

Women and local government

STEPS TOWARDS GREATER INCLUSIVITY

While some progress has been made towards facilitating women's involvement in government structures and programme implementation, there is still a long way to go before the goal of gender equality is achieved. Research conducted by Alison Todes, Pearl Sithole and Amanda Williamson investigated the extent to which women's issues have been incorporated at local government level, and concluded that municipalities tend to lag behind national policy and guidelines in giving priority to the goal of gender equality. This article summarises their findings and suggests future directions.



Photo: Thomas Ferreira, Corporate Policy Unit, eThekweni Municipality

Background to the research

Impressive gender guidelines have been crafted at the national level. These include the principles of non-sexism enshrined in the Constitution and expanded upon in the National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality. They are also found in the requirements of delivery-orientated processes such as public works and land reform programmes. The research explored the ways in which these national commitments to gender equity have been incorporated into municipal activities, specifically through the mechanism of the integrated development plan (IDP).

The questions that guided the research were:

- Are national gender policy directives and guidelines fully integrated into local government in IDP processes, outcomes and in implementation?
- How can attention to women's rights and gender be strengthened in this context?

Three municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal were chosen as case

studies, based on their different geographic, institutional and socio-economic characteristics: eThekweni (a large, diverse and well-resourced metropolitan area), Hibiscus Coast (a series of small towns with some capacity, surrounded by commercial farms and peri-urban settlements), and Msinga (a 'deep' rural municipality, with very limited resources and capacity). The fieldwork was conducted from 2004 to 2006, and entailed 70 interviews and 51 focus groups with national and provincial officials, municipal officials and councillors, project managers, committees and beneficiaries, as well as representatives from non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, gender advocates and academics.

Key findings

Gender is generally seen as peripheral to the municipalities' main concerns. Notwithstanding some efforts to increase the number of women appointed to senior management levels, the employment profile continues to be male-dominated and

gender-stereotyped. Although their proportion within the councils has been rising, women councillors are still outnumbered by their male counterparts. Where gender structures have been established, they are usually far removed from decision-making and IDP processes. There are a few well-placed gender champions, but their impact has been limited. There is no evidence that the increased number of women councillors has had beneficial effects for women. In fact, women councillors generally feel that they derive little support from municipal structures in addressing women's needs, and that there is resistance to raising gender issues in council.

Although women have not been seen as a distinct stakeholder grouping in IDP participatory processes, their presence has been notable. They are often in the majority at public meetings, displaying their interest in improved service delivery. However, their voices are generally not as strong as those of men, especially in contexts in which traditional protocols require their silence, and participatory processes themselves have not been significant in influencing municipal strategy or operations.

IDPs only make limited reference to gender, and women tend to be regarded as one of the 'vulnerable groups' that deserve special attention. While eThekweni's IDP pays more attention to gender, none of the three municipalities has adequately tackled women's needs for gender equality, empowerment, personal safety, equal opportunity, access to employment and social development.

Despite the lack of attention that is paid to gender in the IDPs, municipal projects often benefit women. Some projects, particularly those delivering infrastructure and services, are informed by national guidelines. As a result, women's involvement in water, sanitation and roads projects is not only a prerequisite but is increasingly being regarded as normal. Some project managers and municipalities go beyond national guidelines to run projects that are gender-sensitive. In some of the projects, women gain skills and better incomes, and are empowered in the process. However, women are often confined to menial roles, and most projects do not go beyond meeting women's everyday needs. Their involvement in many small municipal local economic development (LED) projects, such as garden projects, sewing projects, *muthi* trading and block-making, usually remains in a survivalist mode, and the likelihood of turning these into profitable commercial ventures appears remote.

Future directions

Escalating efforts to bring about gender equality in municipalities will require top-down and bottom-up action.

Top-down action from national and provincial government should focus on strengthening attention to gender by:

- demonstrating advocacy and facilitative roles in identifying areas for intervention, formulating practical goals and strategies, and implementing targeted programmes to facilitate women's empowerment;
- supporting and championing gender equality as a priority of government; and
- reviewing progress by developing indicators, establishing monitoring and evaluation processes, and highlighting examples of good practice.

