



## Strengthening women's participation in local decision making in Jinja, Uganda

### Summary

The City of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, and the Town of Jinja in Uganda, have made great strides in empowering women and strengthening their participation in local government. The two communities formed one of the twelve partnerships in Africa supported by FCM's International Centre for Municipal Development.

Like women in many other parts of the developing world, the women of Jinja deal with social and economic problems that affect the well-being of present and future generations, but they have not been represented effectively in local government. As part of a strategic planning process supported by the Guelph-Jinja partnership, the Jinja Town Council intensified its efforts in reaching out to women and integrating them into municipal affairs. Building on existing women's groups in Jinja, they established the Jinja Municipality Women's Association (JIMWA). Within a year, the Jinja Town Council included an elected representative of JIMWA whose mandate was to improve the economic and political status of women. JIMWA has become a successful, active network of women who share entrepreneurial knowledge and work collaboratively to achieve economic empowerment and reduce poverty. Through the partnership, women have received considerable technical training, and have enhanced their community leadership skills. The Jinja Town Council has integrated women in the renovation and management of some of its social infrastructures and programs.

The success of the unique model developed in this project is due to the demand-driven approach the partners used to bring women together, the commitment of the Jinja Town Council to gender balance, and the collaboration of volunteer experts from the City of Guelph, its community and from the University of Guelph.

### Introduction

Under the direction of FCM's International Centre for Municipal Development (ICMD), and financed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Partnerships and Special Initiatives (PSI) Program aims to strengthen the capacity of municipalities and municipal associations in developing countries to improve local service delivery and governance, and to promote sustainable development. The PSI Program supports the establishment of long-term partnerships between Canadian municipalities and overseas local governments, and the organization of short-term capacity-building initiatives, such as training workshops and missions by municipalities, municipal associations, and other enabling institutions.

The partnership between the City of Guelph, Ontario and the City of Jinja, Uganda began in 1990. Since then, the partners have tackled a range of issues – from municipal service operations to community development and environmental concerns. Many of their joint initiatives have aimed at strengthening communication and feedback between the municipal government and various community interest groups in order to identify priority issues.

This case study examines the approach the partners used to establish and support the Jinja Municipality Women's Association (JIMWA) – a women's umbrella organization that reflects the multiple roles of Ugandan women.

### Context

The women of Jinja have been fighting urban poverty for decades at the grassroots level through urban farming and informal income-generating activities. They had formed many small isolated groups, but had little support from or representation in local government.

In 1992, Uganda began a process of government reform that gave legal status to local governments in a decentralized setting. The Local Government Act in 1997 provided a structure to ensure democracy at all levels of government. The structure includes elected Local Councils at five levels (I to V): village, parish, sub-county, county and district. Although women constitute 51 per cent of the population in Jinja, only one seat is reserved for a women's secretary at each of the five council levels, and only one woman from each district is elected as a representative to the National Council. This system gave women limited political influence, and little decision-making power over issues that affect their livelihood.



*JIMWA plays an important role in Jinja municipal affairs.*

In the initial stages of the Guelph-Jinja partnership, the low level of women's participation in local government was not identified as a concern. In 1995 the Guelph-Jinja partners began a Strategic Planning Process with the Jinja Municipal Council (JMC). In the course of their work together, it became apparent that women were not adequately involved in local decision making. To address the gender imbalance, the partners designed a strategy to establish a network for all the women's groups operating in the municipality. Out of the Jinja Municipal Council's participatory strategic planning process was born the Jinja Municipal Women Association. A specific partnership proposal was designed a year later to strengthen JIMWA.

## Objectives

The goal of the Guelph-Jinja project was to raise the economic and political status of Jinja women. The specific objectives of the partnership project were:

- To unify the voices and forces of women through the establishment of an association;
- To research existing women's groups to define the role of the association;
- To enhance the leadership role of women in the local decision-making process by creating space for them on council, and by developing their technical and managerial skills;
- To integrate women into Jinja's municipal social services; and
- To strengthen women's entrepreneurial abilities to sustain family economics.

## A Three-Phase Approach

The Guelph-Jinja partners used a three-phase approach to strengthen women's participation in local government: consensus building, knowledge building, and capacity building.

## Consensus Building

During a technical exchange in 1995 between the JMC and professional members from the City of Guelph, the JMC invited women's groups to express their views on creating a partnership with the municipality. Female citizens quickly recognized this opportunity to empower women, and agreed to create the Jinja Municipality Women's Association (JIMWA). Its first role was to address women's issues within Jinja Municipality on two fronts, by:

- providing an opportunity for women to participate in decision making processes that affect their community, and
- making the organization self sufficient and accountable to its members through training and research.

