

## A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON DECENTRALIZATION, LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

*with Rita Cassisi, Ananya Mukherjee, Bianca Pomeranzi, Gabriella Rossetti, Sarah Silliman* \*

The experiences of women from Africa, Asia, Latin America and North America show how women, largely through collective action at the local level, have innovated existing tools, mechanisms and methodologies, to better address their needs and aspirations, often in the context of poverty and marginalization. However, many issues remain open, including how to expand, consolidate and scale up their achievements at the local level so that they can influence processes and policies that are determined at national or international levels. *Universitas Forum* invited the members of the editorial board for this special issue of our journal – coming from the worlds of research, policy and practice – to reflect on some of these open questions, taking into account the experiences published here:

*What do you feel the experiences presented in this issue of Universitas Forum contribute to the debate about decentralization and women's empowerment? What are the opportunities that emerge and what are the obstacles to be overcome?*

**Gabriella Rossetti:** I would separate two levels of this project: this issue of *Universitas Forum* as an “experience” itself and the “experiences”, i.e. the stories, collected here. What may be particularly innovative is the encounter of the two. Usually women's experiences are used as examples to support a particular theory, or we read brilliant essays and policy documents on the importance of women's “voice”. But the space where that voice is uttered and the space in which it is interpreted are different. To bridge the gap between them has always been a crucial issue, and not only for those engaged in development. The challenge is political, of course, but also cultural in the broad sense of the word. Languages, formats, standards, ways of saying and of seeing things are shaped and reshaped in the process of transferring one's life “experience” into words, then into writing, and maybe into a visual language so that a story becomes “publishable” without losing its original authorship and in spite of (or thanks to) the work of an “editor” who plays the role of broker and translator.

This, in my opinion, is what is really new in this project. We might ask what all this has to do with decentralization and a local approach to development. Things happen locally, always and everywhere. But in the development discourse “local” has come to mean “marginal”, peripheral, vulnerable, micro, in spite of decades of praise to bottom-up and demand-driven approaches. The visual representation remained that of a ladder to be scaled up from bottom to top. It was a

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reasonable image as long as decisions and planning concerning people's, and women's lives were made and designed by those who had the power of doing it and who placed themselves at the top of this imaginary ladder. The topographic representation mirrored the self-representation of those in power; to put it simply, they were also trapped in this cage, even when they sometimes made all possible efforts to "scale-down" or descend the ladder.

**Ananya Mukherjee:** Regarding decentralization, much policy and academic research has concluded that decentralization has had little, if any, positive impact on women's rights. But in part, this has to do with the fact that decentralization, that is, the devolution of power and resources from the centre to the local level, is incomplete in many countries and local institutions are mere executors of decisions made centrally. It also has to do with the fact that decentralization policies have often been accompanied, or indeed spearheaded, by structural adjustment reforms that have really aimed at reducing the role of the state in service provision and in encouraging privatization. So we have to clear up this conceptual confusion.

It is also true that decentralization does not *automatically* modify existing power relations or offer more space and resources to women so that they can meet their needs and aspirations. But it is equally true that decentralization represents the potential for this to happen. What is the alternative? Centralized policy making where, at best, national NGOs and women's organizations who see themselves as representatives of women at the grassroots levels but who are, in fact, an elite themselves, are consulted? The experience in Kerala is a case in point: there, women are organizing collectively, through their work such as through group farming, and this solidarity and increased self-confidence, individually and collectively, is leading them to occupy more and more political space and to use that space to address the social and economic needs of their families, their communities. It would be almost impossible for this to happen at a centralized level, because that's not where the vast majority of women's work takes place or their lives are led. Instead, the complex institutional architecture created as a result of decentralization reforms, at neighbourhood, village and *panchayat* levels, offers a progression of spaces that women are occupying. And they are occupying them, yes, because the constitution provides especially for this, but what is most important, occupying this political space has come about because these women are transforming the social and economic reality and so it is a natural progression, or rather, a virtuous circle. This is much more than quotas!

This said, women's empowerment through political and social reforms at local level cannot take place in isolation. Without policies at national level, women's local experiences, even if important, risk becoming caught up in local power struggles and remaining isolated and without a capacity to really impact on structural issues. So as I see it, the issue is how these different levels are articulated and how the energies unleashed at the local level can generate the critical mass needed to effect the larger policy changes that are needed, even at the decentralized level.

