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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls

Focus: Accountability and participation of women and girls in the implementation of the MDGs

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Achieving the MDGs for women and girls in Africa*

by

Salina Sanou
Head of Policy and Advocacy
Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Background

The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) united the global community behind a collective effort to achieve a common vision of development. This concerted global effort to achieve a set of common development goals has contributed to remarkable achievements including dramatic declines in extreme poverty, infant and maternal mortality and diseases, a decrease in the gender gap in enrolments in education, especially primary level and lower secondary, and an increase in women's political participation and leadership, clearly demonstrated by the increase in the number of women joining parliaments.

Since the MDGs were adopted, dozens of developing-country planning ministries, hundreds of international agencies and thousands of civil society organizations (CSOs) have rallied behind them. It is worth noting that the momentum of a review of the MDGs and the development of a new development framework coincides with the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), an anniversary that must give impetus to the full and effective implementation of commitments made nearly 20 years ago. This nexus of interlinked events and processes represent a once in a generation opportunity to position gender equality, women's rights, and women's empowerment at the center of the sustainable development agenda.

However, while a lot of progress has been made, many challenges in achieving the MDGs remain and progress has been slow and uneven both within countries and among countries. For instance quality education for girls is still a challenge and rates of girls who complete education is still very low. In areas where gender parity has been achieved in women's political participation and leadership as in Rwanda, women do not necessarily represent women rights issues.

Moreover, the conception of the MDGs did not address crucial issues related to the structural constraints to gender equality. These include:
- Disproportionate share of unpaid care work carried out by women and girls,
- Women's lack of access to assets and productive resources,
- Women's low participation in decision-making at all levels,
- Sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Violence against women and girls;
- Unequal power relations between women and men and discriminatory social norms,
- Stereotypes and practices that continue to hold women and girls back.

The MDGs have also missed out on several crucial dimensions of development such as climate change, the quality of education, human rights, economic growth, infrastructure, good governance, fragility and security; they inadequately address global systemic issues such as trade, financial flows, and taxation; and neglect the poorest and most disenfranchised in measuring progress at the national and global levels. Moreover, gender mainstreaming has been inadequate in the design and implementation of the framework, thus impeding progress on all MDGs, as the broader context for the realization of gender equality, such as the impact of economic crises and macroeconomic policies, persistent conflict and environmental changes have not been considered. Furthermore, the MDGs have been accused of being developed in a closed, nontransparent manner and being a donor-led agenda with little attention to local context, participation and the views of those that they seek to benefit. Consequently, when it comes to drafting the successor framework this has

meant that there is little chance of replicating the closed-door approach, which prevailed in the designing and drafting of the original MDGs. Furthermore, while the strategic aspect of an inter-generational approach has been an integral part of the BPfA, this has been absent and not considered in the development and implementation of the MDGs.

Accelerating the Implementation of the MDGs for Women and Girls

Ahead of the 2015 deadline, there is consensus around the interconnectedness of all development goals with key inter-linkages between education, health, poverty reduction, and gender equality, where improvement in one area has a positive effect on the others". Indeed, in the same way that education has positive effects on health, poverty reduction and elimination of hunger, as well as on gender equality, each, in turn, has a positive effect on education (ECE et al, 2012; Grown et al, 2005).

With the 2015 expiry date of the MDGs rapidly approaching it has become clear that the attempts to merge a mainstreaming approach whilst making gender equality a standalone goal has resulted in a mixed bag with multiple gaps . However, these are challenges that can only be effectively dealt with in a new development framework. In an attempt to accelerate the achievement of the current MDGs, African women groups push for the pursuit of following concrete priorities by African member states:

