DFID’s Strategic Vision for Girls and Women

A move in the right direction?

The changes that have taken place in DFID’s approach to gender equality since 2010 represent a major shift in analysis; one which many gender experts fear represents a step backwards, rather than forwards, for women’s empowerment. Below we look briefly at the historical context for these changes, at DFID’s current approach, at the views of members of GADN on this shift in strategy, and at new developments since the introduction of the Strategic Vision.

Historical perspective

In the 1990s the goal of development assistance shifted towards poverty elimination and the Millennium Development Goals. DFID’s first gender policy document “Poverty Elimination and the Empowerment of Women” stressed the importance of women’s rights beyond supporting women as a means to reduce poverty. A Gender Evaluation in 2006 concluded that there was some excellent work in DFID on gender but that it was patchy and there was no accountability for policy commitments.

DFID subsequently developed the Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) for 2007-2010, drafted by the Equity and Rights team, drawing on a wide process of internal and external consultation, including with civil society. The GEAP was a long document, focussing on resources, partnerships and planning for the future. Country offices stipulated what they were doing to implement gender policy commitments and how they would deliver gender sensitive programmes. Rigorous reporting requirements were introduced. Leadership for implementation was provided by the Director General of Country Programmes. Pay incentives were introduced for senior managers, including Heads of Country Programmes, for ensuring action to promote gender equality and women’s rights, and teams appointed senior Gender Champions to promote and ensure action. Technical support continued to be provided by Social Development Advisors.

DFID’s current approach

The new Coalition Government committed to putting results for girls and women at the ‘front and centre’ of all DFID’s funding. The Business Plan has six priorities for the Coalition Government, one of which is to: ‘Lead international action to improve the lives of girls and women’. Actions listed in the Business Plan include:
• Working in partnership with the Nike Foundation to bring private sector expertise into DFID’s strategy on gender equality, and stimulate innovative approaches to empowering adolescent girls;
• Approving new programmes to meet the Strategic Vision for Girls and Women;
• Implementing programmes to deliver the Strategic Vision for Girls and Women.

DFID’s Strategic Vision for Girls and Women (2011)

‘A new Strategic Vision for Girls and Women: Stopping Poverty Before it Starts’ is the gender policy follow up to the GEAP, but with a very different approach. It appears that the Strategic Vision was developed by the senior management team, facilitated by the Girl Hub, with limited internal or external consultation. It is a short narrative accompanied by a diagram of four key pillars or impact areas:

- Delay first pregnancy and support safe childbirth;
- Get economic assets directly to girls and women;
- Get girls through secondary school;
- Preventing violence against girls and women.

An ‘Enabling Environment’ is mentioned, which briefly addresses structural inequalities affecting women and girls.

The Girl Hub

The Girl Hub is a partnership between DFID and the Nike Foundation. The Foundation, the charitable arm of Nike Inc, funds community projects for adolescent girls in a number of countries, focusing on girls’ empowerment at the community level. Additionally, the Nike Foundation engages in high level lobbying and communications work aiming to demonstrate to high level decision makers that supporting girls is an effective way of reducing poverty and promoting economic development in poor countries – marketed as the ‘Girl Effect’.

The Girl Hub partnership is being piloted in a few DFID Country Offices (Northern Nigeria, Rwanda and Ethiopia) to offer ‘game changing’ innovative communications, capacity building and networking support to DFID and other agencies to bring about transformative change for girls.

Analysis and critique – views from the Gender and Development Network

The Gender and Development Network (GADN) is a broad network containing a range of organisations and individuals. There have therefore been a variety of reactions to DFID’s Strategic Vision for Girls and Women, some of which are summarised below. Overall the level of commitment and the clear priorities are welcomed, but much of the underlying analysis used causes concern. However, most members feel that what
really matters is how the strategy affects DFID operations in country, and it is still too early to properly evaluate this.

**Commitment and clarity**

**A welcome commitment to improving women’s lives**
The very strong focus on women and unprecedented level of apparent political commitment within DFID is most welcome. It potentially provides a highly conducive environment for increased DFID funding for women, girls and gender equality, and transformational programming in Country Offices.

