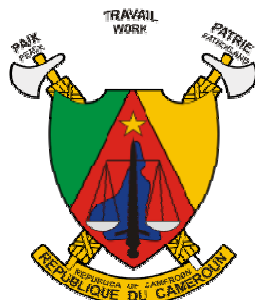


United Nations
Public Administration
and Development Programme



**PRE-CONFERENCE SEMINAR
FOR ELECTED WOMEN LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERS
RECOMMENDATIONS
Palais des Congrès, Yaoundé, Cameroon
26-27 May 2008**

The pre-Conference Seminar for Elected Women Local Government Leaders on the theme: “Strengthening Women’s Leadership in Local Government for Effective Decentralized Governance and Poverty Reduction in Africa: Roles, Challenges and Strategies” was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon from 26 to 27 May 2008. The Seminar was organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) within the framework of the Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance and Decentralized Cooperation initiative in collaboration with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization of the Government of Cameroon and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The overriding purpose of the Seminar was to facilitate the exchange of experiences on challenges faced by elected women local government leaders and strategies for strengthening their role and leadership capacities to effectively implement decentralized governance programmes for poverty eradication in Africa. In pursuit of the overarching objective, the Seminar:

- Examined good practices on women leaders’ participation in decentralized governance and local governments in Africa, with particular emphasis on the measures adopted by governments to promote such participation.
- Exchanged ideas on the impact that women have on political institutions and agendas, including on the implementation of decentralization policies.
- Reviewed the strategies adopted within and across countries to enhance the participation of women leaders in decentralized governance and local governments in Africa especially as they relate to gender equality and women’s empowerment, poverty reduction and development in general.
- Provided an opportunity for a widened interaction between women leaders and policy makers in local governments as well as development partners on matters concerning strengthening women’s leadership capacities for effective implementation of decentralized governance for poverty reduction.
- Strengthened networks and partnerships for promoting more and deeper involvement of women in political leadership and decision-making in local governance.

In particular, discussions at the Seminar focused on the following topics:

- How the implementation of decentralized governance promotes women's representation in leadership positions, and what impact women's participation has on decentralized governance: exchange of European and African experiences.
- The challenges women leaders in local governments face, including in entering local governments and how they can be addressed. This include factors such as resource availability, social and cultural barriers, the provision of quotas for women's participation, training requirements for both women and men (to change attitudes towards women's leadership in local governments), etc.
- How the specific leadership capacity building needs of women and men in local governments can be addressed, including ways to enable women leaders play their roles effectively and to address cultural barriers affecting men's acceptance of women leadership
- Avenues and approaches for enhancing collaboration and exchange between women leaders in local governments in Africa and Europe as one way of supporting the implementation of decentralized governance.

The Seminar participants included:

- Ministers in charge of decentralization in Africa
- Elected women leaders from local governments in Africa
- Representatives of European municipalities and councils
- Other experts and practitioners including:
 - African and European civil society women groups;
 - United Nations officials and representatives from academia specializing in decentralization and gender equality issues.

The main conclusion from the seminar was that women face challenges in three key areas: political, economic and socio-cultural.

1. POLITICAL CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Women face the following challenges in accessing leadership positions and getting re-elected within political parties:

- Lack of willingness/confidence to stand for elections
- Lack of support by other women
- Low level of education/political education/inadequate awareness of laws
- Lack of exposure, lack of public speaking skills, lack of campaign tactics
 - Lack of experience in lobbying and negotiations within the party
 - Lack of self-confidence hampers full participation
- Lack of networking among women within party

- Time management constraints
- Lack of independent decision-making in party politics
- Lack of interest in politics
- Lack of affirmative action policies within parties
- Sexual complications/harassment
- Under-representation in parties resulting in lack of influence in decision-making, marginalization and sidelining of women
- Multiple responsibilities preventing women from fully participating in party meetings

In order to address the above challenges the following strategies were recommended:

- Mutual support among women
- Women's commission within the ministry of local government/president's office (depending on local context)
- Adoption of law on affirmative action within political parties
- Enforcement of laws
- Parties should build capacity for women within them (supporters, members, candidates, elected women, etc)
- Support economic empowerment
- Parties should enhance women's upward moves through the party hierarchy

2. ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND EMPOWERMENT

According to the pre- Conference Seminar, the main object of leadership is economic development and therefore leaders need to be empowered. However, the meeting noted that women local government leaders face the following challenges related to economic empowerment:

