

NOTE FROM THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

In June 2009, the United Nations Women's Fund (then UNIFEM, now UN Women), organized a meeting on "[Local development and women's empowerment: generating guidance and learning to inform policy and practice](#)" at the FAO Headquarters in Rome. The meeting brought together representatives from several UN agencies, the KIP Universitas Programme, Modena and Ferrara Universities, the Royal Tropical Institute and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, and sought to develop guidance for advancing women's empowerment and rights through local development, building on the experiences of development actors working on these issues.

One of the areas identified for follow-up was to strengthen networking and partnerships to systematically bring together research and action on how local development initiatives can actually encourage the expression of women's transformative agency and their empowerment and also contribute to human development. What strategies, tools and methodologies should be employed if local development is to have a positive impact from a women's empowerment perspective? What experiences have achieved positive results in this sense? What lessons can be derived for future actions and policies?

The participants underlined the need to strengthen knowledge generation and dissemination on these issues, taking into consideration:

- that strategic alliances between universities and research institutions and other actors working on local development and women's empowerment should be strengthened so as to promote the research-policy-practice nexus;
- that work at local level needs better documentation, and should be produced in ways that are "reader-friendly" and in attractive formats and mediums;
- the need to exchange innovative ways of addressing challenges that are faced in several contexts;
- the opportunity to develop case studies and other teaching material that can support university teaching and capacity building for development actors related to these issues.

The present issue of *Universitas Forum* is the result of a project designed as a contribution to meeting these needs. It has been a collaboration among several institutions: UN Habitat, UN Women's MyDEL Programme, the Huairou Commission and IDRC. Experts from each of these organizations participated in the editorial advisory board for this issue, together with a gender advisor from the Italian Development Cooperation and two senior academics working on gender and development, from the University of Ferrara in Italy, and York University in Canada. Our sincere thanks and admiration go to these women whose commitment and intellectual contributions have been so fundamental to this project.¹

In November 2010, we launched a call for experiences, tools and methodologies that the women involved considered to be examples of how decentralization reforms and local

¹ Members of the editorial advisory board are Eileen Alma, IDRC, Canada; Rita Cassisi, UN Women, Guatemala; Lucia Kiwala, UN Habitat, Kenya; Ananya Mukherjee, York University, Canada; Bianca Pomeranzi, Italian Development Cooperation; Gabriella Rossetti, University of Ferrara, Italy; Sarah Silliman, Huairou Commission, United States.

development strategies have been conducive to them in expressing their agency and in empowering them, economically, socially and politically. Over fifty applications came in, from Africa, Asia and Latin America and, with the participation of the members of the editorial board, we selected sixteen of them to receive a small grant to allow the experience to be documented and systematized in the form of a case study, video, teaching tool or other formats that could be published on the *Universitas Forum* electronic platform and contribute to policy, practice and teaching. Apart from the experiences of ‘Women Plan Toronto’ and the ‘GELD project in Mozambique’, the cases published in the “In Practice” section of this issue were produced with the support of these small grants which have allowed local women’s groups to work with researchers and video makers, or simply take the time to document and systematize their own experiences.

We are aware of the many difficulties that local groups have in projecting their knowledge outward to an international audience, starting with language, time, resources and communication skills, but also what is understood in academia and in policy circles as scientific or ‘legitimate’ knowledge. So we are very happy if this issue has contributed to overcoming some of these barriers and hope the dialogue will continue.

Gilda Esposito, Roberta Pellizzoli, Haram Sidibé, Sara Swartz

Rome, February 2012