

Gender equality in development policies and practices in Poland

Message

1. Polish government has international commitments in the area of gender equality in development cooperation, but they are not being fulfilled.
2. Aid system in Poland is still in the process of taking shape. Therefore, there is space to influence the system from the gender perspective.
3. Even though the actors in development cooperation, both NGOs and civil servants, recognize the problems of women in developing countries, there is still a lack of expertise in this area.
4. There is space and potential for women's organizations and other actors to promote gender perspective in development.

Upon joining the European Union in 2004, Poland committed itself to adhering in its legislation and policies to the EU standards. As a EU member state, Poland is obliged to eliminate inequality and promote equality in all its policies and actions. In particular, this refers to commitments in the area of development cooperation and incorporating gender equality in development cooperation. The EU twin-track approach should be followed, which encompasses both mainstreaming gender in all development policies and actions, and focusing some resources on women's empowerment in partner countries.

Unfortunately, the EU and global commitments regarding gender equality are generally neglected in Polish development cooperation. Poland lacks gender strategy in development cooperation as well as expertise and understanding of gender equality, and specifically gender mainstreaming, within the departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for aid (Department of Development Cooperation and Department of Implementation of Development Programs). This partly reflects the lack of institutional gender policy at the MFA as a whole, as well as the lack of functioning

gender equality mechanisms at the general government and policymaking level. Part of the problem also lies with the lack of political will on decision-making levels to tackle the subject. Women's rights and empowerment are absent from the programming and implementation of Polish Aid. Regardless of the MDGs and global trends in aid, gender equality and women's rights have never been defined as a priority topic in Polish aid to Africa and they have very rarely been present with regard to other countries and regions.

NGOs and other organizations implementing development projects funded by Polish Aid display relatively high sensitivity to women's problems in developing countries and claim that they are open and willing to address them. Unfortunately, they also suffer from a number of problems, including the lack of expertise and competence, low institutional and resource capacity in the area of needs assessment and planning, and the fact that the Polish Aid system, which has so far only funded short-term (shorter than one year) projects, does not foster any cross-cutting or long-term organizational policies, of which gender mainstreaming is just one example. According to Aleksandra Mielcarz

(Poland-East Africa Economic Foundation), "We would like to have a gender policy in our organization, but we are unable to plan anything long-term". With the lack of strong mechanisms on the part of donors to include gender perspective into development projects, in practice only women's organizations are strongly convinced that there is a need to work towards prioritizing it, and no broader coalition focused on this objective exists.

At the same time, the picture is not completely grim: the system of Polish development cooperation is still being shaped and it is still possible to influence it through advocacy, campaigning and capacity building. The will often exists at the implementation level, both among civil servants and implementing organizations, and allies can be found among them. The key role of women's organizations and their partners is in keeping the debate alive and introducing gender perspective in development on many levels through advocacy and campaigning, as well as through consistently bringing up the issue and demanding that it is taken into account in the dialogue on development between the government and implementing organizations on a regular basis.

Key recommendations

1. Polish government should develop an approach to gender equality based on EU and international commitments, reflected in policies, strategies, and actions related to development cooperation.
2. Women's organizations should continue to advocate and raise awareness in the government and NGOs in the area of women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming as a central issue of development cooperation, while supporting the process on the implementation and expert level.
3. NGOs and other implementers of Polish Aid should take into account that gender equality is central to effective, sustainable development, both in projects focusing directly on empowering women, and in providing them with equal access to other projects and development opportunities.
4. External partners (especially the EU and partner countries) should introduce strong mechanisms ensuring the adherence to the commitments made by Polish governments in the area of gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment, with focus on poverty reduction.

KARAT Coalition

Since 1997, KARAT has been running a network of women's NGOs from Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) aimed to ensure gender equality through monitoring the implementation of international agreements and policies. It advocates women's human rights, economic social justice and gender-focused development cooperation with a strong focus on the perspective from CEE and CIS. KARAT has built up a strong network over the past decade and is currently composed of approximately 70 members.

One World Action (OWA)

OWA was a civil society organization established in 1989 to work alongside rural and urban women's organizations and networks across Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Through capacity-building, networking and advocacy, it worked on issues such as women's rights, participatory governance and social exclusion. It was advocating and campaigning in the UK and Europe to challenge international policies that make and keep people poor. OWA has ceased operations and it closed its office in September 2011.

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