Decentralization Measures and Gender Equalities: Experiences in Uganda♦

Fumihiko SAITO

Faculty of Intercultural Communication, Ryukoku University

I   Introduction
II   Women and the NRM
 2-1   Women and the LC System
 2-2   Women Councillors within the LC System
 2-3   Women outside of the LC System
 2-4   Struggle over Small-scale Activities at Grassroots
 2-5   Donor Influences in Different Districts
III   Conclusions

Decentralization is a process through which a central government transfers authority and functions to sub-national units of the government. Normally there is a cluster of measures involved in this process, and thus decentralization is a shorthand expression. It is one of the most frequently pursued institutional reform efforts in developing countries, particularly since the late 1980s. The rationale for decentralizing measures derives from diverse origins and are intended to contribute to democratization, to more efficient public administration, to more effective development, and to "good governance."

One of the issues in promoting decentralized governance is to encourage participation of the socially weak. In this paper, investigation is made on how Uganda's decentralization endeavors foster one of the most significant disadvantaged social groups: women. Uganda is

one of the pioneering countries in implementing a clearly defined decentralization policy and is

closely watched by other African countries.   Thus, lessons from Uganda in advancing women's

participation in decision-making process are useful to policy makers and donors.

I Introduction

Unlike most of the other sub-Saharan African countries, Uganda is unique at least in

three viewpoints.   First, the various structural reforms including decentralization that the

current administration of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) has been undertaking since

it took its power in 1986, were not entirely "donor driven."   Instead they were born out of the

aspiration of the Ugandans who do not wish to repeat the unfortunate post-independence history.

Donors and international agencies, particularly the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund (IMF), have played a very influential role in the reform process, but the government of

Uganda has demonstrated a genuine commitment to reform policies.   This kind of commitment

has not been so obvious in other African countries.

Second, the NRM asserts that it is adopting an "indigenous" African democracy in the

country.   Decentralization in Uganda is a test case for an African style of institutional

arrangement.   This is a "movement" in which all kinds of political forces are represented in a

unitary polity in order to prevent sectarianism to tear the country into apart.   The movement

system allows political parties to exist on paper, but does not allow them to engage in

substantial party activities.   Apparently this policy is criticized by those parties who oppose the

current movement.   But the people in Uganda are generally supportive to the current

movement system, which brought general peace and economic recovery since the late 1980s.

In the movement system, the NRM introduced the Resistance Council (RC) throughout the country when it took power.   This is a hierarchy of Councils and committees at five administrative levels from villages to districts.   The RC system was renamed as the Local Council (LC) in 1995 when the new Constitution was promulgated.   The LC still continues to be one of the most important foundations for the current movement polity.   The LC system is a mechanism used by the NRM to deliver its messages to people and also a one utilized by the people to express their views and to participate in local decision-making processes.   Without the LC system, the movement system presents few opportunities for popular participation.   The NRM maintains that people can fully participate in politics through the LC and not through competitions by political parties.   Thus, the LC system and the movement polity are two sides of the same coin.

Third, the LC system is not only for political democratization, but also is intended to serve as an effective mechanism for development in Uganda which still suffers from pervasive poverty despite the impressive macro economic growth since the late 1980s.   Indeed, the NRM is pursuing decentralization measures seriously, and the LC system is expected to play a crucial role.   With the LC system, it is anticipated that locally elected political leaders (Local Councillors) make visions for development and these visions are implemented by local administrators.   Ordinary people express their views and participate in planning and implementing local development activities.   With this process, funds are used more effectively and efficiently, and the living conditions for Ugandans are expected to improve.

The LC system was originally proposed, in the early days of NRM in power, as a

"democratic organs of the people" in order to establish "effective, viable and representative Local Authorities" (Uganda, Republic of, 1987).   Since then a number of important steps have been taken.   In 1993 a first thirteen districts were decentralized, and they were given the authority to retain a proportion of locally generated revenue.   A new Constitution of 1995 clearly stipulates the principles and structures of the LC system.   Following this new Constitution, the Local Governments Act, 1997 was enacted.   This Act provides the legal framework of the LC system today and has streamlined institutional relationships between the Council and administrative hierarchies headed by central ministries.

The LC system today is a consultative forum for local decision making.   Elected Chairpersons of the Council form executive committees at respective levels and propose policies for their legislative bodies of the Council, which are formed by the representatives of the people.   The decisions are implemented by their civil service staff.   The LC system is most clearly structured at district (LC 5) level, where district development plans are made and important policies are decided for the district.   The actual public services are provided by sub-county (LC 3) level, where extension officers and community development workers are allocated.   There are a number of positive contributions by the evolutions of the local government structure.

II Women and the NRM

Many developing countries suffer from gender inequalities.   Uganda is no exception. According to the government statistics, 55% of women are illiterate compared with 36% of men.