The JMC committed itself to:

- A neutral relationship between JMC and JIMWA, weeded of any political interference,
- Identifying women's priority issues and solutions, and
- Involving women in the renovation committee to secure their participation in the management of the Kankidu, Walukuba and Mpumudde community centres and the public library.

In an effort to increase women's participation in local decision-making processes, twelve JIMWA Executive Committee Members were elected at their General Meeting held in early 1997. The election process was monitored by the JMC Mayor and Town Clerk. The turnout for the election was moderate, indicating the starting capacity of JIMWA's to mobilize women. The structure of the association included the mayor as a patron and the town clerk as a coordinator. To encourage the development of JIMWA, JMC provided office space and technical support.

## Knowledge Building

### Canadian Exchange Mission

As JIMWA membership grew from 12 women's groups in 1996 to 92 groups in 1999, the voice of Jinja women became louder but not necessarily clearer. In mid-1997 members of JIMWA and the JMC undertook a technical mission to Guelph. The Jinja beneficiaries were exposed to Guelph's grassroots organizations and gender sensitive practices in the local government. JIMWA representatives developed a clearer sense of the possibilities and processes of participatory government. As a result of this experience, the association redefined its objectives:

- To mobilize and sensitize women groups in Jinja Municipality,
- To foster solidarity and team-building,
- To encourage networking among women,
- To train women in integrated skills using various techniques, and
- To empower women through micro-credit schemes.



*Town Clerk David Kaginey, Mayor Stephan Nsubuga-Bewavo, Gus Stahlmann touring newly opened library.*



An important part of the knowledge-building phase of the project was a participatory research study to identify women's priority issues and ways to further strengthen JIMWA. The study was designed by a graduate student in the Department of Rural Extension Studies at the University of Guelph. The participatory methodology gave women in the Jinja Municipality a chance to voice their opinions about poverty and development. Techniques such as appreciative inquiry, participatory action research and participatory evaluation were used.

### Capacity Building of JIMWA

The Guelph-Jinja partners used a multi-level approach to strengthen the capacity of JIMWA and its members. Capacity building activities included workshops, seminars, train-the-trainer courses, and a follow-up study. Many volunteers – from Jinja and Guelph city councils and administration, and from the University of Guelph – offered their experience and technical expertise. Activities included:

- A one-day workshop to present the initial research findings to JIMWA members. The participants gained a clearer sense of their mission, and made recommendations for the year 1998.
- A one-week seminar with the JIMWA Executive Committee helped to strengthen their administrative capacity.
- A follow-up study in 1999 assessed the implementation of the recommendations of the first report and promoted team-building among JIMWA's Executive Committee. The appreciative inquiry (AI) technique was used to help participants build on their strengths by exploring what worked for them in the past, and what they valued most in the association. Appreciative inquiry is an important theory for organizational capacity-building, and is a useful tool for building sustainable organizations.
- Workshops and seminars held at the community centers provided opportunities for women to network and share information on strategic leadership, income generation and poverty reduction, and on how to fight HIV and AIDS.
- Train-the-trainers workshops in income-generating activities, marketing, environmental conservation and municipal leadership contributed to raising women's entrepreneurial knowledge and collaboration dynamics.
- JIMWA trained over 80 women in business management, and conducted seminars on entrepreneurship to strengthen the structure of women's informal micro-enterprises, their managerial and financial capacities. A full marketing strategy was elaborated to help increase their business profits.

A final report on the results of these activities was presented to the City of Guelph and Jinja Municipal Council in 2000.

## Results

### Women's Social Empowerment

JIMWA is seen as a light of hope and a bridge to prosperity as it provides women with emotional support in a time of crisis and change, training in necessary skills, and access to credit and markets. Some benefits of this initiative and JIMWA's influence can be seen at the household level: Financial autonomy has allowed some women to leave abusive marriages, and more men are helping out in sustaining the family and encouraging their wives to join JIMWA.



*Councilor Kovach looking at Women's Groups projects.*

Nevertheless, there are some cultural growing pains associated with empowering women in the Ugandan context. Under JIMWA, women intend to fight harder to reduce polygamy, which the majority perceive as a source of women's under-development, and a factor in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS. There remain, however, a minority of women who support polygamy on the basis that it reduces a woman's workload.

### Women's Economic Empowerment

A large percentage of women and local politicians in Jinja agree that JIMWA has the potential to enhance women's economic empowerment. The network helps women share of entrepreneurial knowledge and work collaboratively to achieve economic empowerment. The research study undertaken by the University of Guelph revealed that most Jinja women's groups were in fact informal micro-enterprises engaged in a variety of income generating activities intended to reduce poverty. (These included poultry, swine, cattle, rabbit and vegetable production, as well as non-agricultural activities such as hand-crafts, music, dance and drama.) As a result of the project, many tools were developed and implemented to strengthen women's managerial and financial capacities and increase their business profits. Partnerships were established with the local government and other local resources in the Jinja community to work toward reducing poverty. The JMC has also benefited from women's entrepreneurial activities, as market dues have contributed significantly to the municipality's total revenue.