1. **Ensure access** to gender equitable, free quality primary education and improved school environments by increasing the number of trained and qualified female teachers.
2. **Accelerate the implementation** of commitments to women's reproductive health made most notably in the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women, the Maputo Plan of Action as well as in other regional and international instruments.
3. **Prioritize the provision of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health** services to 'marginalized' groups which include, but are not limited to: women and girl refugees, rural women, immigrants, sexual minorities, widows and women with disabilities**.**
4. **Implement Gender-Based Violence (GBV) policy reforms** to ensure zero tolerance of violence against women (VAW) through transformed societal attitudes, security, legislative and health provisioning system.
5. **Strengthen and consolidate** women's participation, skills and expertise in all forms of the media and to eliminate media coverage that condones gender stereotyping and myths by redressing relevant laws on freedom of information and communication.
6. **Redress the gaps in women's employment to ensure** equitable income redistribution, land reform, gender and child-responsive budgeting.
7. **Centre women's indigenous knowledge in** ongoing climate change conversations, including the design and implementation of climate change coping mechanisms, to assist in the development of alternative sustainability mechanisms for both rural and urban women.
8. **Accelerate women's economic empowerment** through the elimination of barriers that prevent women's access to infrastructure, credit and markets.
9. **Implement gender parity laws** in existing regional and international commitments by ensuring an enabling environment for women in order to realize equal participation, representation and inclusion in decision-making, leadership and governance**,** peace building and post conflict reconstruction processes.

10. **Ensure government responsibility and accountability** to women's rights, by implementing and fast-tracking laws, as contained in various international and African regional women instruments, for the full enjoyment
(FEMNET et al, 2013)

The Post 2015 Framework: Ensuring Accountability and Participation of Women and Girls

As the MDGS come to an end and negotiations for a new development framework progress, a firm shift in development models is needed. This must go beyond thinking of women's vulnerability and instead focus on women's contribution to African economic and social transformation. ACORD's vision for social justice and ending poverty has at its heart the understanding that people are the primary actors in their own survival and development, and that we must work alongside communities in our work. We focus on strengthening people's capacity to participate and exert influence over governance and decision-making processes to address the root causes of exclusion and injustice.

When it comes to influencing policy, ACORD places a strong emphasis on facilitating the participation of grassroots groups and community-based organisations and citizens to participate through capacity building and advocating for inclusive decision-making processes. Through participatory processes and consultation, we frame our own inputs into decision-making in the perspectives and views of the communities we work with.

Our engagement in the post-2015 process has been governed by this ethic. For ACORD it is vital that any framework which speaks on issues of poverty and sustainable development must be informed by those who experience them on a daily basis. This is particularly true of the communities we work with, who are predominantly rural and politically, economically, socially and geographically marginalised, and are amongst the poorest in their respective countries. These are exactly the groups that are the most excluded from policy processes. These are also the groups that were missed out in 2002 when the MDGs were drafted. Among these groups, women represent one of the most vulnerable, because of their position in society. Gender equality is an important dimension of the advocacy work of ACORD, and the voices of women form a crucial part of the voices that ACORD wants to bring to the international arena.

Despite the current participatory nature of the consultations on the post 2015 development agenda at the national, regional and global level, there is always a danger that the discussions over the post 2015 framework will remain in the high-level political spaces, and that the interests of those with the most at stake will be marginalised, giving way to a repeat of what happened with the current MDGs. In anticipation of the shortfall in consulting the grassroots, we conducted community-level grassroots consultations in 13 of the 18 countries where we work, raising awareness of communities on the current MDGs and the post 2015 successor framework, seeking to hear from the grassroots and especially from women, what their hopes and aspirations are, learn about the realities they live and face, and detail the changes they want to see. The analysis of the data from these consultations is currently being finalized into a flagship report entitled *'The Africa we want: Responsive states, empowered citizens'*[1]. In 6 of these countries, ACORD conducted grassroots consultations targeting women, their issues and concerns. The outcomes of these

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[1] To be released in April, 2014 by ACORD.

consultations have been captured in another report entitled "***African Women and Girls at the Grassroots – Their Say on their World Post 2015***[2]".

Women as Active Citizens

In analyzing women's voices ACORD identified issues in five key thematic areas, one of which is women as active citizens through their participation and accountability. In this regard, the analysis in this section is backed with grassroots women voices demonstrating some of their gains and challenges.

The extent of women's participation in politics and women's access to decision-making can be seen as the key indicators of gender equality in a society. By 2014, Africa had three women heads of state and a country (Rwanda) with one of the highest representation of women in parliament. The average across the continent is 17% of women in parliaments, which is comparable with the global average but still not ideal. This progress has been growing steadily since 2000 and a number of factors have contributed to the changing landscape of women in leadership. The primary one is the use of quotas, where over 25 countries in the continent have some form of quota system. Women acknowledged the progress that has been made in participation of women as citizens.