Bottom-up action should take place in municipalities themselves as well as in civil society. Municipalities should strive to:

- build awareness among all municipal officials and councillors about the significance of gender equality;
- enhance the capacity of gender structures through training, resourcing and networking with external organisations;
- demonstrate leadership through gender sensitive initiatives and behaviour, and intolerance towards practices that reinforce gender inequality; and
- support champions within the municipality and the broader community by providing the necessary assistance and resources, and giving their efforts due recognition.

IDP processes should incorporate the following:

- Efforts should be made to incorporate gender into each phase of the IDP process. The national government has begun to provide guidelines, and international toolkits and good practice examples are accessible on the Internet.
- Incorporating gender could take the form of identifying key strategic issues of importance to women, such as HIV/AIDS or gender-based violence. Through the IDP all aspects of municipal work could be assessed to see how they can address these issues, and provincial and national departments could come together to address them in a more gender-sensitive manner.
- By examining the overall situation of women and men across municipalities, a stronger analysis could provide a basis for identifying their specific needs and assessing whether certain groups of women and men could be adversely affected by development programmes and projects.
- Assessing the operations of departments could reveal to what extent their programmes benefit women as well as men, and whether changes are needed. The findings from this analysis could feed into the IDP and provide a stronger

basis for thinking about future revisions and strategic directions. For instance, the prevalence of gender-based violence should be explicitly considered in transport strategies, the physical design of areas and crime-prevention strategies.

- Municipal gender structures and gender focal points should be brought centrally into the IDP process. They could take responsibility for identifying and promoting the key issues of significance for various groups of women.
- Further efforts should be made to give women and their organisations a voice in IDP participatory processes, and the range of women's issues arising from these engagements should be reflected in the IDP. Where issues fall beyond the municipal mandate, the relevant sector departments should be involved in addressing them through intergovernmental development planning processes.
- Spatial development plans should include good, safe public transport, enable close proximity between home and work, accommodate informal economic activities, provide a range of services and facilities close to home, and pay attention to safety, so that the municipal area is explicitly planned to work better for poor women.
- LED programmes should go beyond concentrating on women's involvement in poverty alleviation projects. Significant areas of economic activity that women are not involved in, such as flagship projects, should be identified and ways in which they can be incorporated meaningfully should be explored.
- The creation of a gender plan could help the municipality focus on gender, and a gender programme could assist in carrying through these commitments. The formulation of appropriate gender indicators would help in monitoring the progress and success of the IDP and its programmes.

The original IDP Guide Packs included guidelines for mainstreaming gender in IDPs, and they set out an approach in which gender was incorporated into each stage of the IDP process. In September 2007, the then Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) launched the Gender Policy Framework for Local Government. It emphasises the role that the IDP can play in mainstreaming gender in the policies and implementation plans of municipalities, as well as the importance of introducing key people (gender focal points), structures (gender forums) and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to institutionalise government's

commitment to achieving gender equality. National government has thus set the parameters, and provided crucial starting points for municipalities. Very few municipalities appear to have taken these guidelines on board, however, and more effort needs to be made to realise overarching commitments to non-sexism and gender equality more substantively in the strategic and operational work of municipalities.

However, municipalities vary hugely in capacities and resources, and they should apply guidelines in a manner that is appropriate to their particular contexts and capacities. A differentiated approach may take the following form:

Municipal type	Suggested steps forward
Large and well-resourced	Gender focal points and key people linked to IDP Strong statements on gender in IDP Gender analysis of municipal development needs and issues Gender audit of municipal structures Gender assessment of municipal policies and programmes Gender plan and programme Gender monitoring and evaluation
Intermediate capacity	Gender champions linked to IDP Strong statements on gender in IDP Gender analysis of municipal development needs and issues Gender assessment of municipal policies and programmes Gender monitoring and evaluation
Small and poorly resourced	Increased women's representation Strengthening of women's voice through education and awareness campaigns Inclusion of women's issues in IDP

The full report by Todes, Sithole and Williamson, entitled *Local Government, Gender and Integrated Development Planning (2007)*, is available on the HSRC Press website (www.hsrcpress.ac.za). The Gender Policy Framework for Local Government (2007) can be viewed at <http://www.cogta.gov.za/dmdocuments/Policy%20TEXT.pdf>



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