- Lack of financial support (high priority)
- Challenges to women's access to land and credit
- Legal status of women with regard to family and marriage: for instance, family succession laws exclude women from owning property
- Difficulties in reconciling work and family responsibilities

The following strategies were proposed to achieve economic empowerment:

- Make and implement legislation to provide and protect land ownership for women and remove or revise discriminatory laws on property rights
- Within the context of participatory budgeting, local governments should make budgets that are gender sensitive
- Create funds for women elected leaders, candidates and business women
- In providing support to women, development partners as well as governments should maximize direct collaboration and dialogue with women themselves in order to reduce administrative costs involved in providing such support through intermediaries

3. TRANSFORMING SOCIAL BELIEFS, CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND DISCRIMINATORY STEREOTYPES

Some of the socio-cultural traditions and discriminatory stereotypes that need to be changed in order for society to entirely support women's access to leadership include:

- Double rejection of a woman both in her family and in her husband's family
- Cultural barriers that prevent women to exercise rights that laws give them
- Tribalism – women are disempowered because of belonging to a minority tribe and ethnicity
- Lack of respect from women's leadership - Men do not accept women's leadership therefore they do everything in their power to divide women. When women fight each other, they become more vulnerable
- Socialization, inferiority complex, lack of confidence
- Cultural traditions and religious norms – For instance, there is a wrong interpretation of the Koran that does not allow girls to attend school
- Discriminatory practices - Because of poverty in the rural areas many girls are forced to go into early marriages and the results are unwanted pregnancies and diminished capacities of career development
- Unequal division of labour between women and men specially with regard to domestic and care responsibilities for children, elderly and the sick
- Lack of nurseries and kindergartens for early child development

The following strategies were proposed in order to address the above challenges:

- Countries should live up to their regional commitments (the Southern African Development Community - SADC committed themselves to have women occupy at least 30 percent of the positions in political and decision-making structures by the year 2005, and 50 per cent by 2015) and to those made when adopting the Beijing Platform for Action. They should be supported by donors and international organizations in these endeavours
- Women should form women's caucuses to push/lobby for the inclusion of affirmative actions
- Governments and civil society should abolish discriminatory laws, stereotypes and explain the difference between cultural and religious values. Family law should be put in place or implemented where it exists
- Early and child marriages should be stopped and criminalized
- There should be political will to support, with the assistance of international organizations, families that send girls to school and give them subsidies or food rations
- Governments should disseminate information among local communities by introducing information centers to address socio-cultural discriminatory practices/norms and create a more conducive environment for women to be respected
- The exclusion of girls from education as well as girls' early marriages should be eliminated. Governments (central and local) and civil society should implement measures enhancing women's education, including their awareness of human rights, laws and how to use them. This will help build women's confidence and leadership. Educate women on existing laws and on how to use them

- Need to establish community infrastructures including nurseries and kindergartens where both men and women share their responsibilities on child's development
- Women should have confidence in themselves. Women should change their mindsets not to be undermined by men

Moreover participants emphasized the importance of networking and partnerships to be formed or enhanced to support women leaders. The following recommendations were made in this regard:

- Gender commissions should be formed to ensure women's participation and the achievement of women's leadership targets
- Women should form alliances with civil society, business women, religious leaders, and others (from the local, the national, the regional to the global level)
- Women's network should be supported through email, internet, etc.

Given the urgency of the challenges and some of the strategies contained in this report, the participants in the pre-Conference Seminar for elected women government leaders recommended the following in order not to lose the momentum created by the Seminar:

It is recommended strongly that elected women leaders in local governments establish a network at national and regional levels to bring them together and provide a forum through which issues and challenges confronting them in their work can be addressed in a sustainable manner. Local governments, central governments and international development partners should support this endeavour especially in its initial stages.

It is recommended that either AMCOD integrate elected local women leaders networks in its membership and deliberations or works to make the network a technical committee of the African Union to bring into the Union matters of African elected local women leaders.

Local governments, central governments and international development partners should support study tours among African local governments to provide opportunities for the exchange of experiences and practices for capacity-building of elected local government women leaders.

It is recommended that this pre-Conference seminar become an annual event within the Ministerial conference on leadership capacity development for decentralized governance and AMCOD and the issues facing elected women leaders in local governments, should continue to be discussed annually in this context.