
High Level Event on Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development
Riga, 2 March 2015
- Chair's Summary -

2015 is a pivotal year for development as the entire international community prepares to decide on its new agenda for global sustainable development for the years to come. 2015 also marks the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the 15th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

At this juncture, the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU is strongly committed to accelerating progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment and has put this theme as a priority for development cooperation. Women's equal rights and economic empowerment, as much as ending violence against women and girls, are not only a matter of social justice; they are also an effective way to promote sustainable and inclusive growth. While a lot has been achieved, challenges are numerous and complex, both within the EU and in partner countries.

Panel 1 – Empowering Economics: Enabling an Environment Conducive for full Participation of Women

- Women are not a vulnerable group. Stronger consideration and support should be given to their economic potential and contribution to development. Changing deep-rooted behaviours and social norms should be done through a bottom-up approach.
- Women's empowerment needs to be addressed holistically and involve many key players at various levels, including public and private actors, the broader families, communities and society.
- Strong leadership is also needed to bring about structural changes in institutions. It is crucial to tackle discriminatory legislation and administrative practices and to fight all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls. Ensuring women's access to justice is essential in that regard.
- Markets should also be made more inclusive, notably through corrective market measures aimed at better addressing market failures, exclusions and barriers that prevent women from participating in, and benefitting from, local and global markets.
- Local initiatives for the economic empowerment of women have proven very effective as they take place at the appropriate level for promoting inclusive development. Women's economic empowerment is also a process that calls for the design of tailor-made services that should include psychological, legal, training skills development and business advice and counselling. "Localised" approaches are especially valuable for supporting micro-enterprises and micro-credit facilities.
- Experience shows that a savings-led approach to financial inclusion can improve women's access to financial services. Supporting women in using their own savings to develop better livelihoods is a good way to foster connections with financial partners and integrate their activities in the formal economy.
- The role of the private sector is key, not only as a driver of growth but also as a fundamental force to safeguard social cohesion. It can provide useful and innovative

solutions to promote gender equality and empower women, such as by developing gender action plans and defining gender-specific performance indicators to ensure sustainable impact of investments.

- Non-economic factors of women's empowerment are also fundamental and should be equally addressed. Empowerment is about strengthening the voice, agency and control women have over their own assets. The role of women's organisations and collective action is key in that regard. Women's economic empowerment should also be measured by a whole range of non-tangible assets seen over a long-term timeframe, such as awareness-raising, gradual change of mentality, policy adjustments, human resources and institutional capacity.

Panel 2 – Women in Entrepreneurship: a Multidimensional Contribution to Sustainable Development

- Women-owned businesses do not only empower women economically but their entrepreneurship can reap benefits for the wellbeing of families. Despite efforts in enhancing their participation in the labour market, women remain substantially under-represented as entrepreneurs. In the developing world, women own and manage around 30 percent of all small and medium enterprises, but their businesses are concentrated in micro and small enterprises.
- Most often, women-led businesses lack access to financial services and only a few manage to jump from precarious or unstable micro enterprises and self-employment to larger businesses. Unlocking access to finance for women entrepreneurs represents a financing opportunity for credit suppliers and is an important potential driver of per capita growth in developing countries, not least because women entrepreneurs prove to be financially viable and to run sustainable businesses.
- Barriers to women's entrepreneurship remain numerous even where gender equality is legally enshrined. Gender-based barriers typically consist of discriminatory legal and regulatory frameworks or cultural practices; limited mobility and access to information and networks; an unequal share of family and household responsibilities and lack of maternity protection.
- Women striving to launch and sustain their businesses should be supported by an enabling environment that combines policy and legal measures, such as simplified tax or administrative procedures, with gender-responsive products, e.g. first loss guarantee mechanisms to address women's problems in mobilising financial collateral when raising funds, coupled for example with technical assistance on financial literacy.
- An enabling environment must also encourage micro actions to restore or spur women entrepreneurs' confidence; ensure political leadership and vision at the national and global level; enable national industry to tap into global markets; and support networks or associations that help women entrepreneurs to advocate their needs, or act as financial safeguards.

Panel 3 - Strengthening the Dimension of Women's Economic Empowerment in Post-2015 framework

- Gender equality and women's empowerment needs to be strongly reaffirmed and maintained at the core of the post-2015 development agenda, both as a self-standing goal and as a cross-cutting issue. To this end, international human rights and gender equality frameworks and the universal sustainable development goals must be consistent. Gender equality and women's empowerment must equally be mainstreamed throughout the future framework to meet this common challenge.
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels and in all countries are key for success and it is essential to reach out, raise awareness and engage with all stakeholders, both inside and outside the development community.
- There is now a need to move beyond high-level declarations and put in place practical changes as well as track – and report against – a clear results framework. Boosting political commitment to a couple of ambitious results targets on girls and women could increase the visibility of this important issue across the post-2015 framework.
- Monitoring and measuring the impact of donor interventions can and must be improved, including through more robust gender analyses, systematic use of sex-disaggregated data and gender sensitive accountability mechanisms. It will be crucial in that regard to identify and define the key targets and indicators for women's empowerment.
- Good progress has been made under the Millennium Development Goals framework in closing gender gaps in certain key areas, pointing to the important role of donor funding. There is nevertheless a need to further enhance donor support to education, family planning and social protection. Donors should also pay more attention to the gender impact of funding in order to ensure that their support reaches the women who need it the most.
- In preparing the next EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, the EU needs to ensure that women and girls' empowerment is mainstreamed in all areas and becomes a key part of every EU programme and project, not just those targeted directly at gender issues. Moreover, policy coherence is needed across the whole spectrum of EU external action. All EU institutions, including Delegations, should be incentivised to take this seriously.

Conclusion and way forward

The 'High-Level Event on Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development' organised in Riga on 2 March 2015 in the context of the European Year for Development 2015 constituted a milestone on the road through 2015. The Event reaffirmed political commitment and gave added momentum for an ambitious EU contribution to the forthcoming international conferences. It will feed into the preparation of the EU Council Conclusions on gender and sustainable development, to be adopted in May 2015.

Participants in the High-Level Event shared ideas and practices for ensuring women's equal rights and access to economic resources and for unlocking women's economic potential. Discussions underlined the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships, the universality of challenges and the multi-dimensional nature of response measures, covering a wide range of sectors such as education, family planning, access to finance and social protection.

Annex 1 – The programme of the conference