

Making Women Work for Development - Again

Twenty five years ago progressive staff in international development institutions argued that women as well as men should be beneficiaries of development. Hard-nosed neo-liberal male economists interpreted this argument as women as consumers rather than as producers of wealth. When thought about at all, they were seen as a category of the population that had specific needs, such as water and firewood (men apparently never going thirsty or needing to eat). Women had babies. They were wealth consumers, not producers.

In 1986 the British aid ministry produced its first policy statement on 'Women in Development' warning that improvements for women could only be achieved if there were greater prosperity for all. In other words, men had to make economic growth happen for consuming women to reap the benefits. Then, later in the decade in what seemed at the time a bold and radical shift in discourse, a new argument was introduced. Women were not only potential beneficiaries; they were also *agents* of development. Thus started the era of instrumentalist advocacy to persuade male decision makers that they should invest in women to secure faster development.

Accordingly, in 1989, the British aid ministry produced a new policy statement on women. To include women in development projects led to greater efficiency and effectiveness. "If they themselves are healthy and knowledgeable, if they have greater access to knowledge, skills and credit, they will be more economically productive".

Then, in the early 1990s came a further sea change. The United Nations Conference on Human Rights made a breakthrough. It recognised that women's rights are human rights. The instrumentalist agenda moved into the shadows as the preparations for the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference developed a vision of global social transformation. Amartya Sen said development was freedom and women were claiming it.

That vision disappeared sometime in the first half of the present decade. Gender equality entered the doldrums. International aid commitments for supporting women's rights declined severely and grass roots organisations all over the world found nobody was interested in supporting them anymore. Multilateral organisations, aid ministries, big International NGOs, all had stopped being

enthusiastic about gender equality. It was embarrassing and something needed to be done. Gender specialists in these organisations began to devise strategies for convincing their senior management that gender equality was a central issue for international development policy. And in so doing they decided to quietly forget an idea of gender equality and women's empowerment as social transformation.

Two years ago the World Bank's gender unit coined a catchy slogan - 'Gender equality is smart economics'. One motivation for women's empowerment is basic fairness and decency," said the World Bank's President last month. *"Young girls should have the exact same opportunities that boys do to lead full and productive lives. But second, the empowerment of women is smart economics...studies show that investments in women yield large social and economic returns."* An accompanying promotional video presents a graph showing the positive econometric correlation between increasing mother's incomes and increasing child height.

International aid ministries and United Nations organisations are adopting the World Bank's argument. The Director General of UNESCO in a message on this year's International Women's Day wrote. *"Gender equality is smart and just economics for many compelling reasons. It can act as a force for economic development and for improving the quality of life of society as a whole".* 'Society as a whole' should be read as meaning 'it's good for men as well'.

In launching a campaign recently to reinvigorate efforts to achieve the MDG on gender equality, the Danish aid minister, said *"Women's opportunities to contribute to the development of societies need to be improved significantly. Otherwise, economic growth in developing countries will be constrained and the ability to care for the environment in these countries reduced."*

The seeming triumph of the 1990s had been that social justice was seen as a sufficient reason for efforts to be made to secure gender equality. Women's and girls' well being was an end in itself. Today, although the argument for equality based on justice and fairness is not entirely, neglected, the last few years have seen a strong shift back to the arguments of twenty five years ago. This trend is indicative of a wider movement in development policies away from the visions of global social justice articulated at the great United Nations conferences of the last decade towards a revival in the centrality of market-led growth as the engine of development. Thus the World Bank's framework for women's economic

empowerment is about 'making markets work for women' and 'empowering women to compete in markets'. Women are expected to increase a country's GNP while development policy actors largely ignore the fundamental gender inequalities associated with the unpaid work of household maintenance and care on which the market economy depends. What's driving this shift?

The Paris Declaration on Effective Aid and all the processes accompanying it, is already proving to be successful in its first and most important principle, of recipient country ownership – at least if the principle is determined in terms of *government* ownership. OECD countries are responding to the views of recipient government leaders, particularly those in highly aid dependent sub-Saharan Africa who may be less interested in the Millennium Development Goals and more in developing economic infrastructure, expanding the private sector and encouraging foreign direct investment. A strong driver for the revival of the growth agenda is China's arrival in aid dependent countries as a significant donor providing aid for economic investment as part of trade deals without any strings attached relating to equity or human rights issues.

The growth trend has both permitted and resulted from a resurgence of language traditionally at the discursive heart of international aid economists' positivist thinking. It underlies results based management, another element of the Paris Declaration which encourages cross-country regression analysis to support instrumentalist arguments showing how investing in women delivers results for whatever development outcome is desired. In 2007, the UK Department for International Development published a new policy on gender equality. It noted that *Tackling gender inequality in access to services and resources is proven to increase women's productivity, and reduce poverty and hunger. Economically empowered women play a more active role in household decision-making, with greater bargaining power to increase spending on education and health. Educated girls and women have better opportunities for entrepreneurship and to earn higher wages, lifting themselves and their families, out of poverty.*

The same document goes on to comment that missing the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target on gender equality "could lower a country's annual per capita growth rates by 0.1 - 0.3 percentage points". So far, there is little evidence that these instrumentalist arguments are making much headway in the wider global policy world. For example, although the World Bank's Gender Action Plan emphasises the importance of women's access to land, in the

World Bank's latest World Development Report - on agriculture – the Overview contains not the least mention of women's inequitable access to land. And, last year, in each of her two policy speeches on the centrality of growth for development, DFID Minister, Vadera gave women/gender just one mention. A quick web search of recent speeches by Finance Ministers threw up few mentions of the growth-gender equality link. There was for example nothing in a long speech by the Finance Minister of Ghana in Frankfurt in December 2007, setting out all the development challenges facing his country. Nor was there any reference to gender equality in two speeches I heard recently when Presidents of sub-Saharan African countries were setting out their development agenda to audiences in the North. So, are we finding the social transformation agenda being thrown away while the instrumentalist strategy is failing to deliver anything for women?

The growth/gender link, that harks back to the 1970s and 80s, may well prove to be a pathway to nowhere for those seeking to reinvigorate policy action for women's rights. It is political pressure that brings policy change not technical arguments, even when such arguments are couched as a catchy slogan. That investing in women creates more wealth is hardly a rallying call for civil society action. International NGOs have been criticised for becoming co-opted into an international aid system through signing up to the Millennium Development Goals. As these fade into the background, so we may find emerging a sharper discursive distinction between official aid agencies and those non-governmental organisations. Here is a possibility for reviving a more transformative vision for international development.

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