

Gender Equality and Sustainable Development

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Gender-related constraints have high costs to society in terms of untapped potential in achieving poverty eradication, health, education, food security, environmental and energy sustainability, and economic growth. There is strong evidence that closing gender gap accelerates progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. While there has been some progress towards better gender equality, there is much more to be done in abolishing gender discrimination. This paper showcases various approaches and interventions to promote gender equality, implemented by the UN development mechanism, SDG Fund and its precursor the MDG Fund. The case studies represent various geographical regions (Bangladesh, the occupied Palestinian territory, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bolivia and Nicaragua) and confirm the importance of joint efforts to promote and protect the rights of women and girls with the aim to support sustainable development. Finally, various approaches and interventions to promote gender equality (mainly through capacity development, legislative and policy frameworks, advocacy and communication, increased awareness on gender equality and women empowerment, economic and political empowerment and access to health) confirm that gender equality is a multi-dimensional issue which needs to be addressed by a range of solutions and actors. Sustainable development can never be attained without the empowerment of women and girls. Urgent actions are needed to empower women and girls, ensuring that they have equal opportunities to benefit from development and removing the barriers that prevent them from being full participants in all spheres of society.

Keywords: Gender, Sustainable Development, Joint Programs, United Nations

Received March 20, 2018

Revised April 6, 2018

Accepted May 28, 2018

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The views of this paper do not necessarily reflect the official position of the UN or the SDG Fund. This paper was accepted and presented at the International Conference on Sustainable Development 2017 (September 18-20, Columbia University, New York). It is provided to ADP as a guest editorial prologue to frame the special issue on gender equality and the SDGs.

INTRODUCTION

Empowering women and promoting gender equality is crucial to accelerate sustainable development. Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human need, but it also has a multiplier effect across all other development areas. It is widely recognized that gender equality is both a development goal and a precondition for the achievement of other development outcomes (African Development Bank, 2014). Moreover, gender-related constraints have a high cost to society in terms of untapped potential in achieving poverty eradication, health, education, food and nutrition security, environmental and energy sustainability, and economic growth (FAO, 2014). There are still gross inequalities in access to paid employment in some regions, and significant gaps between men and women in the labour market. They also face persistent occupational segregation and gender discrimination in wages. In Africa and South Asia, large employment differences remain between men and women, with women's employment being largely relegated to unpaid and vulnerable activities (Women Watch, 2011). The denial of common vital resources such as land, assets, credit and time to women be-

cause of misplaced beliefs, outdated traditions, misinterpreted culture, patriarchy, power wielding tactics, gender politics and many such factors impede their ability to utilize use their maximum capabilities. In addition, sexual violence and exploitation, the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public decision making, all remain huge barriers. Gender inequalities in employment and earnings mean that women have lower incomes, making them less able to open accounts in formal financial institutions. Moreover, women frequently do not have the collateral necessary to seek out loans from the formal financial sector. (UN Women/ UPU, 2015).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was born following the previous the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were set to expire in 2015. The adoption of SDGs was among the primary outcomes of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), where global leaders recognized gender equality, women's empowerment and equal opportunity as an integral part of human rights and essential for sustainable development (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/288, 2012). Moreover, there is strong evidence that closing gender gap accelerates progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Duran y Lalaguna, 2017). Increasingly gender equality, rooted in human rights, is recognized both as a key development goal on its own and as a vital means to helping accelerate sustainable development (UNICEF, 2014). Women have a critical role to play in all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. SDG 5 is known as the stand-alone gender goal because it is dedicated to achieving these ends (UN Women, 2015). Therefore, the 2030 Agenda has set the SDG 5 "Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls" with the aim to support the global development efforts over the next fifteen years. SDG 5 calls on governments to achieve, rather than just promote, gender equality. Acknowledging the huge contribution that women make in the field of unpaid work and building institutions and formulating policies to distribute this burden more equally are essential to ensuring that women have equal access to opportunities and resources. For example, FAO (2011) estimates that when women control additional income, they spend more of it than men do on food, health, clothing and education for their children. This has positive implications for immediate well-being, long-run human capital formation and economic growth through improved health, nutrition and education outcomes.

