and isolated manner. In both eThekwini and Hibiscus Coast, women councillors have not collaborated across party lines to form a Women's Caucus to collectively advance the interests of women, despite repeated suggestions. As a result, women councillors have not been able to effectively assert women's concerns and gender equity interests in a coherent and sustained manner, and their voices remain fragmented and sporadic.

Despite the initiatives and voices of individual women councillors it is difficult to find evidence that the influential positions of women councillors have had significantly beneficial impacts on women. Women councillors in all three municipalities feel that they are highly constrained in what they can do for women, and feel that they derive very little support from municipal structures in their efforts to address women's needs. Of particular importance are the obstacles imposed by a strong and often destructive gender bias that undermines the authority and influence of women councillors.

While many women councillors claim that attitudes are changing and indicate that they enjoy co-operation with their male colleagues, others feel that women's issues are not being treated seriously by men councillors, and that they experience resistance and hostility from them. The gender committees are at best tolerated, and at worst "treated as a joke" by men councillors. Women councillors feel that often Exco's commitment to gender is superficial and politically opportunistic. In eThekwini and Hibiscus Coast women councillors observe that men councillors are dismissive, defensive or angered when gender issues are raised in Council meetings. In Hibiscus Coast men councillors feel uneasy and threatened, and there are indications of a backlash from men who feel that women are being favoured while the needs of men are not being recognised at all. The heightening tensions between men and women councillors was brought into sharp focus prior to municipal elections in early 2006, as the 50:50 quota represents a direct threat to men councillors' future political prospects

and dominance in local government. In this context they directed their hostility towards women councillors, some of whom admit that they fear for their lives.

Women councillors do not only experience resistance from men councillors, but also from the voting public. The elections of ward committee members in all the municipalities demonstrated women's hesitancy to be nominated or elect women to positions of leadership. As a result, municipal officials intervened to ensure that women were strongly represented in ward committee structures. As a result, women comprise 30-50% of the ward committee members, a proportion that would not have been attained without the deliberate mediation by officials who were ensuring the fulfillment of statutory requirements. However, a perception persists that men should hold senior positions because they will perform their roles effectively and responsibly. Women councillors observed that many women are suspicious of women candidates, and criticised them for their "disunity in not wanting to see other women succeed". Conservative cultural values and women's reinforcement of them, entrench women's inferiority and passivity and make it difficult for them to develop the confidence to challenge traditional stereotypes, assume leadership positions and advance women's agendas.

Women in traditional authority structures

Literature on decentralisation and gender indicates that influential traditional systems significantly reduce the space within which women are able to participate in development processes in the public realm. Rural women's participation is customarily denied in traditional male-dominated decision-making structures and processes, and has limited women's political engagement to activities that are marginal and uncritically supportive of the leader (Beall 2005, UNRISD 2005). To a large extent, these observations are borne out in the three municipalities. However, some spaces for women's voice are apparent, particularly those provided through statutory requirements (such as ward committees) and party quotas, and those that are mediated through the wives (*ondlunkulu*) of the traditional leaders (*amakhosi*).

Women in rural communities feel comfortable to discuss their problems with *ondlunkulu*. They perform a similar role to women councillors by providing an understanding and receptive presence and attending to women's needs. The *amakhosi* have effectively delegated these issues to their wives, and thus the *ondlunkulu* enjoy some legitimacy and visibility in undertaking this role.

Many of the *ondlunkulu* in eThekwini are using their relatively influential positions to initiate and participate in development projects, and many of them work closely with women in community-level activities. Similarly in Hibiscus Coast, some *ondlunkulu* have also taken the initiative to promote women's empowerment through development projects. In all areas several *ondlunkulu* are actively promoting livelihoods-based activities and income-generating initiatives for women's groups within their areas (cash crop farming, vegetable gardening, sewing, block-making, goat farming, crafts, and beadwork). However, most *ondlunkulu* in Hibiscus Coast and Msinga remain at the fringes of development processes, providing assistance to women only when they are requested to do so.

In all three municipalities *ondlunkulu* feel that they are highly constrained in what they can do, and they derive very little support from traditional structures to meet

women's needs. They have no mandate to undertake development initiatives, and they cannot act autonomously. They have to seek permission to pursue such activities from their husbands, who then officially heads these projects, although the *ondlunkulu* are directly involved. In Msinga they are not given a platform to raise these issues nor do they feel sufficiently empowered to take steps to address these problems on their own account. In eThekwini some of the *ondlunkulu* are members of the traditional authority structures, but despite these positions they still feel that their influence is restricted. They feel frustrated by their lack of authority, and argue that if they could be given more autonomy, they could be of more assistance in addressing issues that are affecting communities.

The relationship between traditional and politically elected leadership is often fraught with tensions. Formal communication structures between the ward councillors and *amakhosi* do not exist, and their relationship is determined by the personalities and whims of individuals. *Amakhosi* complain that councillors patronise them, and they are frustrated that the councillors do not recognise them or take their concerns seriously. In all municipalities the *amakhosi* feel sidelined and excluded from municipal processes and are threatened by the councillors' power. Thus, to a large extent, relationships between the *amakhosi* and local government are constructed through distant and sporadic linkages, and tense and unresolved communication. However, there is evidence that the *ondlunkulu* do not view municipalities with the same misgivings. In eThekwini *ondlunkulu* have forged some limited engagement with the municipality to construct halls and traditional courts. They would also like to encourage far greater interaction between women and the municipality in the provision of municipal services, particularly in the maintenance of social infrastructure, such as clinics, halls and burial sites.

