

Helpdesk Research Report: Good practice findings of donor efforts to support sustainable gender equality

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Query: What good practice findings are available of Donor efforts (eg DfID, AusAID, USAID, World Bank, UNDP, UNHCR) in the last ten years that led to sustainable improvements in gender equality and female empowerment?

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1. Overview

This report reviews a selection of academic and donor literature examining donor work on gender equality and female empowerment. Most of the available literature focuses on organisational strategies to achieve gender sensitive programming rather than directly on equality outcomes. In the time available for this report, only a selection of material could be examined and some key donors (including USAID) were not well covered in the literature.

Donor approaches to improving gender equality and female empowerment can be divided into two groups. Good practices backed up by evidence include:

- Improved **monitoring and evaluation** of programmes, including adequate performance assessment frameworks;
- **Staff capacity, incentives, and leadership** including compulsory gender equality training for all new staff and incentives tied to the implementation of gender equality action plans, particularly for senior managers;
- Initiatives that support **national ownership** of strategies to achieve equality are more likely to be sustainable, especially if they work with both national women's machinery and civil society organizations. Long-term support to women's organizations can also create national ownership and increase awareness of gender equality;
- **Strong analytical assessments** in the programme design phase;

- Using **participatory approaches** and assessments before implementing programmes and using gender reviews or social appraisals can help to ensure the consideration of gender throughout the duration of the project and to identify lessons;
- A thorough analysis and understanding of the local context and of **relations between men and women rather than a focus on women only**;
- Allocating sufficient **financial and human resources**, including gender specialists at headquarters and in field offices, and in senior positions;
- **Targeting interventions** by country and activity to make best use of limited resources; and
- Creating **interdisciplinary gender teams**.

The following promising donor approaches to gender equality and female empowerment were also found although less evidence of impact is available than for the approaches listed above:

- **Mainstreaming gender** across all aspects of donor work;
- A clearly developed **gender equality strategy** which focuses on results rather than objectives;
- **Financial tracking of gender expenditure** in interventions in order to establish an overview of the types and extent of resources dedicated to gender equality; and
- The creation of **strong partnerships** with strategic stakeholders can increase the probability of sustainability.

Many reports highlighted the lack of monitoring of interventions by all donor agencies. Few suitable indicators to rigorously measure impact on gender equality outside of the education and health sectors were found. This has the effect of making potential progress invisible and leads to uncertainty regarding the impact of programmes on gender equality, and on their sustainability in particular.

2. Well documented good practices within donor organisations

Monitoring and evaluation

One of the most pressing needs at the country level is for donors to be able to capture progress at the programme level. The literature includes limited evidence of comprehensive monitoring indicators (DFID India's education sector indicators being one of the few exceptions) to rigorously measure impact on gender equality. When evidence of success is cited, it is anecdotal in nature or sector specific at the micro level. Lack of monitoring means that any progress made in gender equality becomes invisible, constraining learning and discouraging the promotion of gender sensitivity in future interventions (AfDB 2011).

Evaluations of donor agencies' strategies also reveal the importance of setting up performance assessment frameworks (CIDA 2008; OECD/DAC 2009) in order to adequately measure performance. Experience shows that clearly articulated results and the development of indicators

to measure gender equality have in general been difficult to establish. Indicators are more often clearly articulated in the education and health sector, as these are often more self-evident than in other sectors such as climate change (AfDB 2011). By having clearly articulated results rather than working towards objectives staff are able to more easily focus what they are doing and work towards the same goal.

Gender performance evaluations to assess progress have been particularly practiced by NORAD, SIDA, DFID, the World Bank and UNHCR either as comprehensive evaluations or as annual progress reports on gender. An emerging best practice has also been DFID's active strategy to consult with NGOs on its annual gender progress reports (Social Development Direct 2010).

The trend among all the evaluations considered was to highlight the lack of monitoring of interventions. No donor seems to have been able to develop suitable indicators to rigorously measure impact on gender equality outside of the education and health sectors.