Women in our community are facing many challenges. Decisions are made by men in most areas. Cultural influence is also contributed a lot for this situation to happen. Government and Non-Governmental organization are trying to bring awareness on gender. But still there is a gap to be filled. Strong consideration should put in place to address this." *Garo Qamicha, 24, Female, Vice-chairman of women's saving and credit cooperative, Ethiopia.*

Women also expressed the concern that being left out of the decision making process affected them in other areas of development, a participant in the Mt Elgon region in Kenya expressed it this way:

"The reason that we lag behind in development is because most of us are not included in decision making, especially women"

At the same time the grassroots consultations emphasised that in many areas women are actively engaging as citizens in order to represent their interests, and that that this must be built on and supported. Participants noted how the mobilisation and active participation of women has an effect on the political economy within their societies. Association and empowerment has led to recognition:

"**Our association composed of 113 women is now being courted by politicians during this legislative campaign October 24, 13, because they know that we are now aware that our ballot is our weapon."** *(Buchi Dicko, Participant Niono in Mali)*

Women's share of seats in national parliaments is a reliable measure because these bodies are relatively stable over time and the headcount is easily compared among countries. But there are spaces and opportunities for women at sub-national level that offer better opportunities for promoting younger and marginalized women's participation. In the

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[2] ACORD in collaboration with World Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and UN Women will be launching this report during CSW 58th session on 17 March 2014.

grassroots consultations women consistently raised as an issue the importance of participating in local decision-making structures.

"The major solution I suggested to solve gender imbalance is to create favourable conditions in the community through facilitating dialogues and forums, to allow us to make decisions." *Garo Qamicha, 24, Female, Vice-chairman of a women's saving and credit cooperative Ethiopia*

The gap between policies promoting women's rights to participate and their implementation is often that of accountability. Who holds decision-makers accountable? The key challenge is in creating a more balanced relationship, in which the voices of women are not overshadowed by the interests of the most powerful. Accountability thus becomes a process that manages power imbalances. Solutions to some of the difficulties that women face in regards to the accountability question include:

- Participation: Depending on whether or not women play an active role in the decision-making process and activities that affect them, their needs and interests will be met.
- Transparency: The fact that asking the right questions demands an aware and very well informed citizen. More often than not, women have access to insufficient and/or untimely information, and they often lack the confidence to demand the information required in order to hold their leaders to account.
- Complaint and response mechanisms: The existence of processes through which women can seek and receive redress for grievances is an essential aspect of accountability. More often than not, these mechanisms do not exist at the grassroots level.
- Review and evaluation: The relationship between evaluation and accountability is based on learning. Governments should involve women in the review of their progress and results against set objectives. This participatory approach can not only facilitate learning, but also joint ownership of development, and hence better accountability both ways.

Conclusion

Underlying the process of grassroots consultations has been an emphasis on the importance of allowing women themselves to set the agenda and propose solutions. This is based on the principle that people should be the agents in their own development, and should be allowed to use their knowledge of their own experiences to influence how solutions are devised. The post 2015 framework must be rooted in national and local contexts.

Accountable governance must also be at the heart of the framework, which should clearly outline systems of accountability and how they will be enforced. The post-2015 framework should have clearly defined responsibilities for a number of different institutions, at global, regional, national and local level, as well as the private sector and civil society. Defining the roles and duties of these institutions is vital, as is building, empowering and mandating strong accountability mechanisms to ensure these responsibilities are adhered to, with specific focus on ensuring equitable representation of women in these institutions.

References

ECA, ILO, UNCTAD, UNDESA, UNICEF. 2012. Social protection: a development priority in the post 2015 UN development agenda. UN system task team on the post 2015 UN development agenda

ECE, ESCAP, UNDESA, UNICEF, UNRISD, UN Women. 2012. "Addressing inequalities at the heart of the post 2015 agenda and the future we want". UN system task team on the post 2015 UN development agenda

FEMNET, AMwA, Esai et al,. 2013. Mind the Gender gap: Accelerating gender commitments in the MDGs and shaping the post 2015 development framework

Reading Material

A Transformative Stand-alone Goal on Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Women's Empowerment: Imperative and Key Components; *In the context of the Post-2015 Development Framework and Sustainable Development Goals*

Report to the Committee on Women and Development on progress in the implementation of the follow-up strategy on the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+15)

A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development; The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Draft engendered African Common Position