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Ministero degli
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PRE-CONFERENCE MEETING

AIDE MEMOIRE

**Women in Local Authorities' Leadership Positions:
Approaches to Democracy, Participation, Local Development and Peace**

**Venue: Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy
5 November 2009**

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Approaches to Democracy, Participation, Local Development and Peace
(Florence, Italy, 5 November 2009)

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Gender policies: the State of the Art

Starting from the 70s of the last century, the theme of women's rights and participation in decision-making has gradually assumed an increasing emphasis at the international level. On 18 December 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which represents the main non-binding legal text on women's rights.

The World Conferences of the United Nations held in Mexico City, Cairo, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing, as well as the NGOs parallel forums, have enabled the promotion of a new approach towards women's empowerment.

The Beijing Conference in 1995 asserted for the first time, in the international context, the concepts of "gender mainstreaming" and "women's empowerment"; it also emphasized equal opportunities for access to power and enforced the role of women in decision-making processes.

The Beijing Platform for Action approved by the Beijing World Conference played a key role in encouraging women's political participation by also giving greater importance to women's mobilization.

The Conference asked governments to recognize and guarantee equal opportunities in the access to political institutions as well as a full women's participation in decision-making processes. The Platform for Action also underlined gender equality in institutions and public administrations as well as the full freedom of association and political commitment.

In the wake of Beijing Platform's recommendations, the international community adopted further obligations for the following years. The final document of the 23^o Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, held in 2000, highlighted that women's representations in governments must be increased and, during the same year, the Security Council adopted a gender point of view with the resolution 1325 on the theme of conflicts and commitment to peace.

Furthermore, gender issues have been brought to the fore through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Indeed, two of the eight Goals are designed to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and to improve the maternal health. In 2006 the fiftieth Session of the UN Committee on the Status of Women has reasserted the concept of equal opportunities in access to decision-making processes.

The above-mentioned documents as other produced during these years are not legally binding texts. Nevertheless, a good part of them have been important policy instruments often used by women's movements around the world to affirm gender point of view at the international, national and local level.

1.2 Gender policies in Africa

Over the last twenty years, important commitments on women's political participation have been undertaken also in the African continent. The article 4 of the African Union Charter of 1994 cites the importance of promoting gender equality among the key principles that must be reflected in the policies of the States Parties. During the same year, the Dakar Platform for Action, in preparation for the Beijing Conference, firmly re-affirmed that women, like men, must assume important role at all decision-making levels in diplomacy as in the context of conflicts resolution and peace. The principle behind the African Platform for Action is the adoption of a gender perspective into all policies, plans and actions to promote equality, development and peace. The African plan of action, in order to accelerate the implementation of Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Women's Role Promotion (1999), exhorts governments to develop coordination actions aimed at implementing the principles of the platforms themselves, and to involve NGOs, UN-Agencies and other subjects working on the theme of "gender". The aim is to achieve coordinated policies at local, sub-regional, regional, national and international level.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (Maputo 2003) dedicates a special section to women's rights in Africa. The article number 9 commits parties to implement measures aimed at promoting the participation of women in politics: women should have the right to stand for elections without discrimination, to be equally represented at all institutional levels and to participate in defining development programs and public policies.

The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa adopted in 2004 by the Third Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Heads of State and Government of African Union Member States affirms the importance of promoting gender and equal opportunity policies in all political, cultural and social sectors and in all decision-making processes. In addition, governments of some African countries, such as those belonging to the *Southern African Development Community (SADC)*, have more recently declared their will to reserve to women at least 30% of the appointments in institutions and centres of political decision.

1.3 Decentralization and Gender Policies

During the last decade, the issues of decentralization and local governance have become a priority on the political and institutional agenda of many African countries and of the main international organizations such as the United Nations and European Union.

The approach to the topics of local governance and representation is considered essential to eradicate poverty, promote local development, and bring the institutions closer to the real needs of citizens as well as to foster reconciliation and peace in countries affected by conflicts.

Hence, the local context is not only the basic level but also the level able to articulate the principles of gender equality enshrined in the international documents.

In this context it is very important to highlight the role played by women's participation in local assemblies and governments and the great value of this participation.

Upon the occasion of the United Nations World Summit 2005, the great importance and the role of local authorities have been highlighted for the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals including those contained in the Millennium Declaration¹ both in rural and urban areas. Also in this Summit the necessity for women

¹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, 60/1, 2005 World Summit Outcome.

to take part in the political decision-making process and to have an equitable representation in assemblies and governments has emerged as one of the major premises for the development.

Furthermore, decentralization policies have been recognized as a priority also by the European Union which has promoted a local development approach in its policies. Great attention has been paid to reinforce the role of local authorities and to develop twinnings, networks, and north-south and south-south partnerships among local institutions, by favouring actions aimed to develop gender mainstreaming.

The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) states that “*systematic integration of women augments the democratic basis, the efficiency and the quality of the activities of local government (...) In order to create sustainable, equal and democratic local governments, where women and men have equal access to decision making, equal access to services and equal treatment in these services, the gender perspective must be mainstreamed into all areas of policy making and management in local government*”.

It has been observed that the number of women in local institutions has augmented in those countries which have developed more in depth decentralization processes. That means that women can play an important role so that, on one hand, the local government can produce a positive impact on local communities development and, on the other hand, decentralization can be an important tool for reinforcing the role and political influence of women. Nevertheless, the weight of traditions, customs, stereotypes and discrimination of all kinds, as well as the difficult access to resources continue to hinder a more extensive and effective participation of women in decision-making, including the local level. These obstacles have emerged in the online discussion “*Women, political participation and decision making in Africa*” organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in the autumn of 2007. Despite these difficulties, the participants noted a positive trend in the representation and political participation of women in Africa.

1.4 The Euro-African Partnership and Gender Policies

The Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance, in its mission to support decentralization processes and local governance in the Sub-Saharan Africa has always been focused on the role of women in local assemblies and governments.

During three different study-tours organized in 2007 and 2008, African elected women leaders from local governments of South Africa, Uganda, Ghana, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger and Mali, took part in intensive programs of meetings, visits and conferences, with the participation of representatives of European countries. In those occasions, great attention was paid (i) to south-south and north-south exchange of experiences and best practices, (ii) to the role of women in local governments (iii) and to the establishment of networks of elected women leaders at regional, national, and Euro-African level.

In this sense, the *Pre-Conference Seminar for Elected Women Local Government Leaders* was particularly meaningful. The conference titled: “*Strengthening Women’s Leadership in Local Government for Effective Decentralized Governance and Poverty Reduction in Africa: Roles, Challenges and Strategies*” was organized by UN/DESA, in collaboration with the Euro-African Partnership, in May 2008, in Yaoundé.

The conference was focused on (i) the added value that elected women could bring to the local government, (ii) the exchange of experiences and best practices, and at the same

time, (iii) the need to encourage ad-hoc strategies in order to strengthen the role and participation of women in local institutions. Therefore, women leaders of several African countries agreed to move for the implementation of a Euro-African network in order to consolidate relationship between local women administrators and to encourage the creation of partnerships. The results of the conference were reported in the Ministerial Conference on Leadership Capacity Development for Decentralized Governance and Poverty Reduction held in the following days in Yaoundé.

The final document of the Conference highlighted the important political, economical and cultural challenges which women have to face. As for the challenges in the political sphere, several actions have been recommended to (i) strengthen networks among women, (ii) encourage the composition of women's committees in Ministries of Decentralized Governance or in high-level offices, (iii) adopt laws to fostering positive actions within the political parties and women training in politics.

1.5 The Region of Tuscany and Gender Policies

In Italy, such as in almost all countries, the presence of women in political decision-making processes has not yet reached 30 percent as provided by the Beijing Platform, despite women have reached men and even exceeded them in some areas. This gap must be eliminated and important steps forward must be taken.

Tuscany is the Italian region with the highest number of women elected in the Regional Council (25 percent). Moreover, in the last twenty years, women mayors have risen from 14 to 44. However, they represent only 15 percent of mayors and in most of the cases represent small municipalities.

In recent years, important political decisions made in Tuscany may represent the starting point for faster improvements. The recent Statute of Region Tuscany has strongly reaffirmed among its main aims “*the right to equal opportunities between men and women and the enhancement of gender differences in social, cultural, economic and political life*” thus strengthening and expanding the role of the Regional Equal Opportunities Commission. The increased presence of women in the Regional Council has encouraged the adoption of more significant laws: (i) the law against gender-based violence, which provides assistance to help women victims of violence; (ii) the law which reserves the presence of 50 percent of women in the Region appointments in institutions with a regional interest and (iii) the recent law on “gender citizenship”, which reinforces the right to equality, recognizing gender citizenship as a core principle of all regional policies.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE SEMINAR

The Seminar aims to focus on the added value provided by the presence of women in local institutions in Africa. It also aims to lay the foundations for creating a platform for exchanging Euro-African experiences of women representative of local governments.

In particular, the Seminar will endeavour to:

- Examine best practices on the participation of women administrators in local assemblies and in local governments and their relationships with the civil society;
- Assess the impact women make in local institutions, on the governments agendas and on policies to develop decentralization processes;

- Analyze good governance strategies in those countries which envisage actions to strengthen the role of women in local government in order to foster development and fight against poverty;
- Review programs and projects for the enhancement of female micro-enterprises and microfinance for women;
- Review the strategies adopted within and across countries to enhance the creation of networks of European and African women administrators;
- Define a shared policy agenda which represents a basis of intents to build a Euro-African network of local women administrators.

The debate will focus on three main topics:

- a. Decentralized Governance and Participation: an Overview of Practices with a Gender Prospective;
- b. Women's Role in the Informal Economy and their Contribution to the Local Development;
- c. Strengthening Women's Networks: North-South and South-South Partnerships.

Decentralized governance and participation: an overview of practices with a gender prospective

The final report of the online discussion on “*Women, Political Participation and Decision-Making in Africa*” states that the inclusion of women in political life is a victory for democracy and a non-negligible contribution to the socio-economic and politico-cultural solution². Their leadership is pragmatic rather than ideological and is based on logics of participation involving stakeholders and civil society.

The participation of women in policy-making process ensures a better quality to African politics.

In particular, women leaders at local level (i) provide a new policy based on greater effectiveness and inclusiveness; (ii) have a central role in mediation and in the organization of daily life and social group dynamics; (iii) demonstrate a better capacity to tackle economic and social issues; and (iv) ensure a strong expansion of democracy.

The statistics and the commitments made by some governments evidence the launch of new processes on the political role of women in Africa, but the path to achieve gender equality in key policy areas is still a distant goal to be achieved.

It has been found that in most African countries the presence of women in national institutional levels is higher than in the local levels and the trend is exacerbated by the introduction of “female quotas”. This circumstances contrasts with other parts of the world such as Europe and North America where the presence of women at the local level is higher than at the national level.

The peculiarities of the African situation require the need to focus not only on "female quotas" but also on the skills of women in policy-making which also require levels of education, targeted training, access to information, rules on the financing of politics, etc.

² “Online discussion on Women, political participation and decision-making in Africa” organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in cooperation with the E-Network of National Gender Equality Mechanisms in Africa in September 4 – October 14, 2007.

Furthermore, effective monitoring mechanisms and instruments for the dissemination of best practices are necessary.

Women's role in the informal economy and their contribution to the local development

Women are the "engines of the African economy", performing a fundamental role for the family economy.

Indeed, women develop an increasing role in defining and investigating the forms of endogenous economic and social development, through the organization of the capillary activities in the villages, and also new forms of social and economic organization in the endless suburbs of large cities.

In many African countries, agriculture is the main economic activity and women's work occupies a predominant role. However most of them have no access to land ownership or right to credit.

Women have a predominant role in the widespread informal economy homogenous issues such as small trade and hand-craft business, which are often poorly remunerated or unpaid and without any kind of social and legal protection.

This session aims to deepen the theme of the role that decentralization and local government can play in facilitating local development and to enhance the resources and skills available in the territories, from an environmental and social sustainability point of view. We must also consider "whether and how" the presence of women in assemblies and in local government, starting from their unique role in the local economy, can stimulate new opportunities for local development and qualification of economic activity.

Strengthening women's networks: north-south and south-south partnerships

The political weight of women in the local politico-institutional life can only depend on the unity and good organization of women.

First of all it is important to move towards the setting-up and maintenance of ongoing relationships between civil society organizations and elected women local government leaders. The areas in which women's organizations of civil society are most active are those relating to issues of violence against women, conflict management, violation of human rights and those on reproductive health, environment, health and education.

Secondly, an organized presence of women in national and supranational associations of local authorities should be fostered. Furthermore, the establishment of structured network of women local government leaders including south-south and north-south networks and especially those between Europe and Africa will enable to reinforce local governance logics and trends.

Within this context, the Seminar is intended to be an opportunity to exchange experiences and to initiate a joint work between women local government leaders' networks in Europe and Africa. Hence, the overriding purpose of the Seminar is to address debates concerning the promotion of good governance, participation and innovation and their implications in fighting against poverty and promoting processes of reconciliation and peace.

3. PARTICIPANTS

The Seminar participants will include:

- Elected women leaders from local governments in Africa.
- Representatives of European municipalities and councils.
- Other experts and practitioners including:
 - UCLGA (Union of Cities and Local Governments of Africa);
 - Council of European Municipalities and Regions;
 - African and European civil society women groups;
 - United Nations officials and representatives from academia specializing in decentralization and gender equality issues.

4. VENUE AND DATES

The Conference will be held at the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy on 5 November 2009. The women administrators will also attend the Second Conference of African and European Local and Regional Institutions to be held on 6-7 November 2009 in Florence. The recommendations of this Seminar will be presented during the Second Conference of African and European Local and Regional Institutions.

5. CONTACT PERSONS

1: Euro-African Partnership

Ms. Valentina Tronconi,
Via Cavour, 18
I-50129 Florence, Italy
Tel: 39 055 2387486; fax: 39 055 2666006
E-mail: conferenzeuroafrica@consiglio.regione.toscana.it

2: Regional Council of Tuscany

Ms. Cinzia Sestini
Ufficio Attività internazionali
Via Cavour, 26
I – 50129 – Florence, Italy
Tel. +39 055.238.7285 Fax +39.2387352
E-mail: conferenzeuroafrica@consiglio.regione.toscana.it

3: UNDESA

A: DPADM

- Dr. John-Mary Kauzya, Chief
Governance and Public Administration Branch
Division for Public Administration and Development Management, Department
of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations
DC 2 Room 1742, Two UN PLAZA, NY, 10017, New York, USA
Tel: 1 - 212 963 1973; Fax: 1 - 212 963 2916; E-mail: kauzya@un.org
Website: www.unpan.org

- Ms. Adriana Alberti, Governance and Public Administration Officer, Division for Public Administration and Development Management, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations
E-mail: alberti@un.org

B: DESA/Office in Rome

- Ms. Stefania Senese,
Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 251, 00186 Rome, Italy
Tel. +390668136320 ext.110; E-mail: senese@un.org