**Sarah Silliman:** This issue does contribute to the debate, and demonstrates how decentralization and other reforms can be an opportunity for women to increase their participation and engagement in decision-making at the local level. The opportunity of decentralization is only as good as the commitment of the government, through laws, mechanisms and transparency, and the ability of women to organize to ensure the 'opportunity' translates into concrete results.

While decentralization can provide an opening in the law, it is only when we see the opportunity in practice that we know if these laws will turn into real gains for women. Not only must government be mandated to engage citizens in decision-making, but there must be transparent and on-going mechanisms for citizens to engage. If the budget process is to have participation and inputs by women, it is necessary for the budget to be transparent, the process of engagement to be clear, and the capacity of those to engage in the process to be strengthened.

Additionally, despite decentralization bringing new laws and mandates for citizen engagement, the ability of women to impact local decision-making is still greatly influenced by individual authorities – whether allies or those acting as barriers to women’s engagement – the need for women to create allies within the government who encourage and facilitate women’s increased engagement is still quite strong.

**Rita Cassisi:** Among all the cases presented, I would like to comment on the Central American ones, which I know best. REDMUCH Chiquimula is for us a model, an example to follow, since it is a story of union and cooperation between individual women and women's groups at the grassroots level. It represents a viable path especially for rural civil society organizations, which otherwise, alone and isolated, are unable to act as a valid interlocutor either for international cooperation or local governments. REDMUCH has much to say about political participation: it is widely recognized and for this reason its voice, experience and lessons learned are also widely heard. Processes like this must be taken into consideration by practitioners and decision-makers so they don’t always start from the beginning, all over again. Instead, it is possible to pool local expertise and build on what has already been successfully implemented. It’s important to add that REDMUCH has played a key role in the recent election of autumn 2011. Formally and informally, but always maintaining distance and objectivity, REDMUCH has guaranteed support to women candidates for local government. As a strategic choice, REDMUCH has chosen to consolidate its experience and specialize in the issue of participation and citizenship of women, rather than getting lost in a thousand streams. That also tells us of the association’s maturity.

*Many cases demonstrate the ways in which women are acting, often collectively, as significant “agents” of local economies. Yet without access to technology, credit, markets, support structures and organizations, they risk being marginalized as micro-economic practices. What lessons for policy and practice can be drawn from the experiences of women’s economic agency? What role can be played by international cooperation to help expand the scope and impact of women’s role as transformative agents of positive local development processes?*

**Gabriella Rossetti:** When decentralization processes started in the nineties they were not hailed as a gain for democracy, at least not everywhere. We know the reasons. Citizenship is “territorially based”, yet with globalization everything which is “territorially bounded”, from the nation states to our European towns, seems to be at risk of vanishing or at least of losing strength and the power to make decisions. In this context the local is a place of resistance, if appropriately strengthened and equipped. This has been the shared wisdom of observers of the intertwined processes of globalization and decentralization. The stories told to *Universitas Forum* show that women’s organized groups, active locally in specific, physical places can survive and thrive. Ministries and academic institutions, the so called “top” have to be held accountable by those who are depicted as “local women”. In terms of international cooperation: priority for

“investments” by international cooperation should be given to institutions that are accountable to local women and groups, or should be aimed at making them more accountable. Does this have something to do with “economic empowerment”? Maybe not in a direct way, but economic empowerment may be a first step which leads to the capacity of local women to claim and negotiate at all levels, and so to demand this accountability. We see in many of the stories that groups are formed both as means to reach individual objectives but, also, as an end in themselves when they grant visibility and collective strength.

**Rita Cassisi:** CSEM (ADED Valle) is a model of intervention for local economic development that does work and has enormous potential for the future: it is our pride as UN Women. Decentralization in Central America is very much affected by political turnover. Local services are seldom there and when they are, they have no sustainability. Sometimes it looks like we are taking a step forward and two steps back. Far from the capital city, no business services to local entrepreneurs are guaranteed, much less to female entrepreneurs, who are not even taken into account and are relegated to informal and subsistence economy. The CSEM, where it is working, (still on an insufficient scale compared to the local demand of women entrepreneurs), addresses this problem and bridges this gap. The CSEM model in El Salvador was included in the strategy of CONAMyPE (National Commission of medium and small enterprises). Depending on the capacity of the Ministry of economy, CSEMs are an opportunity in every Central American country and beyond. In Honduras, the CSEM proved to have excellent coping strategies: it faced and overcame enormous difficulties of various kinds, in particular - considering the coup d'état of June 2009 - weak institutions. These events highlighted the great potential of the model. The new Minister for Women in Guatemala has contacted us and informed us that she wants to create other CSEMs, because she considers it a successful model which offers services tailored to people's and especially women's needs. In a recent meeting with the Canadian cooperation, they also let us know that they want to support CSEMs in the next cooperation plan between Canada and Guatemala. CSEM is relevant and sustainable because it fills a void, and meets a real, pressing demand for credit, training and support felt by women entrepreneurs in their territories.