Women contribute more than 80% of food production.   Although 97% of the women have access to land, only 7% actually own land.   Women-headed- households are more likely to be poor than other households (Uganda, MoGCD, 1995).[1]   Recently the HIV/AIDS epidemic tends to reinforce gender inequality in health conditions of women as well as their socio-economic status (Obbo, 1998).[2]

In order to reduce such gender imbalances, the NRM government has been taking measures.   The NRM created the Ministry of Women in Development in 1988.   In 1993, with the passage of the National Women's Council Statute, the government established the National Association of Women's Organizations of Uganda, which took over what was formerly the National Council of Women created earlier by Idi Amin in 1978.   This is basically a parastatal umbrella organization for women's NGOs.   This 1993 Statute also established a hierarchy of Women's Councils from village to district levels, which is exactly parallel to the LC system. This Women's Council hierarchy is overseen by the National Women's Council at the central level.   The two parallel Councils are linked through the Secretary of Women at each layer of the pyramid structures, who is a member of the LC and attends the Women Council meetings as well.

Through these structures the NRM government has been promoting women's participation in decision-making processes at various levels.   The new Constitution expresses explicitly the concern for gender equality.   At the national level, the current Vice President of the country is a woman, and the number of women cabinet ministers and the state ministers has

---

[1] Appleton (1996) calls more careful interpretation of data rather than accepting this assumption uncritically.

[2] For a review of gender situation in Uganda, see Gopal and Salim, 1998; Musisi, 1995; Snyder, 2000; Tripp, 1994, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, and 2001; and World Bank 2001.

been steadily increasing since 1986.   Women represent 18% at the national Parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2001).   The proportionate representation of women in these institutions at the national level is considered to be one of the highest in Africa (Goetz, 1998, p. 253).

At the district level, all forty-five Chairpersons of LC 5 (governors) are men, while forty out of forty-five Vice Chairperson of LC 5 are women.   A recent survey to examine the gender ratio of District Councillors reveals that on average 40% of Councillors are female. There is some variation in this gender representation.   The highest 59% is noted in Bugiri District, while the lowest 28% is in Masindi District (Uganda, MoFPED and UNDP, 2000, Table A 1.2).[3]   This signifies that most of the female Councillors at the district level are the women Councillors whose seats are reserved by the Local Governments Act, 1997, which requires that at least one-third of the Councillors need to be women.[4]   The affirmative action taken by the NRM is, therefore, quite significant to boost the representation of women.   The precise degree of women's representation is different from one type of LC to another, but this general tendency, in which a significant proportion of women were elected through women's reserved quota, is noteworthy.

The reasons why the NRM have been enthusiastic to support women derive from several factors.   First of all, during the guerrilla war to topple the previous government, women's contribution was significant.   Some women fought alongside with men.   Others were involved as intelligence personnel, nurses and other support staff.   "Women were

---

[3] The reason why Masindi and other districts are below the legal obligation of one-third is unknown.   Some female Councillors may have passed away since the last election in 1997/98, and by-elections may not have yet conducted to fill the vacant posts.

[4] The Electoral Commission reports that 2.6% of candidates are female among those directly elected by the constituencies.   Other women candidates are elected on the affirmative action basis (Uganda, the Electoral Commission, 1999).

obviously very active in the all important functions of the RCs: to provide food for the guerrillas, just as they participated in the secret meetings of the Resistance Councils" (Tidemand, 1994b, p. 78).   These women's efforts helped the NRM to obtain power, and therefore the government would like to reward their contribution (Mugyenyi, 1998, p. 134).[5]

Second, the NRM itself was committed to open up social and political space, which was one of the lessons that the NRM learned in order not to repeat the miserable post-independence history of this country.   A new form of women's participation in the RC system originally "did not appear too threatening" to elder village leaders, "although the participation of women in council matters or in warfare clearly was seen as something new or 'unusual'" (Tidemand, 1994b, p. 79).[6]

Third, these reasons, however, do not preclude the political calculation that in order to secure electoral victory, women, constituting half of the population, are an important constituency.   Thus, increasing women's representation would make an important political appeal to this crucial constituency.

The reasons were fairly influential.   Women in Uganda in general and in Buganda in particular have gone through fundamental changes in their relations to society in the twentieth century.   The introduction of the RC/LC system was critical, since this was the first formal institution which granted women their rights to participate in decision-making processes both at

---

[5] Accordingly to Sylvia Tamale, "women's significant contribution to the five-year guerrilla struggle may added to Museveni's realization that indeed women can perform as well, if not better, than men in traditionally 'male' jobs. Apart from participating in active combat, women played a significant role in the task of recruiting, espionage, procurement of supplies, and attending the sick and injured" (Tamale, 1999, p. 19).

[6] Vincent, based on her fieldwork in a village in the late 1960s, notes that normally leaders' positions were taken by men.   "The basic determinants of elite rank in Gondo are sex and maturity.   No woman and no young or single man can acquire elite positions, and the institutionalization of extramarital sexual activity serves to support the overall ranking system of the community whose first principle is gerontocratic privilege" (Vincent, 1971, p. 231).

central and local levels.   The LC system undoubtedly provided opportunities in which their

empowerment can take place (Tidemand, 1994b, p. 115).

