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Gender and Development

◆ Features

- *Assessing the success of gender mainstreaming policy*
- *Mainstreaming in practice – bridging policy and practice*
- *Gender and economics in mainstreaming policy*
- *Role of NGOs in mainstreaming gender*
- *Mainstreaming in the field – Kenya, Fiji, Vanuatu, China, PNG*
- *Gender mainstreaming in governance projects*
- *Successful mainstreaming – practical guides and analyses for practitioners*
- *Men, gender and development*

◆ Publications

◆ Resources

◆ Editor: Pamela Thomas

Gender mainstreaming: Moving from principles to implementation — The difficulties

An ACFOA discussion paper

Australian Council for Overseas Aid, compiled by Jenny Wells and Trish McEwan

Introduction

In 2002, the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) endorsed the new 'ACFOA Commitment to Gender Equity, Diversity and Flexibility'. The commitment:

recognises that women and men have different needs and power structures and that these differences should be identified and addressed by employers in a manner that rectifies imbalance between the sexes. Gender equity strategies seek to achieve fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men, and recognise that different approaches may be required to produce equitable outcomes (ACFOA 2002).

At the same time, an analysis of over 40 non-government organisation (NGO) case studies demonstrated that good gender analysis and gender-focused programs were not a strong feature of Australian NGO work. The research indicated that NGOs ensure that women are the targets of programs and projects, and that they count participation by women. However, very few undertake full gender analysis or develop strategies for interventions that address the different development needs of men and women.

Background

Over the past three decades, development agencies have sought greater recognition of women in the development process. Today, Australian NGOs recognise that for real change to occur women need to be not only in control of their own development, but to also be able to influence the development process. A gendered perspective of development has the potential, through analysis of social relations, to transform structures of power entrenched in the development agenda thus providing the potential to reshape the social, political and cultural landscape of development practice (Porter and Verghese 1999).

International frameworks

The fundamental human right of gender equity is identified in the affirmation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This declaration states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and all persons are entitled to fundamental rights and freedoms without distinction on the basis of sex. Since this broad principle of gender equity was universally adopted over 50 years ago, some of the specific gaps in international human rights standards on issues of gender equity have been closing. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sets out specific areas to be addressed in the prevention of discrimination against women. These include (but are not limited to) equity in education; remuneration, representation before the law, public functions, opinion, marriage and family. Importantly, CEDAW outlines that the whole of society, not just governments, has a role to play in protecting against gender based discrimination. Other international human rights conventions specifically refer to protection of gender equity. For instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) established a unique protection framework on children's rights, and states that all children must be protected against discrimination on the basis of sex (OHCHR 2003a). The Declaration on the Right to Development further recognises the importance of gender equity in participation in development interventions (OHCHR 2003b). Measures must be put in place to ensure that women have an active role in the development and decision-making processes affecting their lives.

Following the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, gender mainstreaming was adopted by the UN as the key methodology for achieving gender equality. This was endorsed by the Platform for Action and outlined as the approach that government, UN and other actors should take in the implementation of this platform.

In 2002, the international community adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) comprising eight internationally agreed goals, with supporting targets and indicators, which aim to halve global poverty by 2015. Gender is specifically addressed by Goal 3, to 'promote gender equality and empower women', with a target of eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and in all education by 2015. Beyond this, gender is recognised as

central to the achievement of all the MDGs, and gender analysis is being built into many countries' plans and reports on the goals. Yet, although the principles of gender equity have been identified and adopted, implementation in practice remains the current challenge for governments, NGOs and communities.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming seeks to integrate men and women's experiences and needs into development at all levels. This, combined with specific actions for women's empowerment, is viewed as an essential means for the promotion of gender equality. Gender mainstreaming is a process of ensuring that all our work, and the way we do it, contributes to gender equality by transforming the balance of power between women and men.

However, for gender mainstreaming to be relevant and effective, it should not be something imposed but instead embraced by the communities involved. Most important is community ownership of gender mainstreaming strategies. People at all levels must be committed to and support the implementation of gender mainstreaming, given that this process of change takes place within complex social and political environments. Therefore, Australian NGOs need to be drawing on local knowledge and ways of understanding to develop 'solutions' that are appropriate to the context in which they apply.

