

FIONA HANRAHAN

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Gender and governance in China – turning the rhetoric into practice

ABSTRACT

Despite being a critical factor for development impact, translating gender concepts into operational reality remains a difficult task, particularly for a sector such as governance which is perceived to be more “gender neutral” than others. This brief examines how the China Australia Governance Program has worked to meet the challenge of turning the rhetoric on gender equity into effective practice.

INTRODUCTION

How do gender and governance intersect? How can gender be integrated into program management processes and procedures? How can gender be seriously considered by policy makers undertaking fiscal and other governance reforms? These are just a few of the many questions that faced the partners to the **China Australia Governance Program (CAGP)** when developing a gender strategy for the AusAID-funded initiative.

CAGP is a 6 year program, running from 2004-2010, that supports governance reforms in China to reduce poverty. The CAGP Gender Strategy builds on complementary Australian and Chinese Government policies. AusAID’s Gender and Development Policy aims to ensure that women and men participate in and benefit equally from development¹. This perspective accords with the commitments of the Government of China as outlined in the *Gender Equality and Women’s Development in China, White Paper*², and its goal of building a new socialist countryside and a harmonious, all-round *xiaokang* (well-off) society.

In support of these policies the CAGP Gender Strategy takes a **proactive and pragmatic approach**, providing training to the staff of partner agencies in gender-related concepts, and seeking to capitalise on opportunities to raise awareness of the need for and benefits from a gender-sensitive approach. Whilst recognising that there are limits to what can be achieved in the context and within the resources available, CAGP’s approach is based on the recognition that **gender is integral to the very idea of good governance**, and must be considered in all of the program’s activities.

THE CAGP GENDER STRATEGY

Fundamentally, the Gender Strategy rests on the key premise that it is not possible to address gender inequality in China without the commitment and capacity building support of key counterpart staff from the Chinese government who are responsible for implementing CAGP activities.

Thus, responsibility for implementing a gender mainstreaming policy across all

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levels and activities of a governance program requires the ongoing commitment of all actors including the agencies that constitute the **key decision-making bodies** of the CAGP Charter Board and the Management Group. These include AusAID, HAI, the Ministry of Commerce, and the National Development Reform Commission (NDRC), activity designers and implementers, and especially Program counterpart implementing agencies.

This commitment was confirmed at the outset through the endorsement by the Charter Board of the CAGP Gender Strategy which was developed “in-house” by the Management Group and CAGP Program Management Office (PMO) staff. The Strategy contains four main elements or approaches: participation, capacity building, partnership, and gender mainstreaming.

MAINSTREAMING GENDER

Central to CAGP’s **gender mainstreaming** approach is the inclusion of a Chinese Gender Advisor as one of the core members of the Advisory and Quality Assurance Group (AQAG). In addition to taking part in the Annual AQAG Review of CAGP, the Gender Advisor also participates in CAGP seminars, coordinates gender training activities, and undertakes an annual review of the Strategy. When specialist knowledge of the gender dimensions of a particular area is required, other gender advisors are engaged to provide analytical input at various stages of the Program cycle on an ad hoc basis - from identification, design and appraisal to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

CAPACITY BUILDING - STARTING FROM WITHIN

Ongoing capacity building of Program and counterpart staff is crucial to the successful implementation of the Gender Strategy. To date the CAGP has provided gender awareness training to

the Management Group and PMO and to the Charter Board focusing on gender and governance, gender analysis in the policy cycle, and an examination of the CAGP poverty framework (an analytical tool developed by the Program to help identify linkages between governance and poverty) from a gender perspective.

An important outcome of the training has been the development of a Gender Action Plan for the Program and the identification of **gender ‘focal points’** comprised of CAGP partners and PMO representatives to help drive the continued commitment to the Strategy to effectively mainstream and integrate gender into every step of the Program cycle. To aid this, a Terms of Reference for the Gender Focal points has also been developed.

CAPACITY BUILDING – WORKING WITH KEY PARTNERS

With the full support of CAGP partners, in October 2006, CAGP provided a one-day gender training for 18 Chinese government officers including senior leaders from the China Centre for Leadership Assessment, NDRC Income Distribution Department, the Research Institute of Fiscal Science (RIFS) under Ministry of Finance, the Economics Research Institute under NDRC, and the Chinese Central Party School. External fiscal and social security experts appointed by CAGP also attended.

