

5 June 2008

**Note on the United Nations System Support to Member States
on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment**

I. Introduction

This note responds to the President of the General Assembly's letter dated 20 May 2008 to the Secretary-General requesting a note on the substantive and programmatic aspects of the work of the UN system on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, following the intergovernmental consultations on system-wide coherence held by the General Assembly on 16 May 2008. The purpose of this Note is to assist Member States in their deliberations on strengthening the UN system's work on gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of their review of UN system-wide coherence. It highlights the increasing demand on the system for support to countries to advance the implementation of their commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment and briefly outlines the achievements, gaps and challenges.

II. Background

Gender equality and empowerment of women are integral to the UN's mission and critical to the achievement of its objectives in development, peace and security and human rights. The Millennium Declaration and the outcome of the 2005 World Summit reaffirm this. There is increasing evidence that gender equality and the empowerment of women are central to meeting all internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The responsibility for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women lies with Member States, including both developed and developing countries. Member States have made notable progress in improving their policy and institutional frameworks for gender equality, in line with global commitments. Nearly every country in the world has a national machinery for women or gender equality; more than 120 countries have national plans of

action on gender equality; numerous countries have amended their constitutions to guarantee women's human rights; laws and policies have been introduced in the majority of countries to eliminate discrimination and violence against women, and 102 countries have introduced positive action to support women's increased participation in national parliaments.

In spite of all these achievements, there remains a serious gap between commitments and their implementation at the national level. While the UN system has made a significant contribution at the normative and policy level, it has not always had the human, technical or financial resources needed to provide adequate support at the national level.

III. The substantive and programmatic work of the UN system on gender equality and the empowerment of women

Mandates

The strong mandates on gender equality derive from the UN Charter, the Beijing Platform for Action, the 2005 World Summit Outcome and outcomes of major UN conferences and summits and their follow-up, ECOSOC Agreed Conclusions 1997/2 calling on all UN entities to mainstream a gender perspective in all their policies and programmes, Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as specific mandates provided by the governing bodies of the Funds, Programmes and the Specialized Agencies. Most recently, the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review of operational activities of the United Nations development system (TCPR) (2007) resolution highlighted the importance for the UN system to "take a coherent and coordinated approach in their work on gender-related issues." The Agreed Conclusions of the 52nd Commission on the Status of Women called for more effective gender mainstreaming in the UN system and for to enhancement of "its capacity to effectively assist Member States, upon their request, in implementing their programmes on gender equality and the empowerment of women and, to that end, make adequate and reliable human and financial resources available".

The intergovernmental bodies, including the governing boards, provide oversight of implementation of the mandates on gender equality in countries in all regions of the world. The CEDAW Committee also monitors implementation in all States parties.

All parts of the UN have responsibility to promote gender equality and women's empowerment within their mandates, and ensure that policy outcomes lead to action on the ground. The UN supports gender equality and women's empowerment through its normative and operational work. The Secretariat, the Regional Commissions, Funds and Programmes and Specialized Agencies, UN Country Teams and UN Regional Directors' Teams all undertake activities relevant to their mandates. Four gender-specific entities in the UN play a leadership and catalytic role in UN system-wide efforts: The Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); and the International Research and Training Institute for Women (INSTRAW).

Achievements

Since 1995, significant efforts have been made within the UN to strengthen its work on gender equality and women's empowerment and there have been some notable achievements. Most UN entities have in place gender equality policies, strategies and action plans, increasingly with time-bound targets and indicators. Many have established gender expertise at headquarters level, and entities with country presence have gender experts, advisors and focal points. Entities have also developed methodologies and tools to support programming and policy advice on gender equality and gender mainstreaming, although these are not always utilized as systematically and effectively as needed. Since responsibility for gender equality and empowerment of women is the responsibility of all staff and managers, capacity-building has been provided in many entities to develop awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Increasingly, UN entities work together on specific issues to strengthen the effectiveness and impact of their efforts. A number of interagency coordination bodies have been put into place, including notably the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE). Joint initiatives and efforts to mainstream gender equality into on-going programmes at the country level have been undertaken.

To strengthen these efforts, in 2006 the CEB endorsed a system-wide policy on gender equality and women's empowerment and a strategy for gender mainstreaming that will serve as standard setting for all UN entities, providing both conceptual and operational guidance and a framework for accountability. In addition, the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) recently approved indicators for UNCTs performance on gender equality, to be used as part of the UN accountability framework at the country level.

Despite all these efforts and achievements, the existing fragmentation among all entities of the UN system and in particular in relation to gender expertise has undermined the UN's capacity to effectively respond to Member States' needs. A number of significant gaps and challenges have been identified.