Despite these shared experiences, the *ondlunkulu* operate individually and are isolated from one another because co-ordinating or networking mechanisms have not been established. While some *ondlunkulu* are assisting women and carving out spaces to improve the lives of women in their areas, many *ondlunkulu* do not appear to be aware of the opportunity that their relatively privileged position may afford them to advance the rights of women in their areas.

Part III
Concluding comments

IDPs constitute an important decentralisation tool in South Africa, and are expected to play a pivotal role in inter-governmental planning and budgeting. These decentralised planning processes provide a useful basis for examining whether they have expanded the space for women's participation in municipal governance, and whether they have the potential to transform gender relations. The experiences of IDP processes in three different types of municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal confirm, amplify and contrast with some of the key themes emerging in the decentralisation literature, and as such contribute to the growing debate about the efficacy of decentralisation processes.

The perceived benefits of decentralisation for women are that it will create greater opportunities for women to express their views and exert influence over decision-making, and women's empowerment and gender equity will naturally follow. Decentralisation processes are considered appropriate for advancing women's interests because they are more accessible to women themselves, by being in closer

physical proximity to them and their domestic responsibilities. Women will support decentralisation because they have a direct interest in the effective provision of municipal services. The IDP participatory processes, and related community-based processes have undoubtedly opened up new spaces for women to give voice to their needs and concerns in all municipalities. Women's attendance at meetings has been noteworthy, indicating the accessibility of these locally-based meetings, and their particular interest in engaging with municipalities around service delivery and related issues. However, an overly optimistic view would be premature. First, the importance attached to the participatory process as a primary factor in municipal planning decision-making is debatable. In the last few years, the comprehensive scope of participatory processes has been significantly reduced, and they have been largely undertaken to comply with legislation. Issues raised are often not considered beyond the meetings themselves or reflected in municipal decisions. Secondly, women tend to raise practical issues, and particularly those that relate to their domestic realm, rather than those with an explicitly feminist content. Even if these issues were to be addressed, there is little to suggest that gender relations will be transformed.

The primary doubts that have been raised about decentralisation's benefits to women refer to the increased power that it gives to local elites and patriarchal systems. These circumstances severely constrain the potential for greater inclusion, participation and influence by women in governance, and through the reinforcement of conservative values could serve to further exclude and disempower them. In KwaZulu-Natal the power of traditional authorities has been well documented. However, evidence from the rural areas in the three municipalities indicates several significant trends. First, the apparent diminished significance of the *amakhosi* and their effective exclusion of them from municipal decision making and resource allocation indicates the erosion of their power and influence in the face of electoral political systems. Secondly, the activities of the *ondlunkulu* provide opportunities for women in traditional contexts to give expression to their needs. Thirdly, the attendance by women at IDP meetings despite active discouragement from local elites indicates the significance of these new spaces for women as well as their agency in seeking ways to meet their own needs beyond those provided through traditional systems. Through the impact of quota systems, increased numbers of women councillors are active in all municipalities. Many of them represent women's interests, finding most effective expression in the direct assistance they can provide to women in their wards. Senior council structures, however, remain largely resistant to accommodating women's interests, and women councillors have experienced hostility and ridicule as they attempt to raise gender issues. Despite some advances, patriarchal systems continue to dominate at the local level, and deeply embedded gender bias ensures that women are still marginalised, their contributions trivialised, and their interests dismissed as irrelevant or of less value than those of men.

Feminist scholars have suggested several conditions to ensure that decentralisation processes benefit women, including the encouragement of women's participation in public meetings and council committees, commitment to women's interests by elected representatives, and pressure being brought to bear on government by a strong women's movement. However, women's civil society organisations in all three municipalities remain weak and fragmented. They lack a central unifying focus and feminist content remains largely absent, and thus women's voice is often inarticulate and unfocused. Some NGOs appear to have potential to represent women's needs, but

they do not engage with local government. In some instances this is due to the way in which municipalities effectively exclude them or minimise their involvement in IDP processes. It also reflects the organisations' focus on provincial and national government departments to address the women's interests that they represent.

In the three municipalities, it is apparent that IDP planning processes have increased the space for women's participation in municipal governance. Women are becoming more active, and many of them are actively seeking opportunities to address their issues in whatever ways are available to them. Through the catalyst of the IDP participatory processes, highly unequal gender relations are being affected, suggesting some potential for social transformation. Importantly, many of these spaces for women's involvement, such as representation on council and ward committees and participation in public meetings, are determined by national guidelines, which establish the conditions for the way in which decentralisation is practiced. In other words, the IDP process takes the form of 'decentralised centralism' which serves to carve out spaces for women's involvement that local elites and traditional systems cannot wish away. However, despite these advances, gender equity and social transformation still remain distant goals, and working towards them will continue to require considerable efforts from municipal stakeholders and civil society organisations.

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