While there has been some progress towards better gender equality, there is much more to be done in abolishing gender discrimination. Urgent actions are needed to empower women and girls, ensuring that they have equal opportunities to benefit from development, and removing the barriers that prevent them from being full participants in all spheres of society. Supporting national capacity development for advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women is central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. In fact, all SDGs are intrinsically interrelated and interdependent, where gender is addressed and mainstreamed amongst all goals.

However, a multi-dimensional issue such as gender inequality is deeply rooted in economic, social and cultural structures of society, and it requires comprehensive approaches. Furthermore, the analysis of a specific country context is needed to improve effectively the gender equality. Involvement of new development actors under the concept of universality of the 2030 Agenda and mainstreaming gender as a cross-cutting priority is a new approach to advance gender equality and sustainable development. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda recognizes that the achievement of sustainable development is a shared responsibility among all countries and among all public and private actors (SDG Fund, 2016). The aspect of universality is emphasized by the UN charter which implies that all nations have the duty to bring about changes in obtaining sustainable development, with their respective strategies while putting into consideration the global good. The following describes a dual strategy that was pioneered by the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG Fund) and later adopted by the Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDG Fund) for the promotion of gender equality in its joint programs.

DUAL STRATEGY TO ADDRESS GENDER AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Gender mainstreaming was established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality in the

Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform for Action stated: “Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programs, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively” (Commission on the Status of Women, 1995). While mainstreaming is clearly essential for securing human rights and social justice for women as well as men, it also increasingly recognized that incorporating gender perspectives in different areas of development ensures the effective achievement of other social and economic goals. Gender mainstreaming can reveal a need for changes in goals, strategies and actions to ensure that both women and men can influence, participate in and benefit from development processes (United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2002).

An important aspect of achieving gender equality can be done through the empowerment of women such as education, employment, and political representation, as well as by ensuring women’s access to health (MDG Fund, 2013). Another fundamental step towards the realization of gender equality is eradication of all forms of violence against women. The dual strategy was designed to strengthen women’s rights and promote gender equality that directly bolstered women’s representation in decision-making processes, increased women’s capabilities, improved their access to resources and opportunities, and reduced their vulnerability to violence and conflict. The dual gender-equality strategy is a gender-mainstreaming effort in line with international commitment to gender equality (UN Women/MDG-F/UNDP, 2013).

The dual strategy is based on approach, working with gender-targeted programs and also mainstreaming gender into all programs. The MDG Fund/the SDG Fund joint program are designed and implemented to address gender-related inequalities by factoring in their fundamental causes and prioritizing concrete interventions to empower the most excluded and vulnerable. These programs based on this dual strategy address gender equality in a broad and holistic manner, thereby contributing to the fulfillment of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of women and girls, and supporting efforts towards achieving the sustainable development. As a result, the dual strategy for promoting gender equality adds value to broader development goals.

The experience of the implementation of a dual strategy helps to advance gender equality by changing institutions, legislation, policies, behaviors, attitudes and social norms across all joint programs. Moreover, integrated and multidimensional joint programs promote gender equality and supports sustainable development activities. Main findings confirm that the joint programs, implemented in 2007-2013, improved legal systems to respect women’s rights, particularly those of marginalized indigenous and ethnic minority groups. Moreover, joint programs addressed inequalities and discriminatory practices across multiple sectors by ensuring the inclusion of women, particularly those living among the world’s most vulnerable groups. The dual strategy to address gender also contributed to raise public awareness on the importance of gender equality as a component of aid and development effectiveness, and to improve institutional structures and resource allocations for gender equality (UN Women/MDG-F/UNDP, 2013). Finally, the dual strategy for advancing gender equality supports both gender-targeted programs and simultaneously mainstream gender as a cross-cutting priority. The next section describes case studies based on the experience of MDG Fund/SDG Fund to advance gender equality as part of the development agenda.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