### Women's Political Empowerment

As women in Jinja learned the intricacies of politics and bureaucracies, they developed their ability to build partnerships with other organizations. This has given them a greater political voice, as well as lobbying power in the local council and in the Uganda Parliament through the MP of Jinja District, the Hon. Ruth Owagage. The Hon. Ruth Owagage, who is referred to as the 'Iron Lady of Jinja', provided moral support to JIMWA and praised the organization for bringing women together and linking them to the political system that affects their livelihood. Today, women have one voice represented by an elected body, the JIMWA Executive Committee. Women are now represented on the municipal council, and are more involved in the local decision-making process.



Mayor Stephan Nsubuga-Bewavo, Gus Stahlmann, Jinja Coordinator, City of Guelph at the official opening of Library Jinja Central.

The close relationship between JIMWA and JMC has become an important aspect in monitoring local economic policies and practices. As a result of numerous complaints to the local council office and JIMWA about unfair micro-credit institution lending policies and mismanagement of funds, the majority of women advocated for more effective monitoring of JIMWA's activities. JIMWA's Executive Committee responded by lobbying for training in organizational development and financial management. Good governance practices have been achieved at JIMWA, and an application for a revolving fund scheme is under consideration in Jinja. In addition, the Division Chairman of Local Council III is also advocating to the national government to monitor the operation of non-governmental organizations to make them more accountable to women and the community at large.

JIMWA works closely with women's secretaries from Local Council I to Local Council IV to mobilize and sensitize women. As the Coordinator of JIMWA, Constance Mugaba has effectively combined her political leadership and power to advance JIMWA's objectives at Local Council III. The Chairperson of JIMWA, Janet Sekirime, is using her previous experience as a Councillor at Local Council IV to lead JIMWA and secure critical resources for improving women's entrepreneurial activities in the metropolitan economy.

### Women's Community Leadership

With the increasingly favorable political climate, the Jinja Municipal Council was able to effectively integrate women in municipal services. The JMC brought together various women's groups to make decisions regarding the renovation and management of three community centers and a public library. This process increased women's management abilities and leadership within the various community committees in Jinja. Today, women's groups are using the community centers for meetings, training and social events. Within these walls, women have found a sense of place and belonging as they nurture their mother organization, the Jinja Municipality Women's Association. As of January 2001, the association had mobilized and registered 110 women's groups in Jinja Municipality, and had approximately 3,000 members, mostly women.

### Sustainability of Women's Group and Women's Empowerment

The Guelph-Jinja partners found that it is easier to create an organization than to sustain it. JIMWA's members identified the following challenges for the sustainability of results:

- To reduce the high expectations that JIMWA can fill all the gaps;
- To further develop JIMWA's team building capacity through ongoing leadership training;

- To become more accountable to its beneficiaries;
- To become self-reliant by securing central government provisions for long-term funding, and by developing more partnerships with local organizations; and
- To improve women's access to credit, markets and training.

### Lessons Learned

The Guelph-Jinja initiative in empowering women has yielded several important lessons for future projects.

- The project's objectives should be clear and understood by all parties, and a monitoring and evaluation mechanism should be put in place before project implementation to ensure that the initiative is reaching its intended beneficiaries. (FCM plays a major role in promoting accountability of local government and women's organization to project beneficiaries.)
- Using a participatory methodology, women have the capacity to identify their own problems, to formulate and recognize appropriate solutions, and to mobilize and influence social, economic and political processes that affect them.
- Ethnicity and religion are not inhibiting factors in achieving women's empowerment. In the diverse municipality of Jinja, women formed multi-cultural, multi-religious, and homogeneous groups that are all coordinated in the JIMWA network. Members trust that JIMWA will protect their interests in collaboration with JMC.
- Support for women's empowerment has benefits for the entire community. Apart from market dues generated by women, JIMWA has shown that it has the potential for mobilizing and organizing women's groups to perform functions for JMC, such as environmental protection and maintaining markets.
- Stakeholder collaboration and a favourable political environment are important factors in integrating women into municipal affairs.

The Guelph-Jinja partnership initiative has shown that various approaches can be used to facilitate the empowerment of women, and to integrate women in local government decision-making processes. In Jinja, the municipal council played an important role in integrating women in local politics by creating JIMWA and supporting its development. The project benefited from the networking ability of the partners, who were able to access important resources such as the University of Guelph. The innovative ideas of JIMWA's Executive Committee and the multi-level approach to capacity building used by the partners contributed to the success of this project, and will be essential for sustaining JIMWA in meeting women's developmental goals in the future.

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FCM gratefully acknowledges the support the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) provides for its international programs and publications.