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A donor perspective

*By Bernadette P. Resurrección and Rebecca Elmhirst
In conversation with Maria Von Berlekom,
Eva Johansson, Orawan Raweekoon and
AnnaKarin Norling*

Both environmental mainstreaming and gender equality sit prominently in development agendas today, almost becoming an established normal in international development after years of keeping it in the margins. In large part, this is being driven by a few development donors. For those of us working on gender and environment for many years, we now seem to be cresting on waves for both intensifying work on gender equality and enhancing efforts for environmental sustainability (including climate) but continue to remain jittery that it may one day ebb due to the volatile political currents. Donor relations significantly influence development and development projects, although in many instances, they are not officially involved in the procedural processes of development planning. Additionally, donor decisions closely align their programming and funding decisions with current international development visions and norms, such as the installation of the SDGs and the UN's Leave No One Behind as the current development compass. For the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the spirit of their programming is also closely guided by the governing principles of Sweden's first Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), marking out Sweden as the first feminist government in the world.

Much has been written and discussed about partnerships with the donor community, such as for example the uneasy shifts from participatory, rights-based approaches to more efficiency-driven results-based frameworks in development practice (Eyben, 2014), to donor dependency by women's organisations and questions of autonomy (Petchesky, 2003), and the particularities of recipient behaviour as they chart their way into engagements with donors (Harcourt, 2017). Instead, the interest in this chapter is to briefly explore the evolution of gender equality as a core principle in Sida's partner relations, the unexpected and counter-intuitive experiences of gender mainstreaming of some of Sida's environment and development professionals, and how and whether Sida is conscious of the troubles that gender experts face and experience as they work in technical and environment settings in some partner organisations that Sida supports.

The making of a discourse

The idea of a feminist government was not hatched overnight. It evolved with efforts to arrive at a brand for Sweden in recent years, however gender equality was already publicly represented as a distinguishing trait of the Swedish state as far back as the mid-1990s. Sweden's association with gender equality coincided with its joining the European Union in 1995 that presented Sweden and other Nordic countries as being 'ahead' of Europe in gender equality, receiving an award as the most gender equal state during the 1995 UN women's conference in Beijing, and the intense mobilisation of women to run for office in the 1994 elections after female representation in the government had earlier dropped (Jezierska & Towns, 2018). After the elections, political parties strengthened their gender equality policies and female representation reached an all-time high. This is a case where a growing gender equality rationality is taken up by the state and anchors its identity and the identity of its subjects (Valdivia, 2015). Gender equality was thus high on the agenda, which helped push it into Swedish foreign affairs (Towns, 2002). The world's first FFP was launched in October 2014; it aimed to apply a systematic gender equality perspective throughout Sweden's foreign policy agenda such as in international development cooperation, peace and security, and trade and promotion. 'Brand Sweden' has now been recognised as a utopian dreamscape for progressive liberals (Jezierska & Towns, 2018).

Maria van Berlekom, head of Sida's Unit for Global Cooperation on Environment and Eva Johanssen, Senior Gender Adviser of Sida further tell us how the principles and practices of gender equality and environmental mainstreaming are deeply entrenched in their operations.

Eva: Since 2014, with our new Feminist Foreign Policy, there is detailed guidance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), to implement and integrate concrete steps for embassies. Sida is a government agency working under the MFA.

Maria: I think that in Sida or in the government as a whole, one doesn't have to argue at all that gender is important. It is so much there. There is also a basic intuitive feeling of what it is all about. Of course, you can argue about the depth of the knowledge and to what extent it is fully applied, but I can't see the need for making the argument for it. The political leadership of Sida is consistent at all levels.

Eva: It's about to ensure that the quality (of gender mainstreaming) is there and so we have updated systems. There is no need to argue the case in any way.

Maria: I was at our embassy in Tanzania and headed our development cooperation operations there. I think looking back, gender equality has been an important goal for Sweden even long before the feminist foreign policy. It is not a new issue. But when the present government was elected in 2015, it was reaffirmed and stepped up. It was an issue with which the government wanted to profile itself. Then they also developed a lot of coherent material. Building on a long tradition and knowledge they stepped it up even more. I would

guess even if we had a change of government, I can't see gender dropping out from the agenda, because it's so much part of the Swedish system either way.

