



Concept Note

Vienna Policy Dialogue
13 to 14 December 2012
United Nations Office in Vienna

Advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women: The role of development cooperation

**United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs
(UNDESA) in partnership with the Government of Austria and the
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of
Women (UNWOMEN)**

I. Background

The deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is fast approaching. The world has changed in significant ways since the turn of the Millennium—environmentally, demographically and politically. Gender inequality persists and women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work and economic assets, and participation in government.

Women play a critical role in realizing sustainable development through their active participation in the economic, political and social life at the national level. Yet, this engagement is often not fully harnessed because of women's limited role in decision-making combined with insufficient access to financial resources, decent work opportunities, security and public services (such as energy, clean water and high-quality education and health-care) that adequately respond to their multiple needs. These inequalities affect women disproportionately in many countries. Addressing gender inequality in these areas and the promotion of employment and equitable and inclusive growth opportunities for women is therefore critical to achieving effective and sustainable development outcomes.

The primary school enrolment of girls now equals that of boys at the global level, and progress in reducing child and maternal mortality has accelerated in recent years. Yet, decreases in maternal mortality rates are far from the 2015 targets. Women and girls also continue to face gender-based discrimination and violence in many countries that undermine efforts to reach the broad spectrum of development goals.

Addressing inequalities faced by women and girls will directly impact progress in meeting the MDGs in 2015 and beyond. Achievement of national commitments towards gender equality and the empowerment of women is a key driver of development effectiveness on all fronts.

Profound shifts in development cooperation in recent years have significantly impacted progress on the MDGs. Stronger development cooperation partnerships between governments, academia, civil society, donors and international organizations that support women are needed to accelerate progress.

Participants at the 2012 High Level Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) urged to put gender equality and the empowerment of women at the heart of an emerging post-2015 UN development agenda and the future of development cooperation. They also called upon the DCF to advance these discussions, building on its past work on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

In response to this call, UNDESA in partnership with UN Women and the Government of Austria are organizing the *Vienna Policy Dialogue* on “Advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women: the role of development cooperation” on 13 and 14 December 2012 in Vienna, Austria. This is the first in a series of multi-stakeholder consultations in preparation of the 2014 DCF.

The *Vienna Policy Dialogue* will bring together senior representatives and experts from developing and developed countries, local governments, civil society, parliaments, women's organizations and the private sector to identify gaps and obstacles and to develop concrete policy recommendations.

II. Objective

The *Vienna Policy Dialogue* will explore the contribution that international development cooperation and the DCF itself can make to position gender equality at the heart of the post-2015 development agenda. The DCF of ECOSOC is well-placed to engage all relevant development actors in an inclusive and transparent dialogue on this important issue.

The overarching objective of the *Vienna Policy Dialogue* is to discuss how the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda can be promoted in international development cooperation and the post-2015 development framework. The meeting will be an opportunity to discuss among key stakeholder groups from gender and development portfolios how best to nurture gender equality and the empowerment of women in light of new and emerging development challenges and the evolving landscape and architecture of development cooperation. It will also be the first event in the fourth DCF cycle (2012-14) and therefore an opportunity to inform subsequent DCF deliberations in other areas as well.

The *Vienna Policy Dialogue* particularly aims to:

- Identify practical solutions and good practices in gender-responsive development cooperation policies and programmes that work and deliver sustainable results from the perspective of all stakeholders and taking into account new financing realities;
- Revitalize the momentum on gender equality and women's rights with a view to promoting internationally agreed development goals (IADGs) including MDG achievement and a gender-sensitive post-2015 development agenda that addresses financing gaps and capacity needs;
- Discuss how gender equality and women's empowerment can be placed at the centre of the post-2015 development;
- Identify how national and global mutual accountability mechanisms can help reinforce efforts to promote development cooperation focused on promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women;
- Assess progress and challenges in collecting timely information on the volume and results of development cooperation related to gender equality and women's empowerment;
- Encourage greater inclusion of all advocates for women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women in national and international policy dialogue and decision-making processes.

The deliberations in Vienna will build on outcomes and recommendations of the 2008 and 2010 DCF and previous DCF High-level Symposia, in particular the 2010 DCF High-level Symposium on "*Coherent development cooperation: maximizing impact in a changing environment*" in Helsinki that focused on making development cooperation more responsive to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women (See Annex 1).