**Simple, well communicated priorities**
Many members appreciate the clarity of priorities, considered to be helpful in promoting action within DFID, and communicating clear priorities to all staff.

**A disconnect with other commitments**
Members are surprised that important commitments made in DFID’s Business Plan and Structural Reform Plan are not fully reflected in the new strategy, notably: strengthening women’s voice and engagement in decision making; and promoting economic empowerment of girls and women through jobs and access to financial services. We are also concerned that the commitment to mainstream gender across DFID’s work could be undermined by a narrower focus on the four pillars outlined in the Vision House.

**Priority areas**

**Violence against Women**
Eliminating gender based violence is seen by GADN as a priority goal in itself and as central in the achievement of women’s rights. The relatively new priority given to this issue by DFID is therefore well received. DFID’s willingness to consult with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in this area is also commended.

**Education, Family Planning and Economic Empowerment**
GADN members agree that the remaining three pillars - delay first pregnancy and support safe childbirth; get economic assets directly to girls and women; and get girls through secondary school - are all valuable and should be included within the strategy.

However, there is concern that the focus within each pillar is too narrow. On family planning, access to contraception should for example, be framed by a concern for women’s reproductive rights and health, including sex education and access to affordable, safe abortion as part of an integrated health system. On education, sanitary protection and sexual harassment on the way to, and at, school are important issues to include. On economic empowerment, the current focus is on assets rather than empowerment. There should be consideration of, for example, the decent jobs agenda and the unpaid care economy. It will be essential that programme teams are allowed and encouraged to broaden the focus.
The missing priorities
Political participation, leadership, the need to challenge and change social norms, and to the need to raise women’s and girls’ voices and influence are seen by GADN members as crucial issues which should be given more priority. Without an increase in political power among women, lasting changes in DFID’s pillar areas are unlikely.

The need to challenge and change the social norms and practices that undermine women’s rights need to be given prominence (and resources) if the barriers to gender equality are to be dismantled.

These issues are all included in the ‘enabling environment’ of the DFID gender Vision House, but they are ‘cross cutting’ rather than priorities, and therefore not linked to concrete targets and actions. How the enabling environment is implemented in practice will be vital.

The ‘enabling environment’ also does not address particular contexts that may have a profound impact on a country, and on women’s lives and opportunities. For example, the deepening fragility of some states, and the democratisation processes in others, requires a different understanding of women’s individual and collective participation while offering new opportunities for women’s leadership. Climate change and financial crisis also increase women’s burden and shape new gender relations so need to be addressed in the ‘enabling environment’.

Analytical framework

The structural causes of poverty and gender inequality
There is a deep seated concern among GADN members that in attempting to simplify, the analysis may have become over simplistic. The Vision House focuses on improving the lives of individual girls and women by, for example, getting girls through secondary school or giving out cash transfers. This approach helps particular girls overcome the barriers that they face, but does less to remove the structural barriers that cause girls’ lower school attendance rates and lack of access to and control of resources. So while DFID’s approach may improve the lives of individual women and girls, the structural inequalities which make and keep the majority of women and girls poor, and which reproduce gender inequality generation after generation, will remain.

Instrumentalism
Apparent in the DFID strategy is an instrumentalist approach where interventions in the lives of girls and women are seen as a means to increase economic development, rather than to realise the rights and wellbeing of girls and women. While this can be a useful way to leverage resources and political will for programmes promoting gender equality, ultimately it may lead to the wrong interventions being chosen. The best outcomes for economic growth are not necessarily the best outcomes for girls and women. Moreover if investment in girls does not lead to growth in the short term, women and girls may then be pushed off the political agenda.
A focus on girls but not women

Some members welcome the focus on adolescent girls as a frequently neglected group. There are concerns, however, that this should not be at the expense of programmes which are already successfully benefiting women. There is a danger too that this approach ignores the intergenerational nature of poverty and powerlessness. For example, women’s economic status in society has a direct impact both on whether families prioritise daughters’ education and whether girls are pressured into marrying and having children early. Moreover, the decisions a girl may make are often directly supported or otherwise by her mother or other women in her household and community, so the attitudes of those around her also need to be addressed. Also, the value of improving girls’ chances in life through education and other measures is much reduced if she then has no opportunity to secure decent jobs and earn an independent income when she reaches adulthood.