Eva: I think that the gender equality principle is very solid. Globally it's received a lot of traction also because having a feminist foreign policy is new. They have been very persistent in promoting it at all levels and in all settings. They also have an action plan every year. That in itself has made a difference. There are benchmarks and they know exactly what they want to do. But also, there has been something of a global vacuum and a backlash on gender equality and human rights, I think, so it was also the right time for Sweden to take a leading role, for example taking the lead in sexual reproductive health and rights. Sweden has taken a very strong position in this area. I think the time was right, it was important that they elevated gender equality.

The unexpected outcomes of gender mainstreaming

Maria points out that Sida's work employs five cross-cutting perspectives that intersect their funding portfolios: (i) poverty alleviation; (ii) human rights; (iii) conflict; (iv) environment and climate change; (v) gender equality. For example, Sida would expect these perspectives to be mainstreamed in huge environmental projects. 'For example, if you take an energy project or an agriculture project, or even an education project, we would both look at how gender and environment and climate change can be mainstreamed in those', she says. She exemplifies the intersecting lines further: 'For example, an education program. We would look at what the challenges and opportunities are for gender equality to be adequately mainstreamed in education. The same would go with environment: what are the environmental risks, vulnerabilities – how can we bring these to the education sector? We would do the same for the energy or disaster risk reduction (DRR) sector. We would have a number of projects, which are sort of 'gender projects' such as supporting UN Women. In that case, we would still look at the environmental risks and opportunities that could and should be mainstreamed in the gender projects. In the case of environmental projects, like the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), we would of course look at how they could integrate gender. But in most other programs that are not about the environment, we would talk about both perspectives (and the other three), and in a gender program, we would talk about mainstreaming environment. That's just because we are a development organisation, we are not an environment organisation.'

Sida projects typically require a gender analysis of the target issues for development intervention (e.g., food security, climate change) and gender mainstreaming within its partner organisations. Capacities and interests to achieve these are often uneven. They have put up 'gender helpdesks' to address the need to build capacities through a suite of thorough guidelines, tools and capacity development exercises especially for organisations that have not traditionally addressed gender inequality issues. However, there are a host of unforeseen problems in instituting gender equality in Sida's partner organisations, some of them in women's organisations.

Maria recalls, for example, a situation in Uganda where grassroots women wanted to highlight their need for greater access to natural resources and forest areas, whilst the national women's organisations were not interested in that agenda, because they thought that that had nothing to do with women. She shares her general observations about women's organisations: 'My gut feeling is that "environment" is more of a blind spot among traditional gender activists. More so than the other way around. This is anecdotal, but I know of a Swedish consultancy company wherein there is this false perception that the "proper" gender issues are connected with gender-based violence and conflict as core issues. I sometimes feel that when I talk to gender specialists, there is less "hype" and less understanding around the environment, or it is given less status somehow than what some gender specialists perceive as more "core" gender issues. To me that's a bit problematic. Whilst when I talk with environment organisations that we support, there may not be so much or enough practical knowledge about gender, but there is certainly an awareness and interest in it.'

Babette: I understand where you're coming from, Maria. In April 2018, I attended the Stockholm Gender Equality Forum. Only three out of 28 parallel sessions and eight round tables were dedicated to environment issues.

Maria's reflections above regarding women's organisations and their tensions also remind us of the research of Narayanaswamy (2014) and Nagar & Raju (2003) in India that highlight and explain dissonances between grassroots women's interests and those of women's organisations active in national spaces and arenas. Narayanaswamy (2014), for instance, traces the stream of influence that shape the discourses of national women's organisations, which she argues have been 'colonised' by Global North feminism rather than attending to the more immediate issues of grassroots women around land and livelihoods. She refers to this as a form of elite feminism among national NGOs. In earlier work, Nagar and Raju (2003) echoed the same views, largely questioning whether feminism in the Global North has further entrenched gender inequalities in the Global South. This resonates with postcolonial feminism that questions the universalising tendencies of mainstream feminist ideas and argues that women living in non-Western countries could be misrepresented (McEwan, 2001; Mohanty, 2003). In a way, this could also explain the weak linkages between gender and environment issues within the feminist movement that Maria alludes to above, where feminist groups consider issues of the environment possibly more technical, when compared with gender-based violence (GBV), reproductive and sexual rights issues, and gender wage gaps, which have been the conventional core targets of feminist engagement. However, linking gender inequality and climate change in policy action has increased in many women's organisations and environmental programs recently and often occupy a niche within their operations. For instance, the recent launch of an improved Gender Action Plan by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in the Conference of Parties (COP) 25 in Madrid was celebratory, 24 years since the 'Solidarity in the Greenhouse' women's