III. Gender equality in the international debate

Member States have anchored and reaffirmed their commitments to gender-equality in normative frameworks. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and the outcome documents of the 2010 MDG

Summit and the Rio+20 Conference. Internationally agreed development goals (IADGs), including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and international norms and standards represent the shared guidepost for assistance providers, developing country governments and other actors as they represent jointly agreed and owned commitments. The United Nations, as the custodian of international norms and standards, has a critical role to play in supporting countries to effectively operationalize these international norms and standards to advance and achieve sustainable development outcomes.

Gender equality in normative frameworks

- The **2010 MDG Summit**, reaffirmed that “*gender equality and the empowerment of women is both a key development goal and an important means to achieve the MDGs*”. Member States of the United Nations also committed themselves to “*enhance the impact of development assistance in advancing gender equality and empowerment of women and girls through targeted activities, including capacity-building, as well as through gender mainstreaming and enhanced dialogue between donors and partners, involving, as appropriate, civil society and the private sector, with a view to ensuring adequate funding.*”
- At the **Rio+20 Conference**, Member States recognized that “*gender equality and the effective participation of women are important for effective action on all aspects of sustainable development*” and “*reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen international cooperation to address the persistent challenges related to sustainable development for all, in particular in developing countries*” and “*the need to achieve economic stability, sustained economic growth, promotion of social equity and protection of the environment, while enhancing gender equality, women’s empowerment and equal opportunities for all, and the protection, survival and development of children to their full potential, including through education.*”
- The **Accra Agenda for Action (AAA)** recognized “*gender equality, respect for human rights, and environmental sustainability [as] cornerstones for achieving enduring impact on the lives and potential of poor women, men, and children*” and found that “*it is vital that all our policies address these issues in a more systematic and coherent way.*” The related commitment in the AAA held developing countries and assistance providers to “*ensure that their respective development policies and programmes are designed and implemented in ways consistent with their agreed international commitments on gender equality, human rights, disability and environmental sustainability.*”
- The **Busan Partnership for Effective Development** takes these commitments even further and calls for accelerated efforts to achieve development gender equality and women’s empowerment recognizing that “*reducing gender equality is both an end in its own right and a prerequisite for sustainable and equitable growth*”.

IV. Development cooperation and the promotion of gender equality

In the current economic climate of austerity, it is more important than ever that the potential of development cooperation for the achievement of development results is fully utilized. The development effectiveness agenda presents opportunities for ensuring implementation of national and international commitments towards gender equality in partner and donor countries and achieving equitable development results.

In recent history, tremendous efforts have been made to identify and implement concrete actions for improving aid management and national systems to guarantee effective results for women and girls. Advocates for gender equality have highlighted existing gaps with regard to the extent to which these processes include voices of women, facilitate the achievement of results for women or integrate a gender perspective in allocation of budgets, or assessing performance and results. Strengthened national systems and capacity on gender responsive planning, budgeting and monitoring are therefore a critical priority.

Lessons learned from the country level also show that the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment is most successful when there is strong government leadership at the central level for mainstreaming gender-sensitive interventions within the broader context of national development needs and priorities.

Overall, policies and objectives on gender equality are not matched by adequate resources. Over 100 countries have put in place national gender action plans. While international norms and standards on equality and non-discrimination should guide financing decisions with targeted investments for poor women, many have struggled to mobilize the financial resources, technical capacity and programmatic expertise needed to implement them.

Both the quality and the quantity of financing for gender equality needs to improve. Currently, only a small share of official development assistance (ODA) directly benefits women in developing countries. Much of the gender-focused aid is restricted to specific types of interventions in limited sectors, mostly health and education. This is partially due to a lack of sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive performance indicators.

Improving the quality of investments and financing for gender equality entails expanding scope of support to women's priorities across sectors and in strategic areas to facilitate the achievement of development goals, and contribute to women's empowerment as producers, care takers, political leaders and agents of development. The realization of those goals requires that accountability frameworks reflect the multi-dimensional response to women's priorities in development and partnership policies.

The promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment at the country level also requires effective accountability mechanisms. Such accountability mechanisms must be grounded in in-country parliamentary oversight with the active participation of all relevant actors, including local and national civil society. Donor coordination must also be aligned with the agreed country priorities and subject to regular independent assessments of progress. Systems to track resources and monitor development results must be improved and institutionalized to ensure accountability for financing for gender equality.

International development cooperation should explicitly target women and girls facing multiple forms of inequality such as those living in absolute poverty and in post-conflict and vulnerable contexts. These women are often left voiceless, excluded from social protection, access to services and economic opportunities. Bilateral and multilateral development cooperation providers, central and local governments and non-executive stakeholders have critical, albeit diverse roles, to play in ensuring that such focus is maintained.