To best contribute to the transition process from the MDGs to the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDG Fund) was conceived, based on the experience of the MDG Fund, to support innovative approach to promote gender equality and advance the 2030 Agenda based on joint efforts and innovative joint programs. Currently, the SDG Fund supports the SDGs by implementing the joint programs in more than 20 countries, working with 14 UN agencies and improving the lives of 3.5 million people around the world. The main objective of the SDG Fund is to bring together the UN agencies, national governments, academia, civil society and

business to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. In addition, the SDG Fund has placed gender equality and women's empowerment at the heart of its efforts to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. By directly empowering women and by bringing a gender perspective to all development work, the SDG Fund promotes gender equality as a multi-dimensional issue which needs to be addressed by a range of solutions and actors to move forward towards the achievement of the SDGs. All SDG Fund' programs apply a dual strategy to address gender and promote sustainable development. In fact, the SDG Fund's joint programs with multidimensional and integrated approaches to mainstream gender as a cross-cutting issue offer innovative solutions that are more effective in tackling complex problems such as poverty, social inclusion, rural development, food security, water and sanitation and many others.

The SDG Fund uses the experience, knowledge, lessons learned and best practices from 130 joint programs in 50 countries, implemented from 2007 to 2013. The joint programs used a number of approaches and interventions towards sustainable development by advancing gender through: capacity development, legislative and policy frameworks, advocacy and communication, establishment of networks and mechanisms, economic and political empowerment of women and access to health. The cases studies, representing various geographical regions (Bangladesh, the occupied Palestinian territory, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bolivia and Nicaragua) demonstrate these approaches to promote and protect the rights of women and girls and advance sustainable development.

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT TO ADDRESS GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Capacity development in its diverse forms was the major focus in all joint programs targeting both rights-holders and duty-bearers at all levels of society. Capacity building efforts tended to concentrate on the duty-bearers in order to improve their capacity to fulfill their duties and obligations. This called for focusing on a wide range of actors and authorities at all levels from government staff at ministry level, municipal leaders, parliamentarians as well as religious leaders, to members of the media and numerous professionals in health, education, justice and other sectors. The basic objective, therefore, was to build their capacities on an individual level through diverse activities aimed at raising their awareness about GBV and understanding of the need to strengthen the legal and policy framework. Ultimately, these activities would contribute to increase the overall accountability, and thereby create a more enabling environment for ensuring the rights of women and girls and protecting them from GBV. To illustrate this approach the "Programme to Address Violence Against Women (VAW) in Bangladesh (2010-2013)"¹ was designed to address the issues related to violence against women and girls and changing behaviors. Violence against women is a serious social, cultural and economic problem in Bangladesh, where nearly two out of three women have experienced GBV during their lifetime, and domestic violence is common, though largely underreported (SDG Fund, 2016a). Survivors of violence did not have information about the facilities provided by the government and NGOs, and the majority of women were not aware of their rights. As a result, they were unable to obtain necessary support. The Government of Bangladesh and other organizations also had inadequate systems for providing information on services and rights, nor were these systems enabled to collect prevalence data, record the number of cases filed or track the causal factors linked to VAW. Consequently, the problem remained unaddressed.

The program aimed to contribute to the long term sustainable socioeconomic development of rural Bangladesh through poverty alleviation in rural areas. The basic objective of the joint program was to build capacity on an individual level through diverse activities aimed at raising awareness about gender violence and understanding of the need to strengthen the legal and policy framework. In fact, a root cause of violence was identified as social and individual attitudes and behaviors. Emphasis was placed, therefore, on awareness-raising, sensitization, and capacity building. Some 23,986 people including journalists, employer, managers, trade union leaders, district officials, teachers, judges and prosecutors, members of sex workers' networks, and many others received

¹Participating UN agencies: ILO, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, IOM, UNESCO, WHO.

To learn more about this joint program at: <http://www.mdgfund.org/program/jointunprogrammeaddressviolenceagainstwombangladesh>

awareness training on GBV. These interventions were further supported by encouraging the adoption and implementation of policies for prevention and protecting victims by enhancing the capacities of the government, improving information and providing support to NGOs and civil society, changing attitudes and behavior of men, women, boys and girls to reduce violence and discriminatory practices such as dowry, early marriage and trafficking. In addition, the joint program also strengthened a culturally sensitive gender approach to healthcare, making it more accessible for women, and supported capacity building for a more adequate treatment for VAW survivors together with linkages to legal support and counseling services. The Program also invested in significant community outreach efforts, including through the effective use of Community Theatre to reach large rural populations. Popular theatre was used as a tool for information dissemination to the rural population, which is often illiterate. In close collaboration with international NGO BRAC, local artists assisted in developing community dramas focused on the issue of VAW. Over 535 popular dramas on VAW, human rights and women empowerment were staged in villages where 178,629 community members attended and heard key messages on how to respond to VAW.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND GENDER RESPONSIVE BUDGETING FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT (GEWE)