The relation between women and the NRM regime is, however, ambiguous.   On the

one hand, women are generally supportive to the NRM.   Thanks to the less authoritative nature

of this regime and to the social stability and economic recoveries brought by the NRM since it

took power, many associational activities of women are made possible.   Under the NRM

government, various small-scale development activities at the grassroots can take place.   Some

of them are very relevant for women's daily needs.   Although this process itself is a struggle

between men and women over respective gender roles, women appeared to have increased their

autonomy in grassroots activities fairly significantly.

On the other hand, they are sometimes very critical of the NRM government as long as

it appears to curtail autonomy of women and/or to reinforce gender inequalities.   When women

attempt to go beyond what the regime is currently prepared to accept, that would create a fierce

tension.   The creation of the parallel Women's Council can be seen as another attempt by the

NRM to ensure that women's activities and grassroots movements do not go beyond the

boundaries defined by the NRM itself, since this Council structure is influenced by the NRM

Secretariat.[7]

What is noteworthy is that the current no-party policy in Uganda works in two

contradictory ways for women to mobilize themselves.   On the one hand, the restrictions

placed on political parties enable women to overcome party differences and become united for

common gender concerns within the polity.   On the other hand, since the parties are not

---

[7] See Tripp 2000, particularly chapter 4, for revealing tensions between women's desires for autonomy and the NRM attempts for control.

allowed to operate, women do not have realistic alternatives to secure electoral success. This tends to reduce political influences that women otherwise may enjoy.

Under these circumstances, in order to attain gender equality women work both inside and outside of the LC system. Within the LC, women Councillors struggle to press their issues, although this process still faces various obstacles. Women often use the LC system wisely; women Councillors within the LC system organize their activities to enlarge autonomous space that women can enjoy. The LC system is useful to mobilize grassroots women, especially if mobilization is called for by women Councillors. Outside the LC system, women also demand autonomy from the state. If the current government attempts limit women's opportunities to participate in decision making, women will undoubtedly oppose such attempts. Women sometimes seek alternative forums, if they consider the LC system unsuitable for their purposes. Women defend autonomy of small, informal and unregistered local associations in order to avoid government influences.

This kind of dual strategy has been an evolving process. Initially, women were reluctant to politicize their activities since in the past these activities were counterproductive in inviting state repression against women. But as women gain more influences on politics, and at the same time as the limitations of the state become clear for attaining gender equality, women started to voice their concerns more loudly and clearly. This boldness was backed up by some successful women, especially those professionals in urban areas.

2-1 Women and the LC system

There are various points through which women interface with the LC system.   One of them is elections.   While the method of universal adult suffrage is normal for selecting representatives, an electoral method in choosing specially designated, socially weak groups is still lining behind the candidates.   This creates various problems.   Men tend to prefer women who are linked with dominant village men, and those women who can be readily influenced by powerful men.   Men intend to preserve the existing local power structure.   Additionally, men often prefer to have female candidates with a pretty face!   The Electoral Commission as well as the Ministry of Local Government are currently aware of these problems, and in fact the amendment to the Local Governments Act, 1997 is tabled to the Parliament for discussions. This amendment proposes to adopt the method of secret ballot to be used for women's elections in the future.[8]

This raises a wider problem of the Ugandan political culture in which women are new players of the game.   It is pointed out that in "general, female candidates running in the 1996 parliamentary elections faced greater public ridicule than men."[9]   One woman candidate, who was well educated and articulate and stood in this parliamentary election, reported that most of the votes she received was from men and not from women.   She speculated that women still considered that men would be better leaders than women themselves.   As a result, she could

---

[8] According to the New Vision newspaper of 19 April 2001, the Amendment was passed, but this news article does not inform whether this passage includes the provision of electing women Councillors (Kakande and Mutumba, 2001).

[9] This is commonly cited at the grassroots level.   See, for instance, Tripp, 1998a, p. 88.

not win the election.[10]   A woman chairperson at LC 3 in Mukono also explained that during the election period some rumors trying to undermine her candidacy were spread widely.

On the occasions of elections, women do not necessarily vote for women candidates only because the candidates are being women.   Women acknowledge that while they feel more comfortable with fellow women candidates, being a woman is not a determining factor for choosing suitable representatives in elections.   Other factors like personality, education, and opinions expressed by candidates are very influential in the voting process.   Capabilities and qualifications matter more than a gender factor.

A woman chairperson at LC 3 in Mukono agreed that gender was not the sole determining factor for elections.   But she explained that the gender dimension was nonetheless evident.   Once she was elected, some men ridiculed her.   According to her, these incidents signify that even though men became increasingly aware of women's issues, discrimination still persists.   She felt that advantages of being a women chairperson was for bringing issues of women and children to be addressed in the LC system, which would be often beneficial for local communities.   She maintained that it was a good opportunity for both herself and her husband to think about these issues both personally and publicly.   But disadvantages include the burden placed on the family that some of her family members would have to assist her in looking after the daily needs of the family.   She hesitantly concluded that it might be difficult for women to contest for elections in the future.[11]

Another interface point is the kind of services that the LC system delivers, especially

---

[10] Personal interview, Mary Mugyenyi, independent development consultant, 2 September 1998.   But, Tripp shows the opposite indication that women think they are better or at least as equally good leaders as men.   See Tripp, 1998b, p. 124.