The lack of monitoring has the effect of making any progress invisible. Programme officers interviewed for evaluations are often convinced that there is more progress than has been put into project reports, and some evaluations tend to support this line of argument (CIDA 2008; Asen 2006). However, it is important to note that there are instances where evaluations found that expected gender equality outcomes were less than expected (CIDA 2008). Thus while gender sensitive programming may lead to progress towards gender equality, this is not an inevitable outcome.

Furthermore, budget support and donor harmonisation have increased the difficulty of attributing progress to a certain donor or initiative (DFID 2006). Anecdotal evidence from programme evaluations (Social Development Direct 2009) suggests that capacity building of national stakeholders in order to create an interest and commitment to gender equality is the best route to sustainability.

Strategies for mainstreaming gender must also include the development of minimum standards for institutional support mechanisms, including at the senior management level in order to ensure adequate support for the strategy. The evaluation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy states that "[w]ithout representation and political support from across the agency, developing minimum standards may fall back on the gender equality unit and be treated as one more administrative, box-ticking task" (UNHCR 2010). Without minimum standards for implementation there is also a risk for a detraction to gender blind programming, which does not take the different needs of men and women into consideration. Evaluations of DFID (2006) and World Bank (2010) point out that despite gender strategies being in place, both organisations have on occasions failed to discourage gender blind programming, as a result of minimum standards at the institutional level.

Staff capacity, incentives and leadership

Evaluations found that there is little consideration given by staff to gender issues.

First, a lack of understanding and capacity on how to integrate gender into programmes means that staff tend to ignore gender concerns. While agencies often produce high quality tool kits and training materials, these are rarely used and often do not correspond to the needs expressed by staff (DFID 2006; AfDB 2011). The reliance on individual staff to ensure that gender concerns are adequately integrated in operations leaves donor agencies with uneven progress in mainstreaming. In order to address these issues agencies have taken the following steps:

- Ensuring that gender focal point personnel are part of the senior management (UNDP 2006).
- Ensuring there are gender specialists both in country offices and at headquarters (AfDB, 2011)
- Using local gender specialists to improve the contextual relevance of gender sensitive programming (AfDB 2011)
- Integrating gender modules into other training programmes such as inductions, sector and poverty related training (DFID 2006; UNHCR 2010).

Evidence from the Asian Development Bank also indicates the benefit of having gender specialists both in headquarters and in country offices (AfDB 2011). Having adequate levels of staff to ensure gender sensitive programming is paramount to ensure consistent implementation. The ADB's experience also shows how using local gender specialists has improved the contextual relevance of gender sensitive programming (AfDB 2011). A synthesis report of gender evaluations carried out by the AfDB (2011) pointed out that in most donor agencies the number of gender specialists has remained low. However, agencies seem unevenly affected by this with evaluations of AusAID (2008) and the World Bank (2010) finding that the level of gender staffing has either increased or continued to be appropriate within these agencies.

Second, multiple, competing priorities promoted by senior management, understaffing and a lack of gender specialists hamper staff prioritisation of gender inclusion (Asen 2006; AfDB 2011; SDC 2009).

Third, gender considerations have been neglected as a result of lack of individual reward. An evaluation of SIDA in 2010 suggested that this could be corrected by immaterial rewards, such as recognition of ideas and staff being listened to by supervisors/management. A comprehensive evaluation of DFID's gender policy in 2006 suggested that staff lacked incentives to address gender as it was not linked to any bonus scheme, professional development or career progression (DFID 2006). Subsequently DFID tied the gender equality action plan performance to senior managers' bonus scheme. While there was some controversy regarding this initiative both with regards to its fairness (senior staff benefiting from work carried out by lower level staff) and its ethical implications (senior staff receiving benefits from something DFID should already be championing), the initiative succeeded in changing attitudes and awareness (Social Development Direct 2010). Now that the awareness among staff has been achieved, DFID recognises that a different approach is required to sustain commitment among senior managers to gender equality (ibid).