In 1996, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) explored how gender mainstreaming can be effectively implemented within organisations. Sida identified three 'arenas' in which mainstreaming strategies are relevant to development: the development cooperation agency, the development program and the developing country itself (Schalkwyk et al. 1996). The study also highlights two background themes for effective gender mainstreaming. The first, that women are not a homogeneous group; and the second, that it is necessary to address both the technical and political dimensions of mainstreaming. Additionally, the study identifies the technical dimensions of mainstreaming as 'reliable data, sound theoretical underpinnings and people with the ability to spot opportunities and interpret gender equality requirements to varied groups' (Schalkwyk et al. 1996). Effective gender mainstreaming therefore requires relevant sex-disaggregated data and a sound appreciation of why gender equality is a necessary outcome (IWDA 2003).

Identifying challenges of gender mainstreaming

In principle, Australian NGOs recognise the importance of enhancing gender equity in order to be more effective in our work. Putting this into practice, however, raises a number of challenges.

Through a series of ACFOA consultations and conferences in 2003, Australian NGOs identified that gender mainstreaming needs a whole-of-agency focus that endorses gender mainstreaming with a commitment instilled at a senior management level. At the field level, comprehensive contextual analysis needs to be conducted that considers the specific needs of target communities. Clear and relevant indicators then need to be identified to measure the effectiveness of development programs. The development of appropriate tools and resources is often required to enable NGOs to put gender equity principles into practice, while at the same time building the capacity of beneficiaries is essential to bring about effective and long-term change for gender equity to become a reality.

ACFOA members have also identified that adopting a Western/paternalistic approach inhibits their capacity to support and maintain positive change towards gender equity through their programs. Instead, it reinforces stereotypes and alienates the communities/individuals involved. Australian NGOs acknowledge that developing strong relationships based on trust and shared understanding is crucial to their success as change agents, however, this is often easier said than done. Further consideration has to be given by NGOs when establishing partnerships to the type of relationship desired and the level of support that can be provided. A comprehensive assessment of partners should be conducted to examine the institutional and individual capacity of all partners.

In order to be effective in addressing gender equity, good monitoring and evaluation systems need to be established. Documentation of program results must support learnings from NGO experiences. The ability to effectively mainstream gender is often constrained by limited resources, including time and funds. For gender mainstreaming to be successful, like any other aspect of effective development programs, development agencies need to work together more collaboratively through the sharing of resources and knowledge.

Developing strategies in gender mainstreaming

In order to move forward and address the more entrenched challenges to mainstreaming gender into NGO programs, Australian NGOs have identified the following key areas and questions that need to be asked:

1. A strong organisational commitment to human-centred development

- Is there an institutionalised commitment to gender equity, including senior management responsibility and accountability?
- Do all staff, including senior managers, have gender-related key performance indicators (KPIs)?

- Does the organisation have a gender equity policy?
- Is there a gender training/capacity building program across the whole organisation?
- Are gender equity considerations incorporated into strategic plans and resourcing?

2. Clear and comprehensive operational policies, frameworks and guidelines for design and planning

- Does the organisation have guidelines for mainstreaming gender across programs?
- If the guidelines exist, what are the mechanisms for implementation and feedback?
- How does the organisation learn in relation to gender practice? For example, does gender analysis inform program development?
- Does the organisation include gender outcomes in design and throughout the project cycle?

3. Operational relationships based on mutual respect, learning and sharing

- Does the organisation undertake joint contextual analysis with partners?
- Are partners aware of the organisation's gender policy?
- Does the organisation adopt gender inclusive/participatory approaches?
- Does the organisation allocate resources for capacity building for partners and field staff?

4. Inter-agency collaboration and learning

- Do the frameworks inform organisational strategic planning?
- Does the organisation contribute to collective learning from either an international/national perspective?
- How does the organisation contribute to the gender practice discussion within the Australian NGO sector?
- Does the organisation share lessons learned in relation to gender practice?

Conclusion

Australian NGOs endorse the internationally agreed principles of gender equity and mainstreaming and are actively seeking to improve the quality of our work. It is accepted that gender equity must be fundamental to the overall effectiveness of development interventions, but to achieve this Australian NGOs need to strengthen their commitment to, and support of, more robust and trusting relationships, better contextual analysis, better management and operational systems, more ownership by beneficiaries and partners, and better learning.

To do this, Australian NGOs, through ACFOA, have committed themselves to working together on more collaborative programming, evaluations and sharing lessons learned to address the challenges faced in mainstreaming gender in their programs.

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