Improved laws and policies and gender responsive budgeting are fundamental pillars for making further progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment. A sound legal and policy framework provides a foundation to guarantee gender equality and allows combating discrimination, demanding equal opportunity and holding the relevant authorities accountable. These changes require organizational and institutional capacity, modifying and implementing the laws and policies to safeguard women's rights and establish protective measures for all forms of violence. This calls for mainstreaming gender in the formulation and implementation of national and local policies, plans and budgets. It also calls for targeting the lawmakers such as parliamentarians and other key actors involved in policy-making as well as those duty-bearers responsible for implementing the pertinent laws and policies. To illustrate this approach the joint program "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) in the occupied Palestinian territory (2009-2013)"² was developed to promote Palestinian women's social, economic and political empowerment, and it worked to reduce gender-based violence by encouraging women's political voice, increasing their opportunities to obtain decent and productive work, and improving their access to protection and justice. In fact, women in the occupied Palestinian territory suffer from high levels of poverty and unemployment, where women refugees are, particularly, vulnerable. This joint program is a good example of capacity development, focusing on achieving results at the highest policy level. The joint program promoted Palestinian women's social, economic and political empowerment and worked to reduce gender-based violence by encouraging women's political voice, increasing their opportunities to obtain decent and productive work, and improving their access to protection and justice (UN Women. 2012). The overall aim was to promote GEWE and address specific gender issues through improved policies, frameworks and protection systems. To this end, the program focused on GBV, the representation of women in decision-making bodies and enhancing economic opportunities for women. It was achieved through the development of laws and policies, new mechanisms, tools and resources. Activities of the program were implemented through a two-tier process by linking research with policy action to improve service provision of the Palestinian Authority, its institutions and civil society organizations, and by developing sustainable institutional capacities and encouraging innovative projects. Major interventions of joint program included: formative research and lessons learned, capacity building of key institutions and organizations that advocate for gender equality, and an innovative mass media and communication campaign to raise popular support for gender equality. The program supported the establishment of inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms to strengthen gender policies across first line ministries (health, education,

²Participating UN agencies: ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN Women, UNRWA.

To learn more about this joint program at: <http://www.mdgfund.org/program/genderequalitysocialpoliticalandeconomicopt>

justice and labor) and the institutionalization of research and knowledge-based systems on GBV and VAW with the aim of providing policy makers with more evidence-based data on how to reduce GBV and tackle VAW. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics strengthened capacities for producing gender statistics, including a baseline of gender based violence.

Key results of this program included a National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women, the formation of a Gender Audit Team, and a National Women's Employment Committee, which led to the formulation and adoption of policies related to the economic empowerment of women.

ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION

Advocacy and communication for gender equality is an important component of all joint programs. Numerous activities were carried out in order to raise awareness about gender equality and women's empowerment, enhancing partnerships at all levels of society. To this end, the joint programs collaborated with media organizations (using for example, newspapers, radio, television, web pages and social networks), civil society organizations, academia and other stakeholders, focusing on gender issues. All joint programs also concentrated their efforts on increasing awareness and knowledge through the creation, absorption, management and diffusion of information and expertise as means to bring the change with specific results at the policy level. To illustrate this approach the "Vietnam Joint Programme on Gender Equality (2009-2012)"³ was designed to raise awareness and knowledge dissemination on GBV in the country. There are still important gender differences hindering many women, men, girls and boys in Vietnam from reaping the full benefits of economic and social development and harnessing their fullest individual potential. Traditional gender stereotypes and roles continue to place a heavy burden on women. Many more women than men are also working as unpaid family workers without sufficient access to social protection. In the area of representation, women are also at a disadvantage with women's representation in management and leadership positions continuing to be limited. Furthermore, gender-based violence continues to be a serious issue in Vietnam. One in three of ever-married women report that they have suffered physical violence from their husbands at some time in their lives (MDG Fund, 2012). The joint program sought to address these weaknesses through strategic, coordinated and multi-sectoral technical assistance. As a result, the program contributed significantly to raising awareness and disseminating knowledge on GBV. Among main program results the Voice of Vietnam, a national radio station, broadcasted short radio plays to raise awareness and advocate for the Gender Equality Law. The program contributed significantly to raising awareness and disseminating knowledge on GBV. The National Study on Domestic Violence provided for the first-time robust data on the problem and helped to clarify misconceptions about GBV as occurring mainly among marginalized groups and the poor. The study raised the issue to a new level of discussion and the evidence influenced a national policy dialogue on this subject. Consequently, some persistent discriminatory attitudes and behavior against women - such as son preference as evidenced by the rising sex ratio at birth - can now be more openly addressed in Vietnam. Another notable result is the increased availability of evidence-based gender data and strengthened data systems, where the set of National Statistical Indicator on Gender Development was developed with support from the joint program. It provides a legal framework for the regular collection of gender data in various sectors including economy, labour, education, culture, family, population and health.