[11] Personal interview, Beatrice Yiga, Women Councillor, Kwapa Sub-County, Tororo, 18 August 1999.

for women.   In numerous villages women expressed that the LC has contributed usefully to

resolving incidents of domestic violence against women.   A recent statistic indicates that 41%

of women are exposed to domestic violence in Uganda (UNDP, 1998, p. 26).   Women need to

pay a certain amount of fee when they ask the LC system to intervene to resolve domestic

violence.   But the fee tends to be relatively expensive for rural women who do not have regular

cash income for their own use.[12]   Although the exact magnitude of improvement over this issue

is hard to gauge, it appears that women appreciate the role of Councillors, especially female

Councillors, in trying to mediate disputes over domestic violence in rural areas.   It would be an

exaggeration to say that the LC system would be able to resolve all disputes for the fairness of

women (Khadiagala, 2001).   But LCs' contribution in dispute settlements is no trivial matter,

and there are some women who express genuine appreciation on this serious issue.

In addition, women also frequently mentioned that improved hygiene at home often

advocated by the LC meetings contributed to reduce incidents of illness of their family members.

This improvement has eased the burden for women because they are the ones most often asked

to look after the sick.   These are no trivial improvements for women at the grassroots level.

2-2 Women Councillors within the LC system

The proportional representation of women at the Councils has increased significantly.

While in the RC system only one out of nine Councillors had to be women, now one-third of the

Councillors are required to be women.   When RC included at least one woman Councillor, it

---

[12] This is called a court fee.   The amount tends to vary slightly from one area to another, but it is around 2000 Ush
(US $ 1.3).   This is also confused by some as a bribe, although this confusion is not very frequent.

was often reported that women's voices were not seriously heard by male colleagues.[13]   It was

often a lonely battle by a single woman in the male dominated local power structure.   Now the

number of women Councillors is increased so that men are increasingly exposed to women's

views.   If women are united within the LC system, chances are more likely that men no longer

treat women's issues insignificantly as they did in the past.   This situation appears to make

women's concerns less marginal than before.   Asked whether the decentralization measures

have done anything good for people in Uganda, some women expressed: "for women, it has

brought a positive change.   In the past, women are rarely represented, and women were not

engaged in policy making.   Now women are engaged in such functions."[14]   Some female

Councillors, particularly at the higher levels, are using the numerical improvement effectively.

For instance, some female LC 5 Councillors appear to be less hesitant to voice their gender

concerns openly.   This open tactics sometimes invite overt and covert resistances by male

counterparts.   But clearly some successful women are now more willing to take direct and

visible approaches in contrast to the low-keyed and informal method of engagement.

In Mukono District Council, there are a couple of women Councillors who are the

members of the executive branch of the Council.   They participated in the Constitutional

Assembly before the current Constitution was formally promulgated, and with this kind of

high-profile experience and background, they have much less anxiety to voice their concerns.

They often receive women visitors serving in lower LCs or Women Councils seeking advice and

suggestions on how some women's issues can be properly addressed in respective Council

---

[13] These accounts are numerous.   See, for instance, Mulyampiti, 1994; and Tripp, 1998b.

[14] Group interview, Joggo, Mukono, 18 August 1999.

systems.[15]

On the other hand, resistance by men for further advancement of women is clearly

persistent.   There appears to be a significant perception gap between men and women in

general, and male Councillors and female counterparts in particular.   Some male Councillors

would not say this openly, but privately acknowledge that in the LC there are already "enough"

women Councilors, and the LCs have to be very careful to women's issues.   But female

Councillors contend that although men have demonstrated improved understanding of women's

and children's issues compared to the past, women still wish men to become more sensitive on

gender issues.   The numerical increase of female representation at the LC decision-making

processes does not automatically guarantee that the decisions are more gender sensitive.

Therefore, the situation of women in Uganda is at a crossroads, being influenced a mixture of

factors.   It is stated:

> women's representatives, even if their numbers expand significantly, cannot be
> expected automatically to be representatives of women.   A feminine presence in
> politics is not the same as a feminist one.   Getting more women into politics is a
> worthy project from the point of view of democratic justice, but the real challenge is in
> institutionalizing gender equity in government policy, and developing [an]
> autonomous power base in civil society to promote these concerns.   Unfortunately,
> the first and the easiest project —increasing the numbers of women in politics — is
> often mistaken for the second.   This is a confusion between the numerical and
> strategic representation of women.   Improving representation of women's interests
> calls for a transformation of politics to legitimize the political status of gender conflict,
> and a transformation of state institutions to eliminate institutionalized male preference
> (Goetz, 1998, p. 251).