A common theme in most of the evaluations considered was the importance of senior leadership to ensure gender equality within the organisation and gender sensitive programme implementation. This was particularly highlighted by a comprehensive review of evaluations on donor agencies' progress on gender mainstreaming carried out by the AfDB. The report argues that "senior management is often most responsive to those priorities that receive the most international attention and resources, and so offer rewards and career enhancement" (AfDB, 2011: p 8). As gender has not been a priority area internationally, it has frequently been overlooked by senior management.

Targeting gender training towards senior managers to increase their awareness is difficult (AfDB 2010). These individuals often bypass training by citing competing priorities and busy workloads. Some organisations have managed to get around this by ensuring gender is integrated into leadership development courses at both senior- and mid-level courses (Unicef) and as part of the resident coordinators' training (UNDP and UNHCR) (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2010). The above mentioned bonus scheme operated by DFID also helped to motivate senior management there, after an extensive awareness raising campaign among all DFID staff failed to put gender high on the agenda (Social Development Direct 2010).

National ownership

National ownership is important for sustainable implementation of gender equality strategies. Success has been more prevalent when donors have supported efforts in countries that have strong gender equality mechanisms and civil society such as the Philippines and Ghana (World Bank 2010; Social Development Direct 2009). Strong NGO participation, especially of women's organisations, can greatly enrich national ownership of the promotion of gender equality (SIDA 2010; DFID 2006, AusAID, 2008). AusAID's support to Mindanao Women's Commission and Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has enabled these organisations to be at the forefront of advocating for gender equality (AusAID 2008) and donor funding to Burundian women's groups have led to a draft inheritance bill which includes women's ability to inherit land (Castillejo 2011). However, core funding is being diverted away from women's organisation in favour of short-term activity based funding (OECD/DAC 2008).

Understanding the local context

At the programme design phase it is important that a thorough review is undertaken in order to understand power relations in the community, identify potential barriers to access for both women and men and to attempt to foresee any potential backlashes. A rigorous analysis of the local context will also assist to assess the sustainability of the intervention.

An evaluation of DFID's work in India shows how rigorous analysis, based on strong gender expertise, lead to the success of the education programme (DFID 2006). A good practice for better understanding of the local context is to use participatory approaches when designing a new intervention (see below).

Participatory approaches

There appear to be more gains achieved where participatory approaches are used to design programmes and where continuous reviews ensure the programme stays on track and adapts to changing circumstances (World Bank 2010; UNHCR 2010; Social Development Direct 2009). By including the beneficiaries in the design of the targeted intervention, their needs can more easily be met and any barriers towards implementation or use of any infrastructure/activity being coordinated can be foreseen. A good practice of women's inclusion in project design is a World Bank funded initiative to improve roads in rural Peru. Through the input given by local women it was assessed that footpaths would be developed to ease the movement of women to move their animals and women in the area now report increased safety, mobility and improved time management (World Bank 2010).

Including women and men

Despite a wealth of academic literature and policy papers available on the benefits of including men and boys in interventions targeting gender equality, women continue to be the primary targets in gender interventions. Even donors who are seen as champions in the field of gender such as DFID and SIDA only have limited interventions aimed at addressing the root causes of gender power relations by including men and boys in their programmes. The SADEV evaluation of SIDA's work on gender showed that when men and boys were systematically included the outcomes were more sustainable. In addition to reducing potentially harmful backlashes against women's empowerment, including men also provides opportunities to identify and address disadvantages faced by men (Byron et al. 2010; CIDA 2008).

The persistence of donor focus on women as agents of change – the Women in Development (WID) approach as opposed to the rights and equality based Gender and Development (GAD) approach which focuses on understanding the social constructs attributed to men and women – has limited analysis on gender power relations and barriers to sustainability.

The GAD approach favours an analysis of gender, rather than women, and a thorough understanding of the underlying power structures between men and women. This is thus a more ambitious policy which requires a deeper understanding of both power structures and the local context in which an intervention is proposed. An evaluation of DFID found that this shift in focus from women to understanding gender and the underlying power structures has left staff confused and in doubt regarding their own capacity to implement this policy in practice (DFID 2006). This has had the implication of a continuation of funding for programmes that are seen as women-focused in which gender indicators have been easier to develop.