meeting in COP1 in Berlin in 1995, whose momentum could not be sustained (Resurrección, 2013). Another example is the Sida-supported EmPower program within the regional office of UN Women in Asia-Pacific in partnership with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) that tackle issues on climate change and renewable energy in Asia and the Pacific. The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) has created a program on feminist participatory action research (FPAR) that seeks to understand gender dimensions of climate change in communities and advocates for a Feminist Fossil-Free Future (see Chapter 12 with Kate Lappin). The recent Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment following the Beijing+25 Review has prioritised environmental concerns. Whether and how these niches of gender and environment programs and platforms link with other parts of their larger organisations and conversely contribute to integrating environment in future gender agendas certainly bears watching. It will probably take some time before these silos are dismantled.

We were also curious whether Sida is conscious of the deep-seated power relations in their partner environment and development organisations, and how gender professionals are entangled in these relations. Many times, these are the very barriers that constrain meaningful change within these organisations, especially since gender inequality is often recognised as a problem external to the focus areas and concerns of these organisations themselves. The next section discusses this at length.

Making space for gender experts in Sida's partner organisations

A good number of Sida's partner organisations have employed gender experts to do gender analysis and gender programming, a few of whom are also contributors to this book. Becky asks: 'What happens if you meet with resistance to gender equality as a value among your partners?'

Maria: That's a tough question. But sometimes our advantage is that we have on-the-ground knowledge about what's happening. This enables us to make inputs and frame the discussion in a way that can make gender make more sense – more contextual and more understandable – for our partners' use. One would have to re-phrase certain wordings when working with certain organisations and actors just to get them through and understood. For instance, we are gently pushing on the issue of gender but still having respect for SEI's core mandate. I think we would take the same approach for other organisations. Sometimes we should perhaps be a bit more pushy, and sometimes we have to be less pushy. It's difficult to say. But I think that the basic thing is that we try to show the way, provide dialogues and inputs, but trying to maintain an encouraging approach rather than a demanding approach.

Eva: In some countries, I worked as the gender adviser of UNFPA who Sida supports. If you're working on a very sensitive area like sexual reproductive health and rights, you have to explain what difference this makes. It has to be

rights-based. In some contexts, it gives added leverage if you can have a narrative which is broader than health and rights issues. If you can explain that it has economic benefits, for example. Child marriage has negative income impact on the family and the country. It will be a short-term gain if you marry off the girl, but it will be a long-term gain if you put her in education. So, it's a little bit about the kind of narrative that's very important. This can neutralise challenging questions, make them more acceptable in a way, and just needing to put these issues in an (acceptable) context.

Sida's Asia-Pacific regional office supports about 45 partner organisations, and about half of them are technically oriented environmental organisations. According to Orawan Raweekoon, the regional office's Human Rights Officer, 'Our priority now is to work with environmental organisations to get gender within the different programs they have.' AnnaKarin Norling, then Research Advisor in the regional office at the time of this interview, tells us that the reception of gender equality concerns has been different for different organisations in the region. She says, 'There were times that I saw some resistance to incorporate gender from these organisations. And their first reaction to begin gender mainstreaming is usually to count women or bringing in women researchers. I constantly say that it's not only about counting women, but also about including a gender perspective to the research.' For instance, she recalls: 'I remember one researcher from one of our partner organisations who said that gender equality is not a problem in the Mekong region – it's economic development and environment. He drew this insight directly from shared views within his organisation.' Other organisations, meanwhile, welcomed the added push from Sida since they had been minimally doing gender-related work already in the past. 'We provide the additional push for some organisations whose members express keen interest to apply gender equality strategies or have been doing this work but not in a major way', AnnaKarin points out.

Babette: Could you provide us more examples of how you engage with partner organisations in the field of environment and development, in embedding gender in their work? How did they react to the need to bring in gender?

