



Inclusive Local Governance, Representation and Affirmative Action

THE PROPOSITION

There is need for a balanced approach between the design of representational arrangements and affirmative action measures if equity in political representation is to be achieved in local governance. UNDP believes that equity in political representation can be achieved through active support to electoral, legal and political party reforms including, but not limited to, the introduction of special measures such as quotas, either on institutions or on the political parties that contest elections to those institutions (see: HDV040,2004). UNDP's approach is to generate, and use as the basis of policy advice, knowledge on the various options of affirmative action in local governance as well as to help develop an understanding of how representational arrangements, including the electoral system and framework for political parties, function with respect to inclusion of women and other disadvantaged groups.

THE CONTEXT

The various electoral systems adopted at the local level are intended to ensure the fundamental democratic principle of fair and adequate representation in different ways. Majoritarian systems generally try to do so on the basis of relatively small, ward-based, constituencies, whilst proportional representation (PR) systems seek to ensure representation of as many parties (or interest groups that they represent) as possible on the basis of larger constituencies. The success of the respective approaches varies, depending on the circumstance. It is generally assumed that PR systems yield outcomes that allow for more equitable representation, especially for women. However, the evidence is equivocal – and a great deal depends on how political parties function and how their electoral lists are established. The choice between direct and indirect election of members of councils at a higher level of local government also plays a major part in deciding representational outcomes. As one goes 'up' the local governance system, indirect elections seem inevitably to favour greater male and elite representation. Hence, whilst indirect systems may provide for greater 'geographical' representation in higher tiers of local government (as they typically consist of members from all lower-tier councils within the constituency), direct systems are probably more likely to result in a more equitable 'socio-political' representation. Also, direct elections, would, *a priori*, typically increase the chances of non-elite representation. All of the above factors structure representation in decentralized governance and all too often the combined impact is one of exclusion. In local governance, quotas are widely used to increase representation – particularly of women – to help counteract this exclusion. However, in many cases the introduction of quotas is too little, too late, with the overall design of representational arrangements having produced a long-standing pattern of exclusion. For this reason, affirmative action is in itself not a panacea for addressing under-representation.

THE EVIDENCE

As noted above the electoral system in itself plays a role in representational outcomes but may not be sufficient to ensure equitable representation. In [Indonesia](#) for example, under the old (pre-2004 electoral system), closed list PR did remarkably little to ensure adequate or equitable representation of women in local governance. Thus, PR as an electoral system is no guarantee of adequate representation if political parties remain elite-dominated or patriarchal. In such cases affirmative action measures may be necessary and evidence does suggest that these have indeed led to increased representation of women and other disadvantaged groups in local government as well as changing underlying power relations and attitudes. However, there are considerable differences in outcomes depending on the form of affirmative action put in place. In [Namibia](#), where the Local Authorities Act of 1992 requires that party list include a certain number of women, it has led to women holding 45 per cent of seats at the local level. Such party list quotas have proven successful in other countries as well. When affirmative action takes the form of reserved seats, emerging evidence suggests that when women and representatives of other disadvantaged group are directly elected they tend to be more empowered and representative of 'their' constituencies than those who are appointed by the elected councils, local administrators or others. However, even when reserved seats are filled by direct elections equitable representation may suffer if elections to higher tiers of local government are indirect, as has been the case in [Nepal](#). This is also the case if elections of council Chairs are indirect, e.g. in [Pakistan](#) where out of 6,400 council Chairs available, only 11 are occupied by women from a pool of 36,000 women in local government. Evidence suggests that when regulations for affirmative action are vaguely formulated there is a higher risk that they are not correctly implemented ([Dahlerup 2002](#)). Further, when affirmative action measures at the local level are not replicated at the national level they may prove to be less effective. Thus evidence suggests that more inclusive local governance may ultimately depend on suitable affirmative action measures for the specific political context as well as the existence of a conducive legislative framework and electoral system. (For an in-depth discussion on this topic see further e.g., [UNDP Background Paper on Representation in Decentralized Governance \(2005\)](#)).

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