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Rethinking gender mainstreaming (or, Did we ditch women when we ditched WID?) — A personal view

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Introduction

The debate on the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming is gradually emerging among practitioners. The International Women's Development Agency sparked the debate in our own region and last year's conference of the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID) in Guadalajara left many of us both energised and reflective. The IWDA meeting was a great opportunity for us to honestly grapple with some tough issues, learn from each other's experiences and feel inspired to return home ready to tackle the issues in our own agencies. This paper reflects on:

- gender mainstreaming and the gender jargon;
- the potential for convergence of the women's rights approach and the gender and development approach;
- new ways of working at NZAID; and
- NZAID's work supporting promotion of the CEDAW in the region.

Gender mainstreaming and the gender jargon

Some of us in the donor agencies are concerned about the lack of critique of gender mainstreaming and of the gender and development approach in practice. Once we had welcomed gender mainstreaming as such an important breakthrough in the Beijing context, we then worked hard to put good policies in place and worked hard (sometimes against the odds) to institutionalise and operationalise gender mainstreaming. We have done this without taking the time to step back and critically assess whether the approach has produced positive changes in the way development is conceived, planned and implemented. My feeling is that in Beijing we invested too much in gender mainstreaming as a sort of silver bullet. And we have since had too many debates about whether gender mainstreaming is an end in itself or simply a tool that we can use as we strive towards gender equity.

I am more than a little allergic to the language of both gender and of mainstreaming. Both suffer from overuse syndrome.

Gender is too frequently used as a form of shorthand when we should be talking about 'women', or 'men and women', or even 'sex'. (Don't you just love all those application forms that now use gender instead of sex? Presumably this is because gender is somehow a nicer word — not dirty like sex — but just plain wrong.)

On the other hand I do believe that if we used the gender word less, it could become a more genuinely useful concept. It is the overuse that creates all sorts of barriers — sometimes when you least expect them. A few years ago, when I was working at the New Zealand Ministry of Women's Affairs, we were developing a gender framework for use by APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) economies. It quickly became apparent that even Canada and New Zealand could not readily agree on what was meant by gender analysis, gender mainstreaming, gender integration and gender sensitisation. If we can't agree on what these are, how can we possibly convince others of their value?

In my work at the Ministry of Women's Affairs I used to see senior government officials' eyes glaze over when the gender language was tossed around — and I don't believe that it was because of any lack of commitment or any lack of preparedness to listen and learn — I simply think that the terminology got in the way of understanding.

Mainstreaming itself is being overused as a concept. At present, development agencies love to 'mainstream' — gender, human rights, the environment and HIV/AIDS to name just four. And I am sure many practitioners will have heard comments such as, 'oh well, we don't need to worry about women, now that gender is mainstreamed', or, if such comments are not actually heard, similar sentiments are nonetheless reflected in the actions which follow.

Is convergence the way forward?

Since last year's global conference of the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID), I have felt that we are on the edge of something new — a new shift in the understanding of how we approach gender and development. Some interesting thinking was emerging there and I am very attracted by some

of the analysis by AWID's Executive Director, Joanna Kerr (see Kerr 2001).

Joanna makes the point that throughout the 1990s there have been two approaches and two distinct communities — one concerned with women's human rights and another working from a gender and development perspective. We have tended to be working in different spheres and using different languages. Our paths have crossed or converged at times such as the Beijing Women's Conference (1995) and its Plus 5 session in 2000.

Her paper has helped me to sharpen my own thinking and to understand some of the discomforts I have felt since I moved into a development agency. I have now swum in both streams. For most of my life I have been in the women's rights stream (as a feminist activist, a trade unionist and a Ministry of Women's Affairs' bureaucrat). For the past three years I have been swimming in the development stream. Joanna's paper has given me a glimmering of understanding of why I have sometimes felt as though I am swimming against the current. Now perhaps the tide is changing, or the two streams are, as Joanna puts it, converging.

One issue for the future is how, or indeed, whether, we should be trying to nudge our organisations towards a rights approach rather than a gender mainstreaming approach — or whether there is a way in which we can find an accommodation that incorporates both approaches, without adding to the gender confusion. Because I come from a strong women's rights perspective, I have found it difficult to understand why some agencies are so nervous about adopting a more explicitly rights-based approach.

I do acknowledge that both approaches have their strengths. As Joanna says, development approaches offer strong analytical and methodological tools for understanding and shaping the effects of economic forces. The gender and development approaches have been more broadly focused and participatory, although the notions of gender are often abstract. Arguably there has also been better analysis of power and control issues, but relatively little evidence of practical approaches to address these. In my view, the women's rights approach provides us with a clearer set of goals to work towards — gender equity. We almost certainly need both approaches in order to respond appropriately to specific circumstances.

What is NZAID doing?

In July 2003 the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) marked its first anniversary. It is an exciting place to work, full of energy and a commitment to practise our craft better and to do things differently. The agency is attracting excellent staff from a wide range of backgrounds who are bringing in diverse skills, experience and knowledge.

We are harnessing this in a very interesting way by developing cross-agency teams to develop sectoral strategies in areas where we have previously lacked a clear policy framework. These include areas such as trade, conflict and peace-building, and even old favourites such as education and health. There are really interesting synergies and perspectives in these teams. We are all learning together and building agency commitment and knowledge at the same time.

The slowest two of these teams to get off the ground have been gender and environment — perhaps because we already had quite good policies and there was a relatively high level of confidence in the established approach.

