

Opening remarks
by
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Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I am very happy to welcome you all to this fifth session of our Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality. I welcome especially all those from other duty stations as well as those of you who are attending this meeting for the first time. I hope that you will find it very useful especially in broadening your network of like minded persons. I also wish to extend a special welcome to Ms. Sarah Murison whom many of you know, who has agreed to be a resource person for my office for this meeting and subsequent follow-up. I invite you all to participate vigorously in the discussions over the next two days so that we can accomplish the major task ahead of us.

Colleagues, as you may have gathered from my communication to you during the preparations for this meeting, this session is unlike the previous ones that we have had. This meeting will focus almost exclusively on the development of key elements of a “UN system-wide gender mainstreaming policy and strategy”. The focus on this topic is a result of several factors. Firstly, it is a directive from the Secretary General as contained in paragraph 39 of his report to the General Assembly entitled Implementation of the decisions from the 2005 World Summit Outcome for Action by the Secretary General (A/60/430). As per the mandate of that report, the outcome of the deliberations of this meeting will serve as our input to the report of the Secretary-General to the 2006 Substantive session of ECOSOC. Secondly our topic today is driven by the ongoing UN reform.

The need to find new and better ways to ensure that international agreements to achieve gender equality and advancement of women are implemented has been emphasized in many fora in recent months. At the same time the lack of coherence and inability to create sufficient synergy among the entities has also been noted. These concerns are articulated not only in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, but also in the contribution of the Chief Executives’ Board (CEB) to the 2005 Substantive Session of ECOSOC contained in their publication “One United Nations: Catalyst for Progress and Change”. More recently the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs (EC-ESA) under which gender issues are considered, has also arrived at similar conclusions. No doubt similar debates have been going on in the governing bodies of

some of the entities represented here. The message, therefore, is loud and clear. The gap between policy and implementation must be bridged, collaboration between the normative and the operational work of the UN must be strengthened and scaled-up results that demonstrate a real improvement in the well being of large proportions of women, and men, must become evident, sooner rather than later.

Thirdly, only last year, this Network noted that it needed to shift its focus from information sharing to a shared analysis of gender issues. Among other issues it identified, was the importance of linking up with and supporting the national Gender Theme Groups, strengthening collaboration in order to avoid duplication of efforts between entities, ensuring that the monitoring role of the Network as well as accountability mechanisms for gender mainstreaming were strengthened, and extending its support to entities whose gender units worked in constrained conditions. I have taken time to carefully review previous reports of the meetings of this Network and I have noted, not surprisingly, that they have made the same or very similar observations time and time again.

And fourthly, focusing on this topic responds to ECOSOC Resolution 2005/31. Not only did ECOSOC call upon all the individual entities represented here to strengthen efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment of women, but it also called upon my office specifically, working with you all, to collectively spearhead these efforts.

It is in this context that the Secretary General wrote to all Heads of UN entities requesting them “to review and strengthen their gender mainstreaming programmes with a view to developing a system-wide gender mainstreaming policy and strategy, with related accountability mechanisms” (A/60/430 paragraph 39). I am glad to know many of you are aware of this communication and have begun to make the necessary consultations within your entities. In fact I have received some extensive information from some of your Heads of Agencies which is very useful for the exercise that we are embarking on.

Although I am the first to admit that a UN system-wide gender mainstreaming policy and strategy will not address everything to our satisfaction, I believe it marks a bold step towards gender equality. The fact that we have been asked to develop a UN system-wide policy and strategy in the context of UN reform is itself significant. For the first time, we are not playing catch-up, but are moving in-step with the changes that are afoot. It is an opportunity that we cannot afford to squander.

As we share our ideas on what we would like to see constituting a UN system-wide gender mainstreaming policy and strategy, we must keep in mind that there are other major developments that are taking place that will affect how we work in the future, whether we like it or not. Some of you have in recent weeks attended meetings on Aid Modalities and the promotion of gender equality in Brussels, Nairobi and Washington DC. The paradoxical situation of both a potentially large increase in overseas development assistance (ODA) and a contraction of assistance to gender equality programmes is worrisome and very real at the country level in some areas today. This

may be driven both by a lack of voice among those who advocate for gender equality in negotiations for assistance as much as by a perception that gender equality programmes are not making a significant impact to alleviate poverty. It is a challenge to all of us to do better collectively to support the advancement of women at the country level. It means that we must take a critical look at how we have proceeded to date and determine what went wrong. We must accept that from now on it will not be business as usual. Thus we must make a paradigm shift.

To enable us to focus our energies on this topic, we shall spend much of our time in the next couple of days discussing the key elements that constitute a UN system-wide gender mainstreaming policy and strategy. The operative words are “key elements”. Please note that we are not here to craft a complete UN-system wide gender mainstreaming policy and strategy. Our purpose in this meeting is to discuss and agree on what shape, form and scope such a policy and strategy should take. The Secretary-General is aware that some individual entities have their own entity-specific policies and strategies on gender mainstreaming. What we are called upon is to contribute to a system-wide policy and strategy. Our discussion therefore must be guided by that request of the Secretary-General and indeed of ECOSOC. Therefore, our discussion must contribute to delivering a policy and strategy on gender mainstreaming that makes sense and that contributes significantly to all UN entities. After our initial discussion in this meeting, my office will continue the dialogue and consultation with you electronically and by teleconference as necessary to flesh out the details that will go into the Report of the Secretary General to the 2006 Substantive Session of ECOSOC.

To kick off our discussion, Ms. Sarah Murison, our resource person, will introduce a preliminary framework that we will use as a reference point. She will from time to time help us to concretize our thoughts and steer us towards a common understanding of the many varied points of view that we have. I have also circulated to you a short briefing paper that I plan to discuss with the High Level Committee on Management and the High Level Committee on Programmes of the CEB next week. These committees have placed gender mainstreaming on their agenda in response to the Secretary-General’s letter with a view to enhance CEB’s commitment to strengthen coherence and coordination of their work. Both the framework and the briefing paper to HLCM and HLCP are in drafts and therefore meant for discussion only and not for distribution beyond this Network. Following conclusion of our discussion, they will be revised.

The decisions of the 2005 World Summit demanded UN system-wide coherence in many areas. These decisions underscored the need for “effective, efficient, coherent, coordinated and better-performing United Nations” (Para 169). I would like to invite you to keep these catch words as the guiding principles as we discuss the elements of a system-wide policy and strategy. Let me emphasize that the UN system-wide policy and strategy is by no means a substitute for individual entities’ own policy, strategy, action plan and the like. These must continue to be supported and strengthened. Indeed both ECOSOC and the Secretary General have pointedly underscored this fact. Given the

complexity of gender and development issues, it is essential to recognize that every entity here holds an important piece of the puzzle.

At the same time, however, it bears stating that the system wide policy and strategy should not be expected to be an amalgamation of the various policies and strategies that currently exist. There are many agency-specific gender mainstreaming policy and strategy attributes that cannot and indeed should not be featured in a system-wide policy and strategy. Rather my expectation is that given the experience and the expertise on gender mainstreaming represented in this room today, there is sufficient knowledge and know-how on what the essential policy and strategy components on gender mainstreaming that the UN should have, at a minimum, to systematically formulate and implement programmes on gender equality, and then be held accountable for the outcomes. Our challenge, therefore, is to distil our own organizational experiences and formulate them in a way that demonstrates that we are the community of practice in gender mainstreaming within the UN system.

I am aware that this is no small task, but I am also convinced that we shall all rise to the challenge. I want to wish you well in all your deliberations and I look forward to the results of this meeting.

Thank you for your attention.