Such a transformation is far from easy, but this is not impossible using the existing

---

[15] Personal interviews, Victoria Kakoko Sebagereka, Secretary for Health, Community Services and Child Welfare, Mukono District Council, 13 August 1999; and Mary Nalugo Sekiziyuvu, Deputy Speaker, Mukono District Council, 13 August 1999.

mechanisms of the LC system.   The first option is the women Councillors who are on the affirmative action scheme.   But this itself is not free from problems.   Once they join the LC, there is no legal distinction between those who are elected by the constituencies and those who are sent on the affirmative action scheme.   The women Councillors, however, who are elected as women's representatives, tend to be treated in reality as a kind of junior partners within the LC system.   There are some exceptional cases that, for instance, women representative Councillors join the executives of LCs, if they are considered well qualified by the chairperson, but such examples are rare.   Some of those who are elected by constituencies outside of the affirmative action scheme consider that they are in a more suitable position to direct the Councils.   Again this is not said openly but this kind of feeling is undeniable.   This is an especially acute problem for women Councillors, most of who are based on the affirmative action.   One woman Councillor in Tororo mentioned, "It is difficult to raise issues in the Council meetings.   Some do not pay serious attention.   We women realize that it is better to discuss the issues among women first in order to obtain more support at the official meetings."[16]

Second, there is a specially designated secretary for women at all levels of the LC hierarchy.   The reason for having this female secretary is to institutionalize women's representation by linking LC and Women Council systems.   Whether this functions effectively or not is a different issue.   This primarily depends on the political relationship between this secretary and other Councillors.   Quite often, the women secretary tends to be marginalized and does not function as an effective link between women constituencies and other political leaders.   Her position may become more promising if she can obtain support from other

---

[16] Personal interview, Ms. Bira Osuna, Women Councillor, Kwapa Sub-County, Tororo, 2 June 2000.

women both within and outside of the LC system.   But again the problem is that contacts between women leaders and grassroots women are limited.   As a result, linkages between the LC system and the Women's Council remain weak.   Therefore, some contacts need to be initiated at least partially by women leaders at various levels in order to enhance the collaboration between the LC and the Women's Council systems.

Additional issues preventing women in the LC system from becoming fully effective include that many women Councillors still need more training and support.   They particularly need more skill training on leadership, lobbying and budgeting.   While the budgeting process is essential to secure funds to meet their gender needs, budgeting seems to be an extremely difficult subject for most of the Councillors, especially female Councillors.   This is probably the single most important area, in which many women Councillors would really wish to be trained.   Some people explained, "We receive explanations only after the office makes budgets.   It is difficult to understand the language of budgeting."[17]   Budgeting is like a particular kind of language.   As with a language, unless one is used to it, one cannot understand it.   There is no particular "smartness" required to "master" it, but one needs to be reasonably "fluent" with it.

There have already been some training programs provided to Councillors including women in leadership and some presentation of their views.   For instance, the training programs provided by the Decentralization Secretariat, of course, include women Councilors as a part of targeted beneficiaries.   But as happened before, training for women needs to be adjusted for their needs and responsibilities which they bear inside and outside of their houses.   The

---

[17] Group interview, Ndeeba, Mukono, 21 August 1999.

women's double burden of being Councillors and of being a mother and/or a wife at home is really demanding, and designing of training programs should cater for this.   Unless somebody at the houses of female Councillors shares household duties, women find it difficult to attend training away from home.   One of the consequences of these difficulties is the issue for reelection.   There appears to be a tendency for those who do not seek reelection to be Councillors of disadvantaged background, including women.[18]

2-3 Women outside of the LC system

Since women are aware that penetrating into the LC system is never easy, they also pursue gender equity outside of the LC system as well.   There seems to be a gradual evolution of strategies over time.   Women at first avoided consciously making political claims in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.   Women generally did not seek direct confrontation with the state since this might backfire against them in reducing their autonomy.   This was also partly because they feared the direct engagement with the state would lead women into corruption and co-optation by the existing power structure (Goetz, 1998, p. 256).

But some women's groups pursue different approaches today because avoiding confrontation has its own limitations.   One of the critical issues is that without directly addressing power relationships between men and women in the society, some women's concerns cannot be fully realized - the concerns getting even more serious under the economic austerities implemented by the government with the support of the international financial institutions.

---

[18] For instance, group interview, Ksege, Rakai, 1 August 2000.

> During economic restructuring and democratization, male politicians have sought to convince women that their interests were served by the current politicians, while at the same time they deny women additional benefits.   This has pushed women toward greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine and affect their status in societies that have distinct cultural traditions and historical experiences (Mikell, 1997, p. 5).

At the same time, as the number of women getting into local and national politics has increased, direct and indirect engagements with the state structures appear to be initiated cautiously. Women's groups, particularly those led by more educated and professional women leaders, are now more likely to engage with the state directly in trying to advocate women's political as well as socio-economic agendas including legal rights in access to land and protection against domestic violence.   Debates over women's access to land under the Land Act, 1998, are one such example where women openly voice their views.   This often invites reactions by critics, some of whom are genuinely opposed to women's concerns.   But this open process is a strategy adopted by women based on their earlier experiences that such direct engagement is necessary and perhaps inevitable.