Financial and human resources

It is important that financial and human resources are made available to ensure effective mainstreaming and over a prolonged period of time. The most ambitious strategy for mainstreaming, and an example of best practice, so far is UNHCR's AGDM Strategy. As the title suggests the strategy goes beyond gender, to also include those groups who may be vulnerable because of disability or old age. However, an evaluation of the strategy from 2004 to 2009 found that while the AGDM Strategy was well thought out, and offered excellent value for money, without increased budget and senior management support its sustainability is questionable (UNHCR 2010). Gender training needs to be topped up on a regular basis and made available for all new staff, especially operational staff, in order to ensure continued attention is given to gender concerns. Often various resources are made available at the beginning of the launch of a new gender strategy, but the momentum seems to dissipate within a few years affecting the ability of staff and programmes to operate in a gender sensitive method (UNHCR 2010; DFID 2006).

Targeting interventions

Some evaluations suggest that because of the limited resources available for gender sensitive assessments and activities, donors should focus on countries with the largest gender disparities (World Bank 2010). An evaluation review carried out by NORAD also suggests that donors should increase their focus on gender in operational activities, and in particular in areas that are of strategic importance to translate benefits to other areas at a minimal cost (Asen 2006). An example of where such an approach appears to have been perhaps unintentionally successful is the SIDA funded Nyanza Road Programme in Kenya. While the programme used labour-based approaches to empower communities, especially women, the most cited outcome among women were not access to paid employment, but rather improved access to maternal health facilities and consequently a perception of decreased maternal mortality (SIDA 2010).

Interdisciplinary gender teams

The DFID country office in India has had great success in influencing and contributing to progress in gender equality. Part of DFID India's success has been to create an interdisciplinary programme team which also reflects India's state apparatus of geographical teams. This team has proved very effective in dialogue with state governments, the identification of entry points at state level, and in holistic approaches to poverty reduction (DFID 2006).

3. Promising good practices within donor agencies

Mainstreaming gender

Gender mainstreaming¹ requires that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities within an organisation, including in programme planning,

¹ The concept of gender mainstreaming was established as a global strategy for promoting gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Two years later the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) defined 'Gender mainstreaming' as '*a strategy for making*

implementation and monitoring and evaluation, policy development, research, advocacy/dialogue, legislation, and resource allocation. An organisation's ability to mainstream gender is thus an indication of how well it will be able to take gender differences into account within programme implementation. However, whilst it may be assumed that a comprehensive gender policy at the organisational level will translate into gender mainstreaming across programme interventions, there is currently little evidence of a direct causal link (DFID 2006).

All donor agencies have attempted to mainstream gender both institutionally and at programme level but the informal perception among stakeholders is that "mainstreaming gender equality is consistently underperforming across the majority of donor organizations" (AfDB 2011: p. 7). However, with only two comprehensive evaluation reviews having been carried out (AfDB 2011 and Asen 2006) more information is needed to fill the current evaluation knowledge gaps (AfDB 2011). Where progress in gender mainstreaming has been made, this has been driven mainly by committed individuals, rather than by institutional arrangements (UNDP 2006; SDC 2009). Key inhibitors continue to be competing priorities; lack of senior management leadership on gender; lack of capacity among staff; lack of resources; and difficulties translating policy into implementation.

There is little evidence that a comprehensive gender policy at the organizational level will actually translate into gender mainstreaming across programme interventions (DFID 2006). This point is often not considered in evaluations and is in need of further research. However, what is clear is that institutional attention to gender may lead to an internalisation of gender concerns to the point where they may feature more prominently in a wider array of interventions (DFID 2006).

In order for organisations to systematically address gender equality issues, mainstreaming activities should take place at every level of the organisation – including explicit commitments among senior management and clear internal accountability mechanisms which ensure these commitments translate into clear policy statements, resource allocations and investments in staff capacity. It is also essential that gender mainstreaming is reflected in monitoring and evaluation activities to ensure that gender equality is consistently reflected in programme design, planning and implementation in order to contribute to positive equality outcomes on the ground.