*Many critics of decentralization policies and their impact on women's rights affirm that governance mechanisms at local level do not significantly modify existing power relations. What tools are needed to make decentralization reforms and local development truly gender sensitive? What lessons can be learned for policy and practice?*

**Bianca Pomeranzi:** Local development should be seen and analyzed as an interaction, a multi-sectoral space of intervention. In such contexts, we can closely observe the power relations between men and women in their real arena of life and action. Understanding and acting locally, starting from real needs and aspirations of women and men, represents a possible and desirable strategy to strengthen critical analysis and deconstruction of the dominant economic model and lifestyle. During the panel on social protection, in the last G8, the director of UN Women and former president of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, together with ILO and WHO, presented a scenario in which networks of local development actors in so-called least-developed countries are already offering and delivering services and therefore offer real answers to pressing local issues and needs that are not answered by the State or the market. I would suggest that in a way, we are back to the end of the 70s and 80s, when there was a genuine interest in people, women and men as subjects of development, as actors and authors of their own personal struggle for liberation

and social transformation. In this renewed context, the issue of women's agency should be approached in a different and challenging fashion, leaving boring, inappropriate and outdated rhetoric behind us, since rhetoric does not allow us to understand and grasp the profound transformation taking place at the global and local level.

In the process of renewed attention to women's agency it is also important to critically reflect on decentralization. Unfortunately, the very rhetoric of development pushes women to seek and ask for assistance on the basis of their vulnerability, offering this image of themselves, often without even being aware of it, as a way of bargaining with the International Aid community. The latter will then feel obliged to intervene in favor of women as vulnerable victims in need of help. This does not allow anyone, neither the International Community nor women themselves, to recognize the significant changes that have taken place over the last 30 years. Women are not vulnerable victims, but instead have inexorably transformed their way of life and those of their societies. Let us consider an example under everyone's eyes: communication and technology. In Southern Africa and sub Saharan Africa, all women own a cellular phone and communicate through this device. They are no longer isolated, hidden, since with a simple gesture they can communicate with the mainstream, still living in the most remote countryside. As the Italian Cooperation where I work, we understood this profound change in social dynamics and have launched a hotline for women in rural Senegal. Women have responded, using it and adapting it according to their needs and aspirations. In electronic communication, starting with the cellular phone to the Internet, women are active protagonists. This is a factor of progress and innovation that we need to take into proper consideration.

Finally, I would like to highlight one important consideration: decentralization and local development can be relevant if we are able to develop management and monitoring tools such as local development agencies (LEDAs), which are faithful and representative of the territories they work for. They can read local dynamics and recognize the role of women as actors and authors of development and change. We must then modify our approach, find new dynamics of collaboration with local stakeholders and overcome failures of the past, such as bypassing local institutions in favour of women's NGOs that doesn't help create the dynamic and dialogue needed. Unfortunately, the United Nations work in a framework of specialized sectors and under separate knowledge segments. Such a conceptual structure is difficult to let go of to instead accept the vision of a truly multi-sectoral approach. In our experience, working for sectors and not for levels - local, intermediate, etc. - does not work. I must confess that beyond the experience of MyDEL in Central America, I unfortunately do not see a genuine will to change this state of affairs.

**Sarah Silliman:** Some of the good practices and guidelines for local governments, women and the city that have emerged from our work at the Huairou Commission refer to *transparent policies, procedures and budgets*. The process for proposing or contributing to planning and budgetary processes must be clear, posted and available for public consumption. For example, if the community is able to make proposals to the municipality for local projects, they need to know the process for presenting proposals, if specific forms or presentation styles, etc. are needed, the date and the process for decision-making. It is also important that it who is making the decision and if it is possible to have community/civil society representation is transparent.



Others revolve around *incentives, mandates and mechanisms for civil society/community participation*. When local governments are mandated, and have clear processes for implementing such mandates, the door is open for women's participation and engagement in decision-making. Communities and women's groups will still need support to understand processes and policies for input, but having the mandate for citizens to be included in local government decision-making is a first and fundamental step. Additionally, mechanisms such as multi-stakeholder advisory or planning boards are a good example of how women have been able to influence local decisions.