This is related directly and indirectly to what is happening at the grassroots as well. As varieties of small-scale development projects are now operated at the grassroots level, this may influence women's activities significantly in the years to come.   Often these projects support women's practical needs: for instance, securing food, water, schools for children, and health clinics for rural people.   As these women gain more confidence in organizing their activities, they may feel less constrained to get connected with other women.   Some are willing to get in touch with elite women sitting in the offices of District Councils.   A crucial point to note is that women are far more networked than any other category of people in Uganda.   This is especially true in areas where government services still remain haphazard despite

decentralized service provisions.　Some women in Tororo frankly expressed their reasons why women are good in networking:

> We are in a poor area.　We would like to meet with women in richer areas to learn from them.　We would like to ask them to transfer their skills and knowledge to us, for example, modern agricultural practices.　We wish to know how they become rich.[19]

Clearly in this process of networking, women leaders, including those Councillors, have a role to play.　Although the relationship between women leaders and grassroots women are not free from frictions, there are some mutually empowering links gradually started to emerge as well.[20] In this sense, small-scale development activities conducted by grassroots women are far from trivial.

2-4 Struggle over Small-scale Activities at Grassroots

The process of organizing these activities at the grassroots mirrors the LC system, because the process at LCs is also a being negotiated and accommodated between men and women over respective roles.　In numerous instances, women still face some objections by men, when they try to organize such activities.　Women express, for instance, "husbands do not like their wives to attend and join group activities.　These husbands do not know what the group is doing.　They are just ignorant."[21]　Women cited that one reason why men tended to

---

[19] Group interview, Allupe, Tororo, 30 May 2000.

[20] Women do not have monolithic solidarity (Kyeyune and Goldey, 1999).　Relationship between women in leadership positions, particularly at the national level and ordinary poor women in rural areas, is ambiguous.　On the one hand, the poor women would appreciate if female leaders can help them.　But often they tended to be far from grassroots women both physically and psychologically.

[21] Group interview, Allupe, Tororo, 30 May 2000.

refuse women to organize such activities was that "men wanted to control women." They

continue, "it is apparent that men discussed this among themselves over the drinks. My

husband were asked by his friends that 'how did you approve your wife to join the group?'"[22]

Women try to convince their husband by explaining benefits that men would also receive by

such activities. It is easier for women to persuade their husbands once the results of such

activities are clearly known.

On the other hand, there are some men who joined the women's groups. When asked

why they decided to do so, some men replied:

> When I wanted to join the group, my friends laughed at me and asked me why I am
> following women. My male friends and I attempted to explain what the groups do to
> their friends. Some even tried to convince other men. Some men were, however,
> still suspicious. Some did not like to accept new ideas, especially those who are not
> well educated. But now it becomes easier to work together between men and women.
> Just like the LC has both men and women Councillors, it is no problem to have men
> and women in these groups.[23]

These statements illustrate the struggle of control over decisions by women and men at the

grassroots level. Instead of passive observers of decision being taken by others, the grassroots

women also wish to partake in decision making. Some women commented:

> Men's understanding of women's issues is much better. But again there are some
> men who have not yet sensitized. … But the challenge in the future is that decisions
> over allocation of household resources (including income) should be made jointly with
> women instead men telling women about the results of their decisions. Although this
> decision making issue is better than before, we still need more men to understand
> this.[24]

Although these small-scale development activities form the realm of negotiation and

---

[22] Group interview, Mulanda, Tororo, 20 June 2000.

[23] Group interview, Mulanda, Tororo, 20 June 2000.

[24] Group interview, Allupe, Tororo, 30 May 2000.

bargaining, they tend to generate encouraging outcomes for both men and women.   This

process creates a learning opportunity for both sexes to reconsider their gender roles.   This is

what is taking place in several rural areas in Uganda.   Sometimes these activities are organized

in collaboration with the LC system.   Other times, they are operated outside of the local

authorities.   But the process of engaging in such activities presents a valuable opportunity for

mutual self-reflection over gender roles and possibly mutual collaboration between men and

women.   This process creates tensions and frictions, and sometimes the results are "hijacked"

by some ruling men.   Therefore, there is no guarantee that this process ends up with mutual

empowering outcomes for both men and women.   However, the people, who were not given

the kind of social autonomy before, have started to take advantage of the social space created

within the NRM polity.   This process can yield mutually beneficial outcomes for both men and

women.

2-5 Donor Influences in Different Districts

        The degree of activities supporting women and/or attempting to close gender gaps

varies from one area to another.   In Rakai, partly because the Danish International

Development Assistance (DANIDA) is keen on gender issues, there have been conscious efforts

to assist women in the area.   As a part of the overall efforts to support women in the district,

for example, micro-credit provisions are provided by two intermediary organizations located in

a provincial town of Kyotera in Rakai District.   One of them is the Victoria Building Society

providing micro credit since 1990.   It started to provide loans to women in 1996.   DANIDA

released its first seed money, Ush 30 million (approximately US $ 24,200) in 1998. DANIDA, following the success of the micro-credit schemes in Bangladesh and other Asian countries, recommended a methodology to "make rural women bankable." According to this methodology, women Councillors mobilized rural women at the grassroots level and to form groups of at least five women. The training was provided on management of funds and project activities. A recent evaluation of the DANIDA project generally confirmed the positive contributions made by the credit disbursement by these intermediary institutions (Shepherd, 2000).[25]

In Tororo, the picture is different. There, most of the donor support in relation to decentralization measures has been to enhance administrative capabilities of the district office. Grassroots outreach activities such as micro credit for women are not as active as in Rakai. Decentralized services have brought less significant changes for rural women there than in Rakai.