ESTABLISHMENT OF NETWORKS AND MECHANISMS TO RAISE AWARENESS ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT (GEWE)

The numerous activities generated by joint programs with the involvement of a wide range of partners also led to the establishment of new networks and mechanisms that contribute to raising awareness and increasing un-

³Participating UN agencies: FAO, ILO, IOM, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO, UN Women, UNODC, WHO.
To learn more about this joint program at: <http://www.mdgfund.org/program/vietnamjointprogrammegenderequality>

derstanding of GEWE. For instance, in Ethiopia the joint program “Leaving No Women Behind (2009-2013)”⁴ was designed to empower women and girls through health and business education, literacy training and better access to loans and reproductive services. Women in the Ethiopian region of Tigray have a tough life, with limited access to financial, medical, educational and social support systems. Many women suffer as a result of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and abduction. It comprised community-based components in Education, Literacy and Reproductive Health, including HIV/AIDS and Livelihood interventions targeting adolescent girls and women. The program used an integrated approach to empower its beneficiaries, where 100,000 were adolescent girls and women. Significant behavioral change was found at individual and community levels, where the impact of the interventions was deemed to be more direct and effective. One of the main achievements was improving livelihood opportunities through capacity building and by providing access to credit. A total of 19,347 women undertook Income Generating Activities (IGAs), and a total of 69,484 girls and women were reached by peer educators about IGAs. These activities helped women diversify their livelihoods and increase their income. Literacy training helped women make records of their projects, and some women were able to balance their financial books after numeracy training. For the first time in two regions, Women’s Savings and Credit cooperatives were formed. Consequently, women’s access and ownership of resources (including food security) improved the status of women in the community and increased their participation in the public sphere. It also increased the participation of women in decision-making related to women’s cooperatives.

Overall, involvement of a wide range of partners in this joint program such as Ministry of Women Children and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA), Bureau of Woman Affairs in Tigray and Amhara regions, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and World Food Program WFP in partnership with Bureaus of Finance and Economic Development, Agriculture and Rural Development, Cooperative Promotion Agency, Education and Health led to the establishment of new networks and mechanisms that contributed to raising awareness and increasing understanding of GEWE. Moreover, the social mobilization provided a better understanding and rationale for positive community response to the rights of women and girls in general, supporting implementation of national law and policies such as prevention of harmful traditional practices, child marriage, health and HIV/AIDS, community outreach to pregnant women and increased access and demand for sexual and reproductive health services. Literacy and life skills education opened the women’s lives not only to read, write and numeracy, but directly increased their capacity to understand and practically apply their learning in other fields such as agriculture, environment, management, and response to rights violations such as child marriage. The savings and credit Scheme and life skills training resulted in increased productivity at household level and increased household income, and investments and reinvestments, which has led to growth in household wealth.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

In many parts of the world gender equality is undermined from the lack of women’s access to resources, rights and entitlements. Consequently, many women continue to face social barriers and legal obstacles to own and inherit property, obtain access to credit, obtain decent work and equal pay and be free from discrimination and violence in the workplace. In addition, they are frequently denied equal opportunity to engage in decision-making processes, participate fully in the political processes and hold public office. Therefore, some of the joint programs focused primarily on addressing this important area. For instance, the joint program “Productive Patrimonial Assets Building and Citizenship Program for Women in Extreme Poverty in Bolivia (2008-2012)”⁵ is a good example of a program focused on increasing the economic empowerment of the most disadvantaged and

⁴Participating UN agencies: UNFPA, WFP.

