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The World Development Report 2012 "Gender Equality and Development": conceptual turning point: but no change in practice?

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Briefing Paper 2/2012

The World Development Report 2012 "Gender Equality and Development": Conceptual Turning Point – But No Change in Practice?

Summary

For the first time, the World Bank devotes one of its most influential publications in the world of opinion, the World Development Report for 2012, to the issue of Gender Equality. Based on studies of profound quality, the World Development Report (WDR) 2012 begins by documenting progress – e.g. the improved access of girls and women to education – and obstacles – like massive inequality in the areas of socio-political participation – on the road to increased gender equality. In addition, and for the first time, gender equality is recognized as a development goal in its own right. In the form of references to the normative and legal reference framework of the United Nations – i.e. the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – there is also a clear-cut politicization of the gender issue. Noteworthy in this regard are not so much the results of the report, since the trends of this heterogeneous development of global gender relations have been known since the review of the MDGs. Rather, it is striking that the World Bank is calling attention in its World Development Report to central insights gained by the international women's movement – quite contrary to the instrumentalising

credo which it has stood behind for many decades, namely that "economic growth is good for equal opportunities" and that equal rights for women are simultaneously an important precondition for increased productivity and market growth. Thus the Bank is recognizing for the first time the importance of agency and collective negotiating processes for empowerment processes in bringing about change in existing societal hierarchies and patterns of discrimination. But it also analyses the strong binding forces of informal institutions, such as cultural norms and traditions, in the assignment of gender-specific roles. On the other hand, this conceptual innovation goes contrary to business operations whose programs continue to have only an inadequate gender-sensitive orientation in spite of the efforts of some sectors. Thus, although its recommendations remain inadequate and its impact on the practical work of the Bank remains to be seen, the World Development Report is a conceptual step in the right direction. In order to further pursue the path laid out by this World Development Report, the World Bank should begin by contributing even more funding to the MDG 3; it should again introduce country-specific Gender Assessments and should adapt the current Gender Transition Plan for implementation of the World Bank's gender policies to the gender approach propounded in the WDR.

Background

For the first time, the World Bank has selected gender equality as an issue for its World Development Report. For the first time, it acknowledges the equal rights of the genders and the freedom of choice to lead an independent life, free from deprivation, as a basic human right of both genders. In doing so, the report explicitly refers to Millennium Goal 3 (MDG) concerning gender equality and the socio-political empowerment of women called for by that MDG. A further unprecedented item is, as mentioned, the reference to international human rights agreements, especially the legal framework of the Anti-discrimination Convention of the United Nations (CEDAW). This argumentation surprises less because of its contents, which have been common topics in international discussions for years; rather, it is significant because it goes contrary to the World Bank's gender policy of the past.

For three decades, the World Bank has informed international women's and gender policies with an "efficiency approach". This approach views gender equality as something functional – i.e. as a prerequisite for battling poverty through economic growth and market-oriented increases in productivity. In doing so, the World Bank has long made no contribution – neither conceptually nor in practice – to implementing the rights of women; quite on the contrary: it has subverted the aim of firmly grounding equal rights between the genders as an independent goal of development. Only after institutional and programmatic reforms in the mid-1990s did the non-economic dimensions of poverty and inequality find their place in the World Bank's political analyses.

During the heated debate carried on by the international community at the beginning of the millennium concerning comprehensive approaches for combating poverty and reducing social inequality, a debate in which equal opportunity of the genders had high priority, the World Bank developed a new policy instrument: Country Gender Assessments (CGA) aimed at identifying central gender issues and problems in the partner countries and prioritizing actions with a gender-sensitive design. The goal of all the 50 country-specific strategy papers for Sub-Saharan Africa was to eliminate obstacles of a gender-specific nature in order to maximize the effect of development collaboration. On a higher level, however, the reference framework of these strategies was not characterized by standards of law or equality, but rather by the aim of increased growth and reduced poverty. Even so, the CGA could have triggered important impulses for gender-equal distribution of social resources, directly in sectors traditionally and generally neglected from a gender point of view, such as agriculture, applied

technology, water resource policies, and transportation. In comparison with other policy instruments for cross-cutting tasks, in which functionality depends to a considerable degree on whether the international donor community makes use of them and develops them further, the CGA were abandoned after only a few years and were implemented on the whole only inadequately.

The Gender Action Plan of the World Bank: "Gender equality as smart economics"

In contrast to preceding policy papers, the Gender Action Plan (GAP 2007–2010) developed by the World Bank – in the face of heated controversy but with broad support from the donor community – turned the issue of women's negotiating power, i.e. their socio-economic empowerment, once more into a business case. Behind the professed goal of rooting gender-based issues more firmly in regional World Bank programmes and promoting gender equality in the partner countries, the focus was again on bringing the economic development of women up to speed. Without dropping a stitch, the actions picked up here on the economic motives (efficiency and increased growth) of micro-financial programmes which had been pursued since the 1970s. Naturally, the Action Plan is thus characterized for the most part by economic argumentation and analysis. Thus the Plan states that "expanding women's economic opportunities (...) is nothing more than smart economics". Aside from its motivation for equality, which is at best only indirect, the problem analysis of the GAP emerges as one-sided. It correctly points out that general conditions often make it difficult for women to acquire qualifications and find a place for their work abilities in the formal employment market. Besides such inadequate general conditions in the agricultural, employment, product and financial markets (e.g. lack of access to land ownership titles and credit), other reasons also distort the one-sided focus on economic issues. For example, social and cultural factors make it difficult for women to participate with equal rights in the social and political life of their societies. The lack of access to reproductive health services and basic and higher education are just as relevant as cultural values and norms which constitute gender-specific barriers for a just and equal participation in social development. These patterns are recognized in the GAP. However, they are then explicitly blended out. It is argued that changing them would lead to success only in the medium-to-long term, while the economically oriented GAP immediately exerts an economically stimulating leverage, i.e. in the short term.