Although Tororo is relatively worse off, there is no large-scale donor-funded assistance similar to the example of Rakai. But precisely because Tororo is relatively poorer than other areas, women tend to form groups for collective improvements of their lives more than in other areas. This is also partly because this area is outside of traditional kingdoms in Uganda, where hierarchical social order prevailed in the past. Thus, this background appears to contribute to forming such networks. Interestingly enough, women often form local

---

[25] Both individuals and groups can now apply for the loan, whose amount is Ush 100,000 - 300,000 (US $ 66-200) for individuals and Ush 0.5 to 1 million (US $ 333-666) for groups. Women can receive a lower interest rate (17% per year) than the normal rate (22%). Many women apply for this loan for income-generating activities ranging from agricultural production to handicrafts making. Repayment ratio is 97% so far. One woman, who borrowed Ush 200,000 (US $ 133) in her first loan for a pig farm, stated that her financial situation improved and now she is planning to take the second loan (Personal interview, 28 August 1998).

informal groups in this district, and these small groups are connected with each other to form a larger network.   This networking is certainly more active in Tororo than Mukono and Rakai. These networks are apparently expanding.   Some donors, therefore, especially national and international NGOs are encouraged by this spread of women's network and have initiated collaborative activities in such various areas as agricultural production, forestation, water/sanitation, and school building.

III Conclusions

In addition to the LC system, women have their respective pyramidal Council structures parallel to the LC system.   This system reflects NRM's desire to mobilize the disadvantaged social groups, and promote their participation in local decision making.   But given the limited alternative opportunities for women to participate outside these Council systems, they also feel constrained by the structures.   For women, with the affirmative action scheme, under which one-third of the LC members need to be women, women's involvement in politics both nationally and locally has been advanced.   But as they become more forceful in politics, new tensions with other stakeholders are generated.

The establishment of the LC system as a formal institution for achieving more inclusive decision-making processes at the grassroots level, on the other hand, does not necessarily lead to equal participation of all marginalized groups in local politics.   "The extent to which locally subordinate groups actually manage to use the RCs to express themselves is not so much the result of policies of the NRM…. Rather it is the outcome of wider economic and social processes and their local articulations.   It is very difficult for [the] central government

directly to influence such matters" (Tidemand, 1994b, p. 171).   "[A]lthough the [NRM] is the most obvious agent responsible for the RC system, then their room for maneuver was severely constrained by a number of factors" (ibid., p. 173).

Society in Uganda is now undergoing an important transition on the issue of socially disadvantaged groups.   This transition in not simple and is being negotiated and bargained between men and women over the allocation of authority, power and resources.   In this process, some have come up with multiple strategies to engage with the LC system.   For women, the LC system is highly relevant.   Irrespective of their choice, whereby they directly engage in it or they prefer to work outside of the LC system, they make strategic choices.

But this transition process is not necessarily a zero-sum situation in which some gains are indispensable losses for others.   On the contrary, this can be a mutually empowering positive-sum process from which mutually beneficial outcomes are obtained, although it involves a lot of efforts by various stakeholders to construct "win-win" relationships.   The small-scale development activities at the grassroots present such opportunities, even if they are not free from obstacles.   The socially marginalized groups may ironically have good potentials to create positive-sum outcomes, precisely because the existing socio-political structure has not been beneficial to them.   The gender dimension may be critical to break neo-patrimonial relationships (Tripp, 2000), which have basically been a zero-sum notion.   Although it may be a common social relationship in Africa, the results have been extremely harmful for the poor (Chabal and Daroz, 1999).   Women and other socially disadvantaged groups are largely left out of the neo-patrimonial relationships, and they have been hit severely by this neo-patrimonialism. Therefore, they may have a potential to break these widespread yet damaging social

relationships.

Some may argue that affirmative action by the NRM can be risky because it may create a separate enclave for women representatives without feminist issues to be mainstreamed. However, through this allocation of designated seats for women, the number of women entering into politics both at the national and local levels has increased steadily, and thus this system is considered necessary, if not a sufficient mechanism, for attaining gender equality in the Ugandan society. Although women are still less represented than men in local decision-making processes, it seems more likely that gender sensitivity has been improving recently. The increase of women's representation in Local Councils by the affirmative action is, thus, one important step forward.