However most of these bodies don't have control over budget, so the ideal would be mandates for multi-stakeholder boards or committees with power to make resource decisions.

*Quotas for women's representation in local decision-making posts* will not solve everything, but guaranteeing representation for women (gender balance) is a good start.

Finally we have to consider *support for citizen engagement/awareness/organizing*. Often these processes, such as gender budgeting and planning, are complex and grassroots women are challenged to effectively engage in them. Support should be provided for organizing and capacity building of grassroots women's organizations or women in general to effectively participate and engage in local government processes.

**Rita Cassisi:** Women's political participation is by all means a priority. Change takes place through participation in politics, in the management of public affairs. In countries facing major problems of economic autonomy, inequality in women's political participation is larger. It seems clear that inequality, exclusion and economic dependence go hand-in-hand with women's invisibility in areas of power and decision making. Even the Minister for women in Guatemala agreed that is not enough to talk about participation in abstract terms, and to overcome that we need to make resources available to women in their territories. Otherwise, they will not be able to participate in politics. The electoral process has its costs, and leadership is also an economic investment that takes time away from traditional productive and reproductive tasks women are loaded with, counting on very little help from the males of their families. UN Women emphasizes a very crucial lesson learned: examples are key. Seeing other women who enter into politics and now occupy positions of power is essential to breaking the glass ceiling. Increasingly, Latin America offers many successful examples of female presidents: think of Chile, Argentina, Brazil.

Decentralization encourages participation and women's empowerment at the local level, but does not guarantee them. The issue still needs to be studied with attention and sensitivity, contextualized in different realities. Different territories live very different and sometimes discordant experiences. We should not delude ourselves that it is an automatic process. Perverse logics and dynamics in local power do exclude women. We have witnessed cases of blackmail, threats to women who have been democratically elected in remote municipalities, far from the center of attention, and consequently forced to resign. These situations are difficult to control; they are not reported or known to the press. Women's safety and protection in the local space should not be taken for granted. Therefore we can say that decentralization favors women when there are effective measures to contain and prevent related risks: the basic one is to guarantee the rule of law and punish abuse and violation of women's human rights. Impunity is the main enemy, but unfortunately it happens most of the time in this part of the world. Ensuring

monitoring, even in areas that are remote from where power and information are managed, usually at the centre. Women's machineries should be decentralized, and where available strengthened. Dedicated desks should be put in place to collect cases and complaints. Rule of law and justice are a *conditio sine qua non* for women's participation in territorial governance. Decentralization *per se* is not sufficient for change.

*In these experiences, and others, what difference has the involvement of international cooperation made? What is the role that the international cooperation and international networks can play to support the work of small women's organizations, build alliances and help them impact on policy processes at national and international levels in ways that have a positive return on work at the local level?*

**Gabriella Rossetti:** *Forums* might be the key word and key tool. What we state, when defending local development, is that Politics (with capital "P") must be found, supported and discovered in the minds and bodies of those who form, have formed or might form social movements, because they want, need and plan to change their lives. In order to do it, they need to associate with others, to go through a conflict and have a project, a long term vision. In the stories we find, first of all, these three things, which might also be treated as indicators: *conflict / association / project-vision*, three broad indicators of the presence of what is called "endogenous" processes. These Indicators and others should allow us to identify entry points for widening communication and networking.

Women's groups and associations need to focus on gaining representation and strength at all levels of decision-making, not just the local level. Activities which are successfully changing women's lives in their so called "communities" might just remain within the enclosure of the projects and programs which helped create their success. Why? When projects and programs are labeled as "international cooperation", a third actor, the "donor" comes into the scene and is perceived as the one that should guarantee survival and continuity more than the local institutions themselves whose "gender sensitivity" is being pushed for by external actors and with their support. We need a sort of peer-to-peer dialogue while also guaranteeing visibility with international institutions. Their sponsorship is purely one of strengthening and support, not of "policing".

**Sarah Silliman:** Working through networks of women, at the national, regional or global level, brings several gains to those working to impact decision-making. First, networks function as horizontal learning labs, where women are able to share their experiences, strategies and lessons with others who are working to make similar change. While the political contexts and opportunities may vary across experiences, women who are organizing to increase their political influence and to influence local development can learn organizing, capacity building and advocacy strategies from one another through networking. Second, networks have a function of adding legitimacy and strength to local and national initiatives, particularly at the regional and international level. Networks such as the Huairou Commission have seen this when grassroots women have shared their experiences of local development and political participation within international meetings and events, such as those convened by the UN. Having a grassroots experience recognized by global actors and agencies can be leveraged once back home, using the

weight of international eyes on local experiences helps to gather support and ensure responsiveness by authorities who may not have otherwise paid close attention.