To learn more about this joint program at: <http://www.mdgfund.org/program/leavenowomenbehindjointprogramme>

⁵Participating UN agencies: FAO, UNDP, UNIDO, UNWOMEN.

To learn more about this joint program at: <http://www.mdgfund.org/program/productivepatrimonialassetsbuildingandcitizenshipprogrammewomenextremepovertybolivia>

excluded women. Bolivia still has high levels of poverty and social inequality, especially in rural areas and among indigenous women, who suffer from isolation and marginalization and a lack of services and job opportunities. Women's participation in the labor market is very low, and they usually work in informal economic activities and have low technical qualifications. In this context, poverty not only refers to income levels or food consumption, but mainly to landlessness (only 1.2 percent of the land is owned by women) as well as a lack of access to social benefits, financial services and assistance. As a result, rural women are unable to access the resources needed to carry out economic activities, nor can they enjoy full citizenship, due to their lack of identity documents and knowledge on exercising their rights. This Joint Program focused on indigenous peasant women living in extreme poverty, helping them to generate sustainable livelihoods and enabling them to fully exercise their citizenship. The program sought to develop a more favorable institutional environment to make women's rights a reality. At the same time, education on women's rights was provided in rural communities, in municipal governments, as well as in various governmental and non-governmental institutions. The program was developed around two foundations: creation of productive patrimonial assets for women, ensuring equal access to credit, assets, productive resources and technology, and meanwhile strengthening women's exercise of citizenship, educating them on their rights and providing identity documents to women who did not have any.

Significant and visible signs of change were achieved in the empowerment of indigenous women through the support provided for income generating activities. Financial assistance was provided to disadvantaged indigenous women to enable them to engage in income generating activities primarily in agriculture, cattle raising, and raising small animals. These activities improved the lives of women beneficiaries by increasing their incomes and enabling them to support their families and reach a certain level of economic independence. At the same time, the targeted indigenous women were further empowered by the training they received through citizenship education that focused on their human rights, particularly their rights to an identity and to own property. Emphasis was also placed on women's economic rights, on their right to participate in decision making processes, their right to access information and to public and private spaces for negotiation as small business owners.

This joint program contributed not only to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls but also addressed goals to end poverty, promote sustained, inclusive sustainable economic growth, full productive employment and decent work for all. Prior to the intervention, 81 percent of women did not meet the necessary requirements to access financial services. At the end of the program, all women participants had access to savings accounts, lines of credit, remittances and payments for services, etc. Moreover, employment was improved or jobs were created for 5,090 women, who increased their patrimonial assets by an average of 50 percent. In addition, around 2,000 women received basic training in production, management and income and expenditure accounting. At the same time, participants indicated that they had spent 63 percent of their earnings to meet the needs of their families, greatly improving the initial family situation. The program also allowed 3,748 women to enjoy their full right to citizenship for the first time, as well as 9,397 people belonging to their family circle. In addition, women's organizations' political advocacy and observation capacities were also strengthened through sensitization on rights, leadership training, and broadening their areas of participation in public life.

ACCESS TO HEALTH

The right to health is one of the major human rights instruments. Ensuring the exercise of this right by all is fundamental for achieving GEWE. The joint program in Nicaragua "From Rhetoric to Reality: Promoting Women's Participation and Gender Responsive Budgeting (2008-2012)"⁶ was designed to support the government in ensuring the equality of women and men and enforcing non-discrimination on the grounds of gender. Women in Nicaragua face not only limited access to decent work and credit, but also poor exercise of their rights, includ-

⁶Participating UN agencies: FAO, ILO, PAHO/WHO, UNCDF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNWOMEN, WFP.