AnnaKarin: I recall that a researcher gave a presentation on his organisation's analysis of the situation where a geothermal plant had been developed in a district in the Philippines and the effects of this on nearby communities. He said that the overall rate of elementary level enrolments and graduation had increased in one of the district schools. So, more kids have gone to and graduated elementary school. Then I asked him whether this was true for both girls and boys. And he gave me a perplexed look and said he didn't know. And I said this is why I wanted to have a gender perspective in your research. And he said: 'I have to find this out and go check.' And then when we talked later over dinner, he said that he was really excited about finding out more and understood why he hadn't, or why he was blind to it. I then saw how it clicked [laughter]. So, it's not always obvious, but people can learn to be more conscious.

I realise it may be difficult for some organisations to adopt a gender strategy. But we at Sida are very serious about this being *our* strategy. These are the results that we are contributing to. And if you don't do this you can't have funding from us. But at the same time of course I hope even if it is donor-driven that along the way they will understand. And that's what our dialogue with partners is all about.

AnnaKarin's example on the effects of the geothermal plant reflects many things: the virtues of dialogue between donors and their partners that may lead to 'epiphany' moments; gender blindness among technical specialists that usually sidestep the social outcomes of technical interventions like the installation of a geothermal plant which was intended to be a climate change-mitigating measure. The question that is hardly asked in these technical and infrastructure-centred contexts is, 'What's in it for women and men, girls and boys?'. The gender perspective that AnnaKarin points out to the researcher challenges the assumption that technical solutions will inevitably have trickle-down benefits for all. This perspective inevitably draws attention to how technological fixes may exacerbate existing relations of inequality and power.

Rosalind Eyben (2014) underscores the need to be power-sensitive as she reflected and described her long journey as a former member of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), another donor organisation. She argues that current professionalised results-based methods and the emphasis on best practices to report successes and 'quick wins' of funded projects often lose sight of power and politics. She recalls a story where two separate visits with Ethiopian farmers were made by a former development minister and herself, and which yielded different insights and viewpoints. Her farmer hosts who grew cotton as a main cash crop lamented that they could not get good prices for their crop and were already in deep debt for farm inputs, so they were compelled to stop growing it.

Rosalind explained to her hosts at the time that, in the US, farm subsidies were reducing world cotton prices, which could explain why cotton sales in Ethiopia dropped. She doubted very much whether the same insight and analysis emerged during the minister's visit. Instead, the civil servant accompanying the minister reported that aid has become crucially important to deliver services especially in view of the farmers' poverty. 'Nothing was said about power in the global political economy that may have negatively affected their hosts' chances of earning a living. A "best practice" approach maintains the invisibility of such issues by rendering poverty reduction a technical activity; the intervening aid agency absents itself from any analysis of the power relations that keep some people in the world poor and others rich. Yet by seeking to do something about extreme poverty through the delivery of tangible results, and without addressing the relations of power – within communities, nations and globally – of which people's poverty is a consequence, international aid agencies may find it difficult to achieve their own goals' (Eyben, 2014: 149–150). Similarly, in climate change and wider environmental debates, there is a growing concern that priorities for planning, action and

funding lie in advancing infrastructural and technical solutions (Nightingale et al., 2019; Eriksen et al., 2015; Ensor et al., 2019).

Orawan tells us about another partner organisation, mostly engaged with sustainable development activities and programs in the fisheries sector, where a process to include gender issues in its vision and mandate has been gradual and has taken very long. It is an organisation that has been in existence for more than 50 years, and its chief concern is fishery management, both marine and aquaculture. Through this example, she describes to us the challenges of introducing gender issues in technical organisations.

Orawan: We tried to influence the organisation from the very beginning of our funding support, so we agree to say that this may be a donor-driven process and they have to include gender equality in the proposal. It normally turns out to be a checklist culture written in the document. But when we ask them in detail what they mean by ‘gender equality’, they are not able to explain what they plan to do. This is the challenge we have from the beginning and for one fisheries organisation, it took them almost five years to come up with only one gender strategy of their organisation. It’s taken us a long time in dialogue. But the funding I think sets the condition for them to work on gender. That’s the key.

AnnaKarin: We are very open that this is our strategy. These are the results that we are contributing to. But at the same time of course I hope even if it is donor-driven that along the way they will understand (gender issues). As Orawan points out, we go far to support and build capacities and also to dialogue to make change happen.

Becky: What has facilitated deeper engagement? Is it just the money or is there something else you have to have to do to get that deeper engagement?