**Rita Cassisi:** In general, International Cooperation should and does play a major role in local development processes. As UN Women we have a key challenge to address: international cooperation invests too little in women and UN Women is trying to emphasize this in strategic spaces such as Busan and within the Paris Process on Aid Effectiveness. There is an urgent need to increase women's empowerment programs. The director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, constantly repeats this in all possible locations. But it is a difficult issue even for a woman like her. Although she is former president of a strategic country like Chile, when she addresses the issue of women's empowerment at the institutional level, her proposals are not taken seriously enough and are strenuously challenged. Donors' focus is too narrowed and biased to sectors, be it health, education, economy, without a general overview, and especially without a gender perspective. In order to change that, we must continue producing high quality research and data instrumental to accelerating the recognition of women's role. We have to count women where they are, make them visible, explain what they do and what we, as International Cooperation agencies, can do to support them. We should do that through an evidence-based approach, overcoming the sheer theoretical and ideological approaches of the past.

*Knowledge appears as an important element of women's political, social and economic empowerment in many of the cases, including the valorization of traditional knowledge and local languages. How do you see the role of universities and research organizations in contributing to local development and women's empowerment? What can be learned from the experiences in Africa, Asia and Latin America published in this issue?*

**Gabriella Rossetti:** As I already said, the whole experience of this *Universitas Forum* might be seen as an experiment in knowledge creation through a healthy contamination between different languages, spheres of knowledge etc. The intolerable divide between the "theory class" and the "practice people" should be challenged without falling into the traps of reversing the relationship (the tyranny of the "field") or re-creating the myth of indigenous knowledge as a fixed deposit of "local wisdom" guarded by a nurturing feminine care. Healthy contamination means simply (although this is anything but easy) dismantling the conventional system which labels different spheres of knowledge and different places of knowledge production as fixed entities (scientific/academic vs. customary/traditional, etc.). We read stories of university students and scholars who made discoveries "in the field" and of rural women who changed their views on their own knowledge of seeds and agricultural practices which they had been previously pushed to abandon as backward *because* traditional. The Forum and the floor is now open for new stories to come forward.

**Ananya Mukherjee:** Regarding the role of universities, there is an enormous potential for universities and research institutions to play an important role both in generating and transmitting knowledge for development and women's empowerment. But in many cases it requires a serious transformation in the self-understanding of academics and their understanding of how knowledge is produced. This is difficult because most universities are quite conservative and also powerful institutions.



Academics are trained in disciplines: they are economists, sociologists, anthropologists and so on, so it is not at all automatic that they can provide the complex and trans-disciplinary perspective that is really needed to address development.

We need to recognize that there are many different kinds of knowledge: popular, traditional, and not just academic or “scholarly” knowledge. There is no hierarchy between these different forms of knowledge. Knowledge is produced in many ways and places. Ordinary working people produce and use knowledge, to generate livelihoods and many other necessities of life - including their cultural identities. And this knowledge is transmitted locally in many ways, not just through the written word. Yet for the most part, even though this knowledge exists, these communities don’t have many tools that allow them to project it outward and disseminate it in ways that can influence policy. Universities have a major role to play here.

Let me give you an example from India. Rabindranath Tagore, India’s famous poet-philosopher and the first non-European Nobel Laureate had envisioned exactly such a university. Tagore was also a towering figure in India’s anti-colonial struggle and a revolutionary pedagogue who first established a school and then a university, which he christened Visva Bharati (a Sanskrit phrase which means ‘where the world builds its home in a single nest’). In Tagore’s vision Visva Bharati was to be completely cosmopolitan, and yet ‘local’. Through Visva Bharati, he wanted to bring East and West together as equals, undaunted by the asymmetry of power; equally importantly, he wanted to bring the university close to the community. As he said in a speech deeply critical of universities in colonial India:

*In every country, education is connected intrinsically to the life processes of its people. But in India, our educational system connects only to a few professions - such as law, accounting, medicine, policing and petty administration. Where the tiller tills, the miller toils at his grinding mill or the potter works at his wheel. (...) This education has no reach whatsoever (...). If India had even one real university - then from its very inception (...) it would strive to create an integral organic connection between the community of its students and teachers and the livelihoods of the communities around it. (...) I would call such an ideal university ‘Visvabharati’ (Tagore’s speech Visvabharati, 1919; my translation)*