Gender strategies

Gender strategies have been initiated by donor agencies to clarify both their stance on 'gender', how it relates to their organisational strategy and how they commit to achieve gender equality in their programme interventions. The gender strategy is also used to enhance the agenda by informing research and advocacy.

women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of...the policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.' In practice, gender mainstreaming often includes both an attention to gender inequalities across all policies and programmes, as well as targeted investments and interventions which aim to specifically address gender inequalities and empower groups of women and men.

The gender strategies have aimed to influence the level of attention staff gives to gender, by making it clear that gender is not only the responsibility of gender specialists, but rather that it needs to receive attention from everyone both at the operational level and at headquarters. However, evidence has shown that staff has been reluctant to take the strategy on board in their daily work for a number of reasons (see sections below on staff capacity, incentives and leadership).

Where gender units have been set up to facilitate mainstreaming and gender sensitive programming, these often sit quite uncomfortably within institutions and are easily sidelined (CIDA 2008; Moser & Moser 2005). Where gender focal point systems are in place these have traditionally been the responsibility of junior staff or consultants. It has increasingly been acknowledged that these individuals often do not have either the expertise, the capacity nor the level of influence to effectively integrate gender into all of the organisation's programming (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2010).

Without an institutional approach to gender mainstreaming, backed by systems and mechanisms, evidence shows that success has been based on individual efforts of enthusiastic individuals (UNDP 2006; Asen 2006). This leaves gender mainstreaming vulnerable to financial and staff cutbacks (Asen 2006).

Where Gender Action Plans (GAPs) have been developed to clarify gender strategies, evaluations show that they are rarely used to the extent envisaged. Reasons often cited include lack of rules mandating their use or staff incentives. The use of GAPs has thus come down to individual country or sectoral context as well as the individual operational staff members (AfDB 2011).

Tracking expenditure linked to gender equality

UNDP, CIDA and AusAID have developed good practices to track expenditure linked to gender equality. Launched in 2009, the UNDP Gender Marker approach rates the contributions of expenditure of both investments and expenditures to targeted gender equality programmes and gender mainstreaming within the organisation (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2010). AusAID and CIDA have applied similar approaches to their programmatic interventions, however less information is available with regards to their administrative budgets. The AfDB points out that "even when tracking systems have been put in place they can be undermined by uneven record keeping and interpretation" (AfDB 2011: p. 47). Without this type of information it is impossible to conclude whether adequate resources are dedicated to gender equality in both programmatic interventions and staff levels and capacity. In general, evaluations tend to conclude that not enough resources have been allocated to gender, by using proxy indicators such as lack of monitoring and absence of observable results, the level of human resources, training and inclusion of gender in interventions and inconsistent or lack of use of procedures and tools to enable gender mainstreaming (AfDB 2011).

Partnerships

Creating effective partnerships with local organisations often prove to be key in ensuring effective outcomes (Social Development Direct 2009). Unifem in particular has found that establishing partnerships with Planning and Finance Ministries, especially with any gender unit or gender focal person within these institutions, has proved especially useful. By building the capacity of key stakeholders through a system of awareness raising, building technical capacity and moving towards an approach of ongoing support has shown some success in incorporating and sustaining gender sensitive budgeting within the finance ministries in Morocco and Ecuador (Social Development Direct 2009).

4. Progress made in gender equality at the country level

Uneven progress across countries

The evidence shows that it is often difficult to translate institutional-level gender equality commitments into effective implementation at the country level. Evaluations found “a relationship between the degree of policy evaporation and the specific country context, sector and aid modality evaluated” (DFID 2006). Whilst some country offices report good progress on gender considerations and integration of donor gender strategies in their work, progress is often uneven across field offices (DFID 2006; SDC 2009).