Gaps and challenges

Long-standing challenges and emerging issues, such as the increased targeting of women in armed conflicts, new forms of violence against women, the gender-differentiated impact of climate change and the food crisis, as well as persistent forms of discrimination in other areas, require increased effectiveness of the UN as a strategic partner to Governments and civil society in supporting their efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

At the same time, despite significant and innovative efforts made by individual entities, gaps and challenges within the UN, including coordination and coherence, authority and positioning, accountability and human and financial resources continue to hinder the capacity of the UN system to effectively respond to Member States' needs.

Coordination and coherence

Weak linkages between inter-governmental agreements and implementation on the ground have contributed to inadequate coordination and coherence. Lack of channels to provide essential feedback from operational levels on what works and what does not work at the national level is also a constraint. Information on intergovernmental decisions and recommendations should be more broadly disseminated and awareness of the implications of policy/normative outcomes for operational work be raised. Ways to provide more effective feedback from the operational level to inform normative work need to be addressed.

Lack of coordination can also mean that high priority issues are not paid adequate attention. At times, duplication of efforts by different entities has occurred because of a lack of coordination. Even in areas where effective interventions have been made by a large number of entities over many years, for example in the areas of violence against women, the lack of a coherent and sustained system-wide approach has limited the effectiveness of the work of the UN. Lack of coherence in the UN system may also emerge from the diverse and sometimes contradictory types of policy advice of governing bodies of different entities.

Authority and positioning

Most gender equality specialists in the UN system, even at senior levels, function as advisors with very limited policy or operational authority or capacity, especially because of inadequate levels of staff and financial resources. In the context of the gender mainstreaming strategy, gender equality is a mandate for every UN organization; but shared responsibility cannot substitute for recognized authority. Significantly greater effort is required to enhance the authority of gender equality expertise in the UN system. Gender equality expertise, entities and coordination mechanisms are irregularly present in high-level decision-making bodies of the UN, whether within the CEB, the UNAIDS co-sponsors, or at the heads of agency meetings of UN Country Teams. The UN system lacks a recognized driver that can identify and take action in response to critical gender-related issues, provide direction and

support, including in emerging or new areas; and hold the system accountable for delivering results on the ground.

A UNDG review of Common Country Assessment and United Nations Development Assistance Framework highlighted the absence of holistic support by UN Country Teams to national plans of action on gender equality. The absence of a recognized overall authority results in Ministries of Women's Affairs or Gender Equality having to negotiate at country level with multiple counterparts from the UN. In many cases, their most obvious counterparts, the Gender Theme Groups, gender focal points and/or UNIFEM where it is represented at the national level, lack the resources or authority found in other UN entities and coordination mechanisms.

Accountability

In most entities, the political will and support for gender equality from senior management remains inconsistent and inadequate. While there are many excellent gender equality policies and strategies in place across the system, a UNDG review of accountability for gender equality in UN system policies and practices found that there is no system-wide standard and no consequences for non-performance. Few entities have introduced clear performance indicators on gender mainstreaming in annual staff performance appraisals or ensured that job descriptions and work plans include specific references to responsibility for gender equality. As illustrated in reviews of accountability for implementing gender equality policies undertaken by governments and NGO partners, even where good policies or strategies are in place, the human and financial resources and authority needed to ensure robust implementation are frequently lacking.

Resources

Inadequate and unpredictable human and financial resources for gender equality activities are a reality throughout the entire UN system, in particular in the gender-specific entities and units. Too often, increases in human and financial resources for gender equality in

UN organizations are tied to cost-sharing contributions rather than sustainable core commitments. One of the results is reliance at the country level on weak gender focal point systems rather than investment in high-level, specialized and sustainable advisory and technical expertise in gender equality that can respond to demand.

There is increasingly widespread use of gender-responsive budgeting tools, which enhance the potential to track resource allocations and expenditures at the national level. The limited ability of the UN to track its own resource allocations and expenditures on gender equality actions needs, however, to be addressed, to enable improved response to Member States.

IV. Strengthening UN support to Member States

Member States' commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment have become stronger as goals in their own right and as the evidence mounts to demonstrate their crucial importance for the achievement of development and peace. Member States' requests to the UN system for specific technical, human and financial support to transform the global, national and regional norms into concrete programmes and quantifiable progress have increased significantly. The urgent need to respond to pressing yet unmet priorities – such as reducing maternal mortality and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS amongst women and girls in some regions or scaling up responses to violence against women and girls in all countries – fuel this demand. As we approach the mid-term review of the implementation of MDGs, it is critical to address the gap between growing demand by Member States, and the UN's capacity to respond. The existence of policies, expertise and networks within the UN system on gender equality – coupled with the UN's role as a partner of choice for countries in support of gender equality – create a strong basis upon which to move forward.

Throughout the UN system, experiences have shown that when there is a strong commitment and leadership from top management, and sufficient dedicated human and financial resources, positive outcomes are possible. With improved coordination and

accountability; adequate financial resources; strong institutional authority and leadership on gender equality at both headquarters and country level; and a well-resourced network of experts and advisors easily accessible to the UN system and Member States, the UN's capacity to provide effective technical assistance and support at the national level would be significantly improved.