Accordingly, alongside Visva Bharati, Tagore established a second campus with an Institute for Rural Development. Young professionals trained in a variety of disciplines took up the task of social change along with the local communities. Tagore strongly believed that social change must also have a cultural dimension. Visva Bharati therefore saw the flourishing of a whole range of art and music, from the West to the East, and a particularly strong emphasis on the revival of local folk art, music and the centuries-old folk philosophy whose humanism had deeply influenced Tagore. It produced one of India’s most famous and revolutionary sculptors – who came from the local indigenous community. His life-size sculptures depicting the working life of these communities now adorn the campus.

Neither Visva Bharati nor the Institute of Rural Development could realize Tagore’s vision. The reasons lie in part in politics, but in another very large part in what I was referring to above: the self-understanding of academics and in turn, their understanding of ‘legitimate’ knowledge. I am

very glad to see that *Universitas Forum* is contributing to overcoming some of the barriers between ‘legitimate’ knowledge and marginalized knowledge(s).

**Rita Cassisi:** Alliances with local universities is strategic because it points to high-level training for human capital at grassroots level, where it is directly requested. We must recognize that the further away from the capital, the more we face a shortage of strategic and specific capacities and competencies. So we tend to import them from the center, but only for short periods and often with a superficial understanding of the context. This leads to very short-lived impact on the local context. In the rare cases where specialized and skilled professionals are available, often trained by international cooperation or government, they leave at the first opportunity for a better contract elsewhere. It's a kind of brain drain, typical of developing countries, both as an internal phenomenon, from the periphery to the center and internationally, toward North America or Europe. We cannot forget that in order to engage processes of sustainable local economic development, expert practitioners and decision makers are required: local campuses of the University, fortunately a growing phenomenon, provide for the training of human resources, which remain rooted in the territory and in connection with it. Universities and research institutes are also less influenced by political dynamics, and less exposed to the spoil system. They can produce and disseminate knowledge starting from the bottom, with the participation of the real protagonists of the development process. For us at UN Women this is certainly a successful practice, which produced excellent results and we are willing to continue to experiment.

**Bianca Pomeranzi:** We are witnessing the globalization of communications and of relationships. It is therefore strategic to promote South-South cooperation, as the exchange of experiences and practices among countries that are willing to work on common tools and common lessons learned. We need to identify concrete drivers of change, they already exist in our times and overcome traditional dynamics of women's exclusion, both in public and private sectors. The local context is key: territories must communicate directly with each other, even without passing via national centers. South-South cooperation is full of potential. Think, for instance, of what Latin America and Southern Africa can share in terms of experiences and policies. In the context of South-South cooperation, exchanges among territories can be enhanced by the facilitating role of universities. Universities which are able to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge, that do not shut themselves in a closed circuit, potentially can develop a real understanding of societies, offer valuable spaces for reflection and action for change for both men and women belonging to different generations and with different histories behind them.

Universities should raise the voice of the territories where they operate and show new ways forward. Even international cooperation, far from providing general, undifferentiated aid subordinated to nation states' requests, should develop specific attention, services and aid, easily accessible, directly from local contexts. Cooperation in this sense would accompany the decentralization process and instead of acting *only* at interstate level, as is usually the case with the United Nations, should be able to dialogue and interact with the intermediate levels. We also need to reflect on the direct relationship with civil society in the traditional sense: it can be misleading because often associations and NGOs become intermediaries, delegates with a voice and a vote *in place* of women and men who end up not exercising their full citizenship. In time of great change and transition it is necessary to look for intermediate players and their

transnational networks. Universities can help in that. It's important to let women speak and express themselves at these intermediate levels. In Central America, for example, we can count with 20 years of experience in local economic development, always intervening at the local and intermediate levels.

I especially support the strategic collaboration between universities and local economic development agencies. The Central American experience is very positive: we started our interventions at the end of bloody internal conflicts of the 80's, when peace and development were still to be imagined and built. Unfortunately, to my knowledge Development Agencies have not been as successful in Africa or in other contexts, such as Lebanon, or Senegal, where there were already too many international actors, given the huge presence of international cooperation. In Palestine for instance, we tried to implement a program of local economic development for women, but only with great difficulty because of the conflict, and because of the relationship between the PLO and the territory, which is unfortunately very hierarchical and top-down. Such contexts suffocate the spring of territories and local spaces which I mentioned previously.