The aim of the gender training was to raise awareness of the **need for gender analysis in policy formulation** and the importance of the collection of sex-disaggregated data to meet that need. A mini lecture was also delivered on ‘gender budgeting’, a topic of interest to key counterparts the NDRC and the Budget Affairs Commission under Component 2’s Fiscal Reform Theme. Lively and contentious debate and discussion between gender trainers and officials was a feature of the training courses.

TURNING RHETORIC INTO PRACTICE

Through its support to the Chinese Government reform process, CAGP has been able to highlight the gender dimensions of policy formulation that may otherwise have been overlooked.

Examples under Component 1 include the 'Assessing the Distribution Impact of Income and Pensions' Project, undertaken with the Income Distribution Department of NDRC. CAGP support emphasised that a true analysis of unequal income distribution should also take into account the **inequitable distribution of income and pensions between men and women** where women are marginalised by lower incomes, earlier retirement and lower social security payments.

Planning has also recently commenced on a topic under hot debate in the Chinese government on reform of public service delivery and the role of the different layers of government.

Experience from Australia can highlight the important role played by the non-government and private sectors in the devolution of service delivery and its impact on citizens. These lessons are crucial to China's reform where maternal death rates in Gansu Province in Western China are on par with those of some of the poorest countries of Sub-Saharan Africa.

In order for policy analysis and informed policy reform to be gender sensitive, the **collection of sex-disaggregated data is a crucial starting point**. However, this is not widely practiced in China at present and addressing gender inequality is seen as the domain of women's organisations such as the All China Women's Federation (ACWF). Thus, a collaborative project on the financial situation of county and township governments between the CAGP (Component 2), the Fiscal and Financial Affairs Department of the NDRC, and their research agency the Economic Research Institute, provided an excellent opportunity to work closely with China's

key reform body on the importance of gender analysis in fiscal reform. Surveys in four provinces are collecting and analysing data on revenue sources and expenditure responsibilities of local governments, including expenditure on education and health. Results from the surveys will help inform China's revision to the Fiscal Transfer Payments Law which will potentially have a **significant impact on the relative resource allocations among men and women**. A gender advisor has been appointed to review the Institute's survey methodology, questionnaires and survey results and provide advice as to how data collection and gender analysis can be improved.

Also under the Fiscal Reform Theme, the Budget Affairs Commission (BAC) of the Standing Committee of the National Peoples Congress commenced a study on "The Long Term Fiscal Impact of Social Security – A Study on Social Security Budgeting in China" in October 2006 led by the Research Institute of Fiscal Science. A gender advisor is working closely with the Institute to help promote the analysis of budgeting and expenditure on social security (old aged pensions) from a gender perspective. The gender advisor will travel with the research team to the provincial level to facilitate interviews and data collection.

Upcoming focal themes under Component 2 provide further opportunities for CAGP to encourage Chinese agencies to consider the different impacts that policy reforms can have on men and women. These themes include: (i) 'Strengthening Policy Processes to Reduce Institutional and Regulatory Barriers', which will address integration of domestic factor markets (rural-urban labour mobility and land transfer systems), and; (ii) 'Social Security for Migrant Workers'.

CONCLUSION

In relation to gender dimensions of good governance, the key lesson from CAGP to achieving better development impact is that the opportunity must be taken to

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About the Author



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Prior to joining CAGP, Fiona worked with HAI on development issues and programs with an East Asia focus.

Fiona has a Bachelor of Asian Studies from the Australian National University, specialising in Chinese. Her honours work focused on the population registration system and 'floating populations' in China.



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promote gender issues with non-traditional agencies and partners

whose mandate does not directly specify a focus on gender equality, but whose reform agendas and policies have a huge impact on Chinese women and men in different ways.

A key challenge for international development agencies and project teams is to work together with key reform bodies including the NDRC and Ministry of Finance to integrate the consideration of gender issues into their daily work. Differences in the recognition and understanding of gender equality issues between China and international agencies must be acknowledged and be supported by ongoing commitment.

MORE INFORMATION

China Australia Governance Program

<http://www.cagp-online.org>

REFERENCES

¹ Gender And Development – AusAID's Commitment, Policy Statement by the Hon Alexander Downer, MP, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, March 1997, p.4.

² Gender Equality and Women's Development in China, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, August 2005, p1.