NZAID's current policy deals with gender mainstreaming as follows:

Promote an active policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in NZODA policies, programmes and projects to ensure they include consultation with women and men, are based on a full analysis of differential impacts of activities on women and men and provide equal opportunities for women and men to contribute to and benefit from development (NZODA 1998).

Since Beijing, the New Zealand agency has made some very good efforts at gender mainstreaming at an agency level and at a programming level. There are still some significant challenges at partner-country level, as I am sure my colleagues from the Pacific would agree. Overall, I feel that our existing gender and development policy is good as far as it goes. I hope that we will develop this further into a gender equity policy with an explicit rights and empowerment overlay. There is no lack of commitment at agency level, but I would really like some fresh ideas for further embedding or institutionalising that commitment.

NZAID's support for work on promoting and implementing CEDAW

NZAID's recent efforts to support the promotion and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the Pacific region are likely to have a far-reaching, long-term impact. These efforts also reflect an interesting convergence of the human rights streams and gender and development streams. In-country mainstreaming necessarily occurs as a pre-condition for implementation of CEDAW. The whole of government needs to be involved and actively participating if we are to make a difference for women.

When I worked for New Zealand's Ministry of Women's Affairs I was responsible for coordinating the preparation of two of New Zealand's reports on progress with implementing CEDAW. I always had this sneaking feeling that in New Zealand we were not making quite as good use as we could have of the

reporting cycle process to progress both the policy debate and action on women's status domestically.

Concentrating on CEDAW reporting could be viewed as simply a bureaucratic exercise. This is not how I see it. I am convinced that CEDAW is a powerful tool for improving the status of women in Pacific Island countries. It has taken time — at least 15 to 20 years — but there is now a depth of understanding and a strong desire to make full use of the convention. And the leadership for that is now coming from Pacific countries and Pacific women.

Complying with CEDAW will continue to be a very important part of NZAID's work in the region for some time to come. These efforts are a powerful example of gender mainstreaming at partner-country level. The effect is that government agencies work together with the explicit aim of improving the status of women or improving women's access to services. In implementing CEDAW, governments are effectively taking a rights-based approach — the convention serves as an international bill of rights for women. In addition, governments find that they also need to work together with NGOs or civil society to give effect to the convention. Other benefits of CEDAW include:

- it provides a great opportunity for women's offices to provide leadership and to increase their profile;
- reporting on implementation prompts governments to action — they want to be seen in the best light (especially when under international scrutiny) — as do their political mistresses and masters;
- statistics and data need to be gathered regularly;
- reporting provides a baseline against which progress can be measured over the longer term (it may not initially mean that good analysis necessarily follows — but the availability of the data means that it can come);
- the CEDAW Committee assists governments to identify priority areas for future action. This has the potential to encourage government agencies to take specific medium-term actions to address issues and improve women's status or become more responsive to women's needs;
- reporting provides a measurable and visible focus for activists to put pressure on their government; and
- reporting can increase clarity about which part of government is responsible for which area and take pressure off the under-resourced women's offices.

This list sounds like the standard definition of gender mainstreaming — yet it is driven by a specific women's rights approach and end objective.

Mainstreaming and CEDAW in the Pacific

In late April, the Women's Bureau of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community convened a workshop in Apia, at which countries could learn from the experiences of both Fiji and Samoa with preparing and following up CEDAW reports. This workshop had Pacific 'ownership' and leadership in a very real sense. In just two years, Pacific countries have developed a depth of understanding about just what a powerful tool the CEDAW reporting process can be. The trainers from the United Nations were certainly impressed.

One very important impact has been the way that the process has encouraged other government departments in both Fiji and Samoa to work cooperatively with the women's ministries — often for the first time. Each has learned that they cannot be effective unless they work in partnership across government and alongside NGOs.

Gender mainstreaming: Think tank outcomes

The think tank allowed us to explore the question of whether we should return to gender-specific 'tagged' funding in our agencies (does financial evaporation follow 'the amazing disappearing woman of gender mainstreaming') and to consider new ways of approaching the whole issue of 'gender and development' in our own institutions (including whether we should look to carrots or sticks to achieve our goals). Discussion and collaboration such as this also provide an opportunity to learn how to avoid the trap of gender just being an 'add-on' or 'clip-on', to think about how we can make 'gender' a more genuinely useful concept and not simply a proxy for 'women'. We have the chance to explore how we might accommodate a rights approach with a human development approach and, most importantly, a chance to move forward — to be inspired into action.

Conclusion

Even now, after doing this job for three years in a committed agency, I feel very challenged about how we can make gender mainstreaming really work. If it is to work, we need to more clearly identify the practical benefits it brings to the development and implementation of projects and programs. Improved statistical evidence, increased involvement of women in the design of projects and policies and a clearer understanding of the impacts of policies and programs can only improve the quality of the project. Once the benefits can be clearly demonstrated, it becomes far easier to engage the

necessary political will and commitment. We have to work out ways of being smarter and stealthier about getting these messages across.

I feel that we are at an interesting point in the whole women in development/gender and development/women's rights field; that we are on the edge of something new. As a lifelong feminist I'm glad to still be involved so that I have this opportunity to learn.

Note

- * At the time of writing, Patti O'Neill was an advisor with the New Zealand Agency for International Development. She is currently administrator of the OECD's Gender Network.

References

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