To learn more about this joint program at: <http://www.mdgfund.org/program/rhetoricrealitypromotingwomensparticipationandgenderresponsivedbudgeting>

ing access to health. One of the aims of the joint program was to incorporate a gender perspective into national budgeting processes, especially with regards to health. At the national level, gender considerations were incorporated into policies and budgets, particularly those of the Ministries of Health and Labour, to ensure the exercise of human rights in these areas and a decrease in violence. Specifically, the program assisted in 15 municipalities in Nicaragua, where there was an increase in the number of women having access to health services (estimated 8,781 women) and there were improved health services in terms of infrastructure (Maternal Houses Network) and equipment, all of which were outcomes of the joint program. More than 5,700 women obtained access to education and to sexual and reproductive health services at 15 municipal health fairs. Women who attended and trained in sexual and reproductive health also increased awareness of their personal care, assuming commitments to annually get Pap tests and other specialized exams. The program also fostered opportunities for participation of women in public policy to give women the opportunity to incorporate their priorities and needs. A gender focus was adopted in the formulation and implementation of municipal development plans and budgets in 15 municipalities. This strengthened the capacity of local actors to incorporate gender practices in policies, and established municipal information systems for monitoring and evaluation of gender practices in plans and budgets, accountability and social audits.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality is vital if we are to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. In particular, SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) is interlinked with other Development Goals that require women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. Sustainable development can never be attained without the empowerment of women and girls. Closing gender gaps accelerates progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, problems related to poverty, food security, education, health, employment, social inclusion and environment will not be solved without addressing gender inequality.

Specific development programmes are needed to remove the barriers that prevent empowerment of women and girls as a prerequisite for sustainable development. The experience of the SDG Fund confirms that achievement of gender equality requires integrated and multidimensional approaches, involving various development actors. Moreover, specific strategies are needed to empower women and girls. The SDG Fund and its precursor, the MDG Fund, has placed gender equality and women's empowerment at the heart of its efforts to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, based on lessons learnt and previous experiences. Using a dual strategy, the SDG Fund implements both gender-targeted programs, and simultaneously aims to mainstream gender as a cross-cutting priority in all joint programs. The SDG Fund used this dual strategy to strengthen women's rights and promote gender equality with specific joint programs that directly bolstered women's representation in decision-making processes, increased women's capabilities, improved their access to resources and opportunities, and reduced their vulnerability to violence and conflict. Presented cases studies in Bangladesh, the occupied Palestinian territory, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bolivia and Nicaragua confirm the importance of joint efforts to promote and protect the rights of women and girls and support sustainable development. These examples clearly highlight that gender equality is a multi-dimensional issue which needs to be addressed by a range of solutions and actors.

Overall, diverse approaches and interventions are needed to be applied at different levels, ranging from strategies to improve and implement national laws and policies to capacity building interventions at the local level, targeting the most vulnerable categories. Experience of the joint programs in 2007-2013 confirm that the most significant achievement and results were made possible primarily from the collective efforts to foster political will, build capacity at all levels, and raise awareness about significant transformation in society. Gender equality and women's empowerment joint programs directly benefitted 766,517 women and girls, where capacity building was a major focus in all programs, targeting both rights holders and duty bearers. The programs also strengthened the capacities of 449 private and 1,523 public institutions, providing training on gender related issues to a total of 14,982 civil servants. Joint programs supported victims of VAW, and it is estimated that 631,033 women

and girls (at least 79 percent rural) gained access to prevention and protection services, including shelter and medical and/or legal support as well as anti-discrimination and health care support. A total of 32,560 women improved their participation in economic life with support provided by the joint programs (90 percent of beneficiaries located in rural areas). Moreover, all programs included a component on advocacy and communication on gender issues, reaching a total of 2.59 million individuals by awareness raising and sensitization campaigns, including citizens and civil servants. In terms of partners and organizations, the programs report a total of 2,113 partner organizations, 14,377 civil servants and 2,070 religious leaders that have increased their awareness on gender issues, mainly by radio, newspapers and other written media and television campaigns. Moreover, the programs provided support for formulation, enforcement or institutionalization of 50 national laws, 23 local laws, 44 national plans and 55 national policies that explicitly address gender based discrimination and promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

To conclude, there is no universal solution to support the goals of gender equality, and this is the reason why gender equality programs need to take into account national settings and national needs. As a result, gender equality requires a wide range of solutions and partners to work in a collective manner to address gender in a broad and holistic manner, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

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