The women's experiences in this paper highlight that the process of transition will remain gradual, and long-term perspectives are more appropriate. Long-term approaches can accommodate trial and error for people to interact with others with whom they do not share perceptions. Men and women still have different views on respective roles. In order to improve mutual understanding, a long-term learning process is essential. In this process, the lower level LCs may be fairly useful for such learning experiences, especially if respective Local Councils can be networked with others in different places in order to exchange different experiences.

List of References

Appleton, Simon [1996] "Women-Headed Households and Household Welfare: An Empirical Deconstruction for Uganda," World Development Vol. 24, No. 12, pp. 1811-1827.

Chabal, Patrick and Jean-Pasal Daroz [1999] Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (Oxford: James Currey).

Goetz, Anne Marie [1998] "'Fiddling with Democracy': Translating Women's Participation in Politics in Uganda and South Africa into Gender Equity in Development Practice," in Mark Robinson and Gordon White eds. The Democratic Developmental State (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Gopal, Gita and Maryam Salim [1998] Gender and Law: Eastern Africa Speaks: Conference Organized by the World Bank and the Economic Commission for Africa (Washington, D.C.: World Bank).

Inter-Parliamentary Union [2001] Information on national parliaments, http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm [accessed 3 May 2001].

Kakande, John and Richard Mutumba [2001] "Parliament Passes Amended Local Government Bill," New Vision 19 April.

Khadiagala, Lynn S. [2001] "The Failure of Popular Justice in Uganda Local Councils and Women's Property Rights," Development and Change Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 55-76.

Kyeyune, Grace and Patricia Goldey [1999] "Towards Effective Poverty Reduction: A Study of Heterogeneous Groups of Poor Women in Uganda," Journal of International Development Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 565-580.

Mikell, Gwendolyn ed. [1997] African Feminism: the Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa (Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press).

Mugyenyi, Mary R. [1998] "Towards the Empowerment of Women: a Critique of NRM Policies and Programmes," in Holger Bernet Hansen and Michael Twaddle eds. Developing Uganda (Oxford: James Currey).

Mulyampiti, Tabitha [1994] "Political Empowerment of Women in Uganda: Impact of Resistance Councils and Committees," MA Thesis for the Department of Women Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Makerere University.

Musisi, Nakanyike B. [1995] "Baganda Women's Night Market Activities," in Bessie House-Midamba and Felix K. Ekechi eds. African Market Women and Economic Power: the Role of Women in African Economic Development (Westport, CN.: Greenwood Press).

Obbo, Christine [1998] "Who Care for Carers?: AIDS and women in Uganda," in Holger Bernet Hansen and Michael Twaddle eds. Developing Uganda (Oxford: James Currey).

Shepherd, Andrew [2000] "Evaluation of Rakai District Development Programme Report No. 1 Synthesis," draft report submitted for Danish International Development Assistance (Kampala: DANIDA, July 2000).

Snyder, Margaret [2000] Women in African Economies: from Burning Sun to Boardroom (Kampala: Fountain Publishers).

Tamale, Sylvia [1999] When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda (Kampala: Fountain Publishers).

Tidemand, Per [1994a] "New Local State Forms and 'Popular Participation' in Buganda, Uganda," in Kanyinga et al. The New Local Level Politics in East Africa (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet).

Tidemand, Per [1994b] "The Resistance Council in Uganda: A Study of Rural Politics and Popular Democracy in Afrika," doctoral dissertation presented for Roskilde University.

Tripp, Aili Mari [2001] "Women's Movements and Challenge to Neopatrimonial Rule: Preliminary Observations," Development and Change Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 33-54.

Tripp, Aili Mari [2000] Women & Politics in Uganda (Oxford: James Currey).

Tripp, Aili Mari [1998a] "Expanding 'Civil Society': Women and Political Space in Contemporary Uganda," in Nelson Kasfir ed. Civil Society and Democracy in Africa: Critical Perspectives (Oxford: James Currey).

Tripp, Aili Mari [1998b] "Local Women's Associations and Politics in Contemporary Uganda," in Holger Bernet Hansen and Michael Twaddle eds. Developing Uganda (Oxford: James Currey).

Tripp, Aili Mari [1994] "Gender, Political Participation and the Transformation of Associational Life in Uganda and Tanzania," African Studies Review Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 107-131.

Uganda, the Republic of [1987] Commission of the Inquiry into the Local Government System (Kampala: the Republic of Uganda).

Uganda, the Republic of, the Electoral Commission [1999] The 1997/1998 Local Governments Councils' Election Report (Kampala: the Electoral Commission, February).

Uganda, the Republic of, Ministry of Gender and Community Development (MoGCD) [1995] Country Report in Preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women 1995 (Kampala: MoGCD).

Uganda, the Republic of, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED) and the UNDP [2000] Draft Final Report on the District Resource Endowment Profile Survey (DREPS) Volume III: Institutional Data Report (Kampala: MoFPED, April).

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [1998] Uganda Human Development Report 1998 (Kampala: UNDP).

Vincent, Joan [1971] African Elite: the Big Men of a Small Town (New York and London: Columbia University Press).

World Bank [2001] A Database of Gender Statistics, http://genderstats.worldbank.org/ [accessed 17 July 2001].