The role of women’s organisations

Collective action, particularly through women’s movements, has been vital in transforming gender relations thus far. While work through the Girl Hub does aim to bring girls together, the emphasis still appears to be on individuals rather than on the importance of collective efforts, or on new forms of networking rather than support to established women’s organisations.

Public-private partnership

Private sector partnership

While there may be a role for the private sector in injecting energy and resources, the distinction between government and private sector is in danger of being blurred though the Girl Hub partnership. It appears a non-elected organisation has had a significant impact on policy development. Moreover, the experience of the Nike Foundation in small scale development is not necessarily transferable to government initiatives; their influence on the strategy may have extended beyond their expertise. In addition, the impressive communication skills of the Nike Foundation have made a significant impact in raising the profile of funding for adolescent girls, but have over-simplified the issues. This has made it harder for others who are trying to communicate a more nuanced and realistic picture. Expectations have also been raised to probably unsustainable levels, which may result in a backlash against funding for women and girls in the future if it is felt that this approach has been tried, but failed.

Learning and Results

Lessons not learnt

Those with most experience of programme work within GADN are surprised that many of the lessons from DFID’s previous Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) have not been taken forward in this new strategy. The government’s review of the GEAP was never published, but NGO experience suggests that there were innovations within the old strategy which were worth building on. The prominent role of relatively new players,
notably the Girl Hub, in supporting implementation of DFID’s strategy raises concerns as to whether valuable expertise built up over many years may be lost.

In particular, expertise in gender mainstreaming is critical. Experience has repeatedly demonstrated that targeted initiatives for women need to be complemented by action to mainstream attention to gender equality and women’s rights across all development interventions. Women’s projects on their own command a tiny fraction of overall spending on aid and, without changes to unequal gender relations in wider society, do not result in sustainable change.

**Results based approach**

In the past DFID has played a valuable role on the international stage in innovating to promote gender equality. The new focus on results and value for money in international aid provides DFID with an opportunity to lead the way in innovative approaches to ensuring that aid delivers for women. However, there is a substantial danger that, without conscious attention to the complexity of this task, the focus on results may stifle innovation and hamper the best projects. This is particularly true in the area of gender equality where the barriers to change are substantial. Empowering women is a slow process which entails shifting attitudes, beliefs, traditions, norms and practices, as well as bringing about changes in long-standing institutions and systems, such as the market, state and family. Traditional indicators of success cannot cope with outcomes which are less immediately tangible, are more difficult to ‘count’, and often demonstrated in long term trends – for example those relating to women’s control over their bodies, their sense of agency and self-worth, shifting attitudes about women’s roles in society, or the invisible process of orientating planning and budget systems to women’s needs and rights.

**Recent developments**

Three months after DFID’s Strategic Vision for Women and Girls was published Andrew Mitchell spoke about his vision for UK aid. The Secretary of State mentioned the need to address structural inequalities, recognise local complexities, and strive for long-term transformative impact. Among DFID staff there have also been signs that a more nuanced approach will be reflected in the practical implementation of DFID’s work on gender equality. There does appear to be more flexibility in implementation than the Vision House suggests, with some examples of girls’ voices being emphasised or the more complex approach needed for economic empowerment being taken on board. GADN and our members have also welcomed the level of consultation with civil society around the VAWG pillar. DFID’s focus on family planning in 2012 also provides further potential to promote the rights of women and girls.

GADN members will watch closely the impact of the new strategy on DFID operations at country level and continue to offer examples of what, in our experience, works in practice in the promotion of women’s rights.

We would welcome greater transparency within DFID. We would like to see more public monitoring and evaluation of the way the strategy is being implemented, the
resources used, and the impact that it is having. This would better enable us to continue to work together and learn from each other in promoting women’s rights, empowerment and gender equality.

The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

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