Evaluations suggest that gender progress tends to be more easily implemented in countries which have strong national ownership of gender equality strategies, such as India and Ghana (World Bank 2010; DFID 2006). However, there are exceptions – the evaluation of DFID’s programmes in the Western Balkans (DFID 2006) found that despite progressive gender equality indicators, the Western Balkan country offices did not implement gender assessments and consequently gender sensitive programmes. This can partly be attributed to the lack of gender policy directions available from DFID headquarters with regards to middle income countries at the time and shows the importance of gender mainstreaming at the organisational level.

There appears to be some differences in the method and effectiveness among donor agencies to support gender interventions. While some agencies appear to be good at considering gender concerns at the programme planning and design phase, an evaluation of CIDA points out that during implementation gender concerns are easily dropped, especially in programmes that have a non-gender equality focus (CIDA 2008). However, an evaluation of SIDA’s work found the opposite, with gender concerns being addressed more during implementation than during the planning and design phase (SADEV 2010). While the literature provides little direct explanation for this, it might be that a combination of the constraints already outlined in this report contributes to the lack of attention given to gender differences.

The experience of the World Bank (2010) shows that where gender-aware lending was sustained, progress appeared more successful as in Bangladesh and Ghana. The approach used in these two countries in the education sector was to address both the supply side (female teachers, classrooms and textbooks), but also to address and create demand for education among vulnerable groups (World Bank 2010).

Sectoral focuses

Donor agencies have tended to focus on including women and girls in development outcomes in sectors such as education and health in particular (DFID 2006; CIDA 2008). Other sectors that have received some attention include democracy and human rights, water, agriculture and the informal sector (CIDA 2008; SADEV 2010). Significantly less consideration has been given to gender concerns in programmes focusing on the environment, infrastructure and pro-poor growth.

However, the lack of monitoring and the development of indicators to measure progress of interventions have meant that progress has been difficult to quantify outside of education and health sectors where some positive progress has been observed in India amongst other countries (DFID 2006). Evaluations of AusAID (2008) and CIDA (2008) report that there has been some indication that women who benefit from capacity building activities and improved access to resources may subsequently make gains in other areas and consequently improve their decision making power within the household.

The rationale for moving towards donor harmonisation and common procedures was to reduce transaction costs and enhance the effectiveness of aid. Local ownership of the process was thought to be beneficial to ensure policies were grounded in local analysis and a commitment to the strategy of the implementing Government. However, for bilateral donors this also provides challenges as this reduces their influence on how aid is used (DFID 2006).

Some evaluations point towards the challenges of incorporating gender sensitivities in new aid modalities, including the risk that gender becomes sidelined among other competing priorities, especially with the focus on tangible results, the lack of civil society involvement, the problem with rapid disbursement fund and the subsequent difficulty of setting up appropriate monitoring systems (AfDB 2011; CIDA 2008). Other evaluations consider the new approach as full of opportunities to increase gender concerns, including increased opportunities to strategically integrate gender into aid programming at the country level rather than at programme level and as an opportunity for gender equality dialogue at the highest level (CIDA 2008).

An evaluation synthesis report, however, finds that emerging evaluative data on integrating gender equality into General Budget Support (GBS), Policy-based Lending (PBL) and Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAPs) indicates that gender is not being mainstreamed (AfDB 2011). Further, tension between donor-driven and partner-driven priorities can weaken gender focus in implementation. For example, when national ownership and DFID policies on gender differ, DFID country offices tend to align to partner government priorities to the extent of not pursuing gender equality and women's empowerment (DFID 2006).

However, a good practice example of donor harmonisation to achieve gender equality has been the harmonised gender audit of organisational systems in Rwanda supported by eight organisations. The audit was aimed to be a tool to assess aid's effectiveness on gender and serve as a platform to move forward. However, despite the process proving popular among donors and NGOs, the partners struggled to influence the Government of Rwanda to take the recommendations forward (OECD/DAC 2009).

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6. Additional information

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For further information about measuring women's economic empowerment, including findings from evaluations, please see the Helpdesk Research Report on Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment (<http://www.gsdc.org/go/display&type=Helpdesk&id=616>).

About Helpdesk research reports: Helpdesk reports are based on 2 days of desk-based research. They are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues, and a summary of

some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged