

Uganda's Decentralization Program and its Consequences for Women's Empowerment – Summary and Results

Uganda's decentralization program from 1986 onwards is regarded as one of the furthest reaching reform programs of local government and administration world wide. Under the legal framework created by the Local Government Statute (1993), the 1995 Convention and the Local Government Act (1997) a Local Council (LC) System was set up at five different government levels ranging from village to district level. Following the goals of Uganda's ambitious decentralization program the Local Councils shall play a significant role in poverty reduction within rural areas. However, there is disagreement on the program's effectiveness, especially concerning its contribution to poverty reduction.

The increase in local power and resource autonomy following decentralization can mean significant improvements for the local population – especially when it comes to satisfying local needs.

On the other hand the persistence of traditional power structures on the local level are not to be underestimated. Without additional measures (like affirmative action- and awareness-raising campaigns or clear juridical provisions) decentralization can further deepen the kind of local power structures that tend to exclude women from the aspired improvements. In the case of Uganda, decentralization experiences are somehow contradictory.

Decentralization and its consequences for women's empowerment

In my study I try to explore, whether women in Uganda can participate in this local gain of power – power understood along the lines of the “empowerment-approach” as additional capabilities, possibilities and choices. Rodenbach and Wichterich's “Empowerment matrix” served as a frame of analysis for my research.

Reliability of formal law (juridical empowerment)

The introduction of a local jurisdiction paralleling the formal states law lead to a strengthening of customary law at the local level. Especially in its modern interpretation traditional customary law impedes women's access to land and property. Moreover, the parallel existence of both formal and customary law and institutions further increased women's insecurity and confusion about juridical matters.

Appropriation of existing law (*juridical Empowerment*)

In Uganda, women's experiences with this new local jurisdiction are often disappointing: First, the informal fees to Local Councillors are often higher than official court fees. Secondly, due to the patrilocality of marriage prevailing in Uganda, women often do not encounter neutral courts. Disappointed with the "rule of person" prevailing in Local Councils, women increasingly seek the assistance of magistrate courts, professional law institutes or state's employees, who they expect to act according to the "rule of law".

Influence on political institutions – representation and participation (political empowerment)

Due to the Local Council System in Uganda the local populations' opportunities for political participation have generally improved. As a consequence of the affirmative action program which reserves one third of all council seats for women delegates, women's participation was encouraged. However, elections for the "women's seats" are not secret, which lowers participation rates at these elections. Therefore, women delegates often enjoy lesser political legitimacy than their male colleagues.

In general, positive correlations between Uganda's decentralization program and the influence of women's groups on local politics were observed, with heads of women's groups often having senior positions in Local Councils. However, this does not necessarily mean that women in Local Councils can and want to represent women's interests and push forward their demands, especially when they encounter their (male) Council members' resistance.

Overall, only one third of all women take advantage of their right of and opportunity to political participation. Additional measures such as awareness-raising campaigns and training can make it easier for local women to take the opportunity to political participation offered by the decentralization program.

Participation in Community Programs (social empowerment)

Assuming a higher sustainability of community-owned projects under the decentralization program, Local Councils and local NGOs seek cooperation when providing local public services and development projects. Women in Uganda are traditionally very involved in local community projects, especially those concerning health care and water provision. They often do the major part of the work involved. Nevertheless, men who represent the elite of the local communities, claim ownership of and guidance over these projects – an attitude that triggers heavy conflicts and, ultimately, results in decisions contrary to women's interests.