In addition to the lack of a rights-based approach, the GAP has been criticized for its feeble impact and inadequate implementation. An evaluation of all gender-relevant actions of the World Bank by the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG 2010) came to the sobering result, that the Bank – in spite of visible efforts to integrate gender-related issues into its business activities – makes only a small contribution to gender equality in its partner countries.

Since 2011 the Transition Plan (2011–2013) has been put in place to advance the implementation of the World Bank's gender policies through improved monitoring and country-specific gender analyses. However, even though it prescribes an approach for increased equality of opportunity between the genders, one which goes beyond the mere economic empowerment, the Transition Plan simply follows on with the primary economic and instrumental analysis of the GAP.

The World Development Report 2012: conceptual quantum jump in spite of weaknesses

By devoting the World Development Report 2012 to the issue of equal rights and development, the World Bank underscores the relevance of the issue and its own continuing interest in it. In contrast to earlier World Bank publications, the document recognizes for the first time the equal rights of the genders as an independent, priority value. Even though the report clings in a second line of argumentation to the functional importance of gender equality for "smart economics", a turn away from the credo: "equal rights are good for economic growth" becomes clear. This is equally welcome and overdue, inasmuch as the international community had already declared the elimination of unequal rights between the genders as a paramount, independent goal of its programmes at the end of the 1990s.

The report contains voluminous confirmation of the regionally differing, sometimes disparate social development of women and men. It documents recent advances regarding greater equality of the genders. Thus the gap between women and men and between girls and boys is closing in many developing countries in the area of social development. Both in basic and higher education as well as in life expectancy and health, an improvement in the social position of women is emerging. Better access to paid work and legal reforms are strengthening the negotiating powers of women and increasing their scope for decisions in the household area. At the same time, the WDR highlights contradicting social realities: positive de-

velopments do not trickle down to all social classes to an equal degree. Above all, extremely indigent and socially marginalized groups continue to be excluded from developmental advances. Moreover, massive inequality remains very stubbornly rooted in the area of political participation. This is seen in the proportion of women in parliaments and governments, which, although it is increasing, remains low; it is also seen in the blatantly higher mortality rate of women and girls, especially in West Africa and South Asia. It also shows up in the limited economic opportunities of young women in highly segregated employment markets, where women worldwide are assigned the unpaid work of family care and reproduction and are restrained to the informal sector.

In line with this analysis, a key focus of action for multilateral donors in future should be on socio-political aspects and on ensuring equal rights of women in sharing in social decision-making processes. In contrast, however, the analysis of the WDR concentrates on the micro-level of social organisation and budgetary issues and lacks critical reflection about the prevailing macro-economic conditions which shape budgetary decisions. At the same time, the underlying development economy continues to be stamped by the vision of a gender-neutral market while the gender-specific impact of regional market mechanisms such as the increase of interest rates and tax rates on the one hand and the reduction of public funding and public investments on the other are not taken adequately into consideration in the analysis of global developments. The result is that actions are proposed which continue to focus on the classical areas of social development such as (maternal) mortality rates and education instead of financing actions which could help to overcome strategic and structural discrimination against women. In particular, the chance has been missed to highlight the international obligation to support the gender-relevant MDGs, especially MDG 3. Unless something is done, up to in 28 billion \$ US will be lacking by the year 2015 for implementing this obligation. The macro-level, along with the interaction of the socio-political and macro-economic frameworks and their impact, e.g. on the access of women and men to resources and political offices, is nearly overlooked or taken into account only uncritically. Correspondingly, the impact of globalization is also inadequately reflected on. While the positive aspects of globalization (like new jobs) are emphasized, the risks and disadvantages of globalization and the financial crisis for women (like informal employment and precarious work conditions) are not analysed according to their impact.

Conclusion

With the World Development Report 2012 the World Bank has underscored the relevance of equal rights as an independent goal of development. It documents in detail and with many facts the progress made and the obstacles remaining along the way to a greater gender equality of rights and opportunities. At the same time, it marks a first step in rethinking - from "equal rights for women as economically efficient" to "strengthening gender equality as a process of social and political change".

This development stands in stark contrast to the World Bank's past practices. The Bank has been criticized for unsatisfactory results in both its gender-policy and practices in general as well as in flagship projects. For example, the Doing Business Project, which aims to promote development in the private sector and thus growth in the developing countries, is criticized for neglecting important gender-specific barriers against business start-ups (e.g. land rights, access to technology). The question thus arises to what extent the research departments of the World-Bank Group can influence real programmes of funding and credit disbursement policies. To this extent, the conceptual orientation of the WDR is to be welcomed in any case. For a sustained new orientation of the gender policy of the World Bank, however, more

will be required than a World Development Report. It remains to be seen to what extent the WDR 2012 will also gather conceptual momentum in the operational business activities of the World Bank and thus mark a de facto turning point both in its gender policies and its practical work. Such a turning point should include the following points:

- The strategic and structural aspects of equal rights between the genders should be taken more into account. In this regard, particularly the social-political participation of extremely poor women should be promoted more, and the gaps in funding actions for achieving the MDG 3 should be narrowed.
- *Country Gender Assessments* should again be started with the participation of the civil society in the partner countries. Taking the points of criticism of the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) into account, they should be used to implement gender strategies in practice and as a monitoring instrument of gender-sensitive donor policies.
- The Transition Plan should be conceptually revised and at last adapted to the legal framework proposed by the World Development Report.

Literature

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