V. Format

The Vienna Policy Dialogue is a medium-sized, focused meeting of high-level experts and practitioners in development cooperation and gender equality from all DCF stakeholder groups to ensure a targeted, interactive discussion. A hallmark of the DCF is its interactive, open, frank discussion on development cooperation with a diverse group of actors.

VI. Documentation

In addition to this brief concept note, a substantive background document will be prepared by the organizers, which will help guide the deliberations. It will be circulated to participants in advance of the meeting. Experts may be invited to contribute short substantive papers or presentations on the various themes of the meeting.

VII. Outcome

A brief summary of the meeting, highlighting key recommendations will be prepared. It will serve as input for various preparatory activities for the 2014 DCF, the ongoing deliberations on a post-2015 and other related processes. All documentation relating to the meeting will be made publicly available on the DCF webpage.

VIII. Participants

Representatives of national and local governments, parliaments, civil society groups, private sector/foundations and representatives of international organizations will be invited to take part in the Vienna Policy Dialogue.

IX. The Development Cooperation Forum

The Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) is the principal multi-stakeholder forum for global dialogue and policy aimed at reviewing trends and progress in international development cooperation. It provides policy guidance and recommendations to promote more effective and coherent international development cooperation.

The roots of the Forum lie in the 2005 World Summit, at which the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was called upon to convene a biennial forum focusing on international development cooperation. Since its launch in 2007, the DCF has provided a dedicated, inclusive platform that engages developing countries, including those providing South-South cooperation, donors, multilateral organizations, parliamentarians, local governments, civil society and private philanthropic organization.

This next phase of the DCF will be critical for the achievements of the MDGs. The 2014 DCF will unfold in a two-year phase (2012-14) that will be informed by critical processes including the design of the post-2015 UN development agenda and the follow-up to Rio+20. The Forum will play a leading role in sharing solutions to respond to emerging global challenges, including those related to changes in the landscape and architecture of development cooperation.

Preparations for the 2014 DCF will focus on supporting policymakers and practitioners to proactively adapt development cooperation practices to emerging trends and further review its quantity, quality, allocation and impact to make tangible and concrete contributions toward improving the lives and rights of people, promoting sustainable development, reducing persistent inequalities and struggles over scarce resources.

Further information

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Annex I

Key recommendations of the High-level Symposium on “Coherent development cooperation: maximizing impact in a changing environment” in preparation for the 2010 DCF (Helsinki, 3-4 June 2010).

The Helsinki High-level Symposium discussed how to make aid more responsive to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. The discussions led to a number of key recommendations listed below:

1. *Mainstream policies*: gender-sensitive policies¹ and existing gender action plans need to be widely discussed and integrated in national development strategies and aid policies.
2. *Live up to commitments*: Recipient countries called upon providers to systematically provide development cooperation to help national institutions to deliver on their commitments to support the achievement of gender-related MDGs and national gender equality objectives, to strengthen the use of national systems to deliver responsive results and to report gender-focused aid on budget.
3. *Build capacity*: It was recommended to invest aid in capacity development of national partners including Ministries of Finance, sector ministries, national women’s machineries, civil society organizations, parliamentarians and local governments. This would enable them notably to conduct gender-sensitive analysis and ensure gender responsiveness of national planning, budgeting and monitoring.
4. *Enhance the quality of aid*: Participants underscored the importance of on-budget aid for gender equality and the use of national systems to promote transparency, accountability, cost-effectiveness, alignment and long-term development results.
5. *Make high-quality information available*: Despite recommendations in the Beijing Platform for Action, availability of sex-disaggregated data is often limited to a narrow set of sectors and dimensions. Adequate indicators and data-collection systems are rarely in place. National agencies do not coordinate among each other to consolidate available data. Information sources are often not directly comparable. International repositories may not be congruent with findings at national level. At all levels, greater investment is urgently needed to boost statistics and reporting on gender-related MDGs.
6. *Promote mutual accountability*: For gender equality to become a reality, national mutual accountability compacts need to include relevant indicators to assess progress, including on civil society organizations’ activities. Gender-related performance indicators should be agreed and actively monitored and evaluated by all relevant stakeholders, be integrated within performance frameworks of national development strategies and encompass normative gender equality standards identified in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals.

¹ Such policies include: e.g. gender parity in education, a universal social protection floor, full productive and decent work, giving women control over productive assets, providing health care including reproductive health, etc.