Gender equality and women empowerment in development cooperation

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PURPOSE: to propose a Programme of Action to support gender equality in development cooperation.

CONTENT: women are at the centre of sustainable social and economic development, poverty reduction and environmental protection in developing countries Despite this, gender inequality is part of the daily experience of a large proportion of the world's women. Therefore, the role of women in employment and economic activities is often underestimated because most women work in the informal sectors, often with low productivity and incomes, poor working conditions, with little or no social protection. For example, in Africa women constitute 52% of the total population, while they produce and market 60 to 80% of food. The female labour force in sub-Saharan Africa in 2005 was about 73 million, representing 34% of those employed in the formal sector, earning only 10% of the income while owning 1%of the assets.

Inequalities can also be seen in terms of decision-making with a very low rate of female representation in positions of power or even in terms of education (as an example, 57% of school age children outside of education are girls, while two thirds of illiterate people in the world are women). Moreover, the sexual and reproductive health of women remains precarious and many of the modest gains in women's health made in recent decades are now threatened by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Women are also the main victims of domestic violence and armed conflict.

The ability of women and girls to empower themselves economically and socially by going to school or by engaging in productive and civic activities outside the home is persistently constrained by their responsibility for everyday tasks in the household division of labour. In addition, gender inequalities are still ingrained in the cultural, social and political systems of many countries.

Reaction at EU level: in order to tackle these many challenges, the Commission decided to react and propose a Programme of Action in an effort to close the gender gap in the developing world.

There are already several European and International initiatives in this area to progress towards greater gender equality (for example, in the framework of the European Consensus, the development cooperation Agreements with all geographical regions or even the Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men). On an operational level, most Member States and the European Commission have, hitherto, adopted a twin-track strategy, which comprises, on the one hand, the mainstreaming of gender equality in all policies, strategies and actions and, on the other, the financing of measures which directly support women's empowerment. However, the Commission aims to go further and proposes adapting this approach to the new aid modalities, to the requirements of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and on the 2005 Conference that it organised, in this context, on the theme "Owning Development: Promoting Gender Equality in New Aid Modalities and Partnerships".

The present Communication builds on the outcome of that Conference, the policy framework of the European Consensus, and on the practical experience gained so far. It also responds to the commitments made in the Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men by formulating an EU strategy to progress towards achieving: (i) equal rights (political, civil, economic, employment, social and cultural) for women and men, girls and boys; (ii) equal access to, and control over, resources for women and men; (iii) equal opportunities to achieve political and economic influence for women and men.

An EU Strategy to Accelerate the Achievement of Gender Equality: according to the Commission, the new EU strategy must meet two objectives:

(a) to increase the efficiency of gender mainstreaming;

(b) to refocus specific actions for women's empowerment in our partner countries.

In order to reach these objectives, the cooperation strategies must act on three levels:

1. **Political action:** gender equality and women empowerment have to be brought to the table during the political dialogue with partner countries at the highest level;

2. **Development cooperation:**the key role of women in growth and development needs to be taken into account in the preparation and implementation of cooperation strategies; e.g. agricultural and food security strategies must clearly address the differing constraints faced by rural women, since in certain developing countries they are responsible for up to 80 % of basic food production; effective partnership, dialogue and consultation have to be established with relevant stakeholders (including governments, research centres, universities, civil society, international organisations) in the preparation of country strategies and aid programmes; mutual accountability mechanisms have to be put in place to improve the accountability role of different actors (government, regional economic communities, development agencies, civil society and media…) must be clarified; gender sensitive performance indicators have to be developed and used; budget support has to take into account Gender Equality concerns by linking the disbursement of incentive tranches to gender sensitive indicators;

3. **Institutional capacity building:** updated practical tools have to be developed in the assessment and implementation phases (26; improved access to information and best practices, and gender training for partner countries and staff have to be provided.

It is on this basis that the Commission proposes 41 actions listed in the annex of its Communication in the following broad areas:

- **Governance** (human rights, women's political empowerment, development of indicators, role of women in conflict and post conflict situations);

- **Employment and economic activities** (economic and social empowerment of women, employment, gender budget analysis, public finance management);

- **Education** (abolishing school fees, incentives to send girls to school, improving school environment, adult literacy);

- **Health** (social protection schemes, sexual and reproductive health and rights);

- **Gender-based violence** (legislation, victim protection, awareness raising through media, education and training).

These activities are examples to help to identify the proper programme mix for each specific country or region. The proper mix of activities will be decided case by case after a thorough analysis of each individual situation.

The set of identified actions will be implemented by the **country programming** of development aid (national and regional strategies of the DCI in particular) and via **thematic programmes and other financial instruments** (additional resources are available through multi-annual thematic programmes tabled by the Commission under the financial perspectives 2007-2013; the Thematic Programme "Investing in People" contains a financial envelope for funding EC actions in the area of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women; actions will also be implemented to further raise awareness of gender inequality, to build the capacity of NGOs acting in this area and to strengthen the statistical capacity of governments). The funds available will be allocated through calls for proposals from eligible organisations and by direct agreements with selected partners.

Gender Equality will also be supported through the implementation of the Environment and Food Security thematic programmes, as well as under the new European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Instrument for Stability.

Lastly, the Commission will ensure the **monitoring and follow-up** of actions taken. It will organise in 2010 a second major international Conference on Gender Equality with the participation of all major stakeholders. Furthermore, a mid-term and a final evaluation of the implementation of this strategy will be undertaken by an external evaluator in 2010 and at the end of the 10th EDF cycle.

Conclusion: through enhanced **political dialogue** which incorporates gender equality as an explicit theme and which paves the way for the EU to engage actively with those civil society organisations for increased gender equality and **specific, targeted actions** to complement mainstreaming activities in each of the EU' s developing partner countries, the Commission aims to change cultural, social and political patterns and the distribution of political and economic power to further promote gender equality in developing countries.