Orawan: If I may chime in, I think it’s not only the money that motivates, but we also provide capacity building. We have held one workshop with the leaders of our partner organisations. The workshop provides awareness-raising on the basic principles of gender equality. This is because most of the challenges arise from no buy-in from the top level of the organisation. This is another strategy, so it is not just only money that motivates. We also have a regional gender help desk that provides hands-on support to those who would need the capacity building. For example, this help desk can help train on gender analysis or formulating monitoring and evaluation (M & E) indicators for the organisation. So that’s another service or form of support that the regional office provides. We hold workshops and train top management and raise their consciousness on the importance of gender in their organisations and institutional programs. These workshops where the heads and directors of our partner organisations are invited to ensure that the mandate for gender mainstreaming comes from the top. The attitudes and mindsets of the leadership and top management level need to change. There is need to bring gender equality to the top agenda of the organisation. We also try to make them understand the importance of allocating a budget for gender-related programs

and activities. Otherwise, the gender specialist will have to fight for resources and it's going to be tough for them to be always struggling.

Orawan also tells us that five-year program agreements with Sida require that the partner organisation employ a gender expert. Once employed, it's probable that gender experts experience multiple dilemmas, chief of which is a sense of isolation especially in highly technical settings. As contributors in this book say, their knowledge is often tacitly considered supplementary to the authority of the technical sciences, and this is exacerbated by the fact that transforming gender equality is not the core business. It is often challenging to incorporate a gender perspective in an organisation that does not prioritise changing unequal power and gender relations. Do donors like Sida realise and understand the struggles these experts experience? Additional questions may arise, given the goal of environmental sustainability of these organisations: How can gender considerations add value to the mission of conserving and protecting the environment or resources? In short, such a concern is more directed at identifying the *usefulness* of including gender in improving biophysical and environmental outcomes, but less on ensuring equal benefits for all, including for women as a group. This also focuses on instrumental gains, or in short, a focus more on what women can do for environment and development rather than what development can do for women (Cornwall, 2016; Ferguson, 2015).

In other chapters of this book, contributors express their struggles in science-led organisations because at core, gender equality is a political goal that seeks to transform unequal relations of power to benefit those marginalised, realise equitable access and control of resources and equal rights to decision-making and overall well-being (Leach, 2015; Rocheleau et al., 1996). Their work is not intended to serve the ends of environmental protection, nor to boost the business profits of firms, although there are efforts to bend it towards these ends. This could be where tensions and contradictions possibly lie.

Concluding remarks

The chapter also showed us some of the struggles of gender experts from the perspective of donors. How can they further support gender experts who may be dealing with knowledge hierarchies and isolation in technical work settings? How can the experiences of gender experts provide useful lessons for donors in moving the gender agenda forward in these rather difficult settings?

The examples in this chapter provide us with important food for thought about how members of a donor organisation perceive and enact their gender equality mandate and work with partners. In relation to this mandate and drawing recollections from her years as a DFID employee, Eyben (2014) underscores the importance of recognising the positionality of donors in a landscape of power relations. For her, recognising forms of visible (or formal) and informal (or invisible) power is crucial: visible power is seen through formal institutional arrangements for policy making such as increasing the numbers of women in parliament, whereas

invisible power is able to shape and influence policy agendas from a position at the 'rear,' and often comes from internalised norms and beliefs 'about how the world should be' (p. 130). Donors are often influential through invisible power, according to Eyben. What also emerges from these conversations is that donors are profoundly influential and can potentially be real agents of change with respect to enacting a gender equality agenda in environment-oriented organisations. They can also conversely bring environmental issues to the attention of feminist organisations. They can potentially support gender experts navigate the difficult technical terrains that they are asked to influence and transform. However, in studying women working in NGOs across the globe, de Jong (2017) discussed donor relations and alluded that donors unconsciously position themselves as external actors standing 'outside' the development realities that their organisations are trying to transform through development aid.

Eyben (2014) suggests that it may help to be co-reflexive: to see ourselves through the other person's eyes and put ourselves in others' shoes. Additionally, de Jong (2017: 93) suggests the need to critically examine the investments we make on ourselves that maintain an external presence from those we partner and the unequal power realities they face. A meaningful connection can lead towards a more transparent and honest appraisal of the steep problems that gender experts and supportive donors face in environment and development practice, and hopefully fuel and affirm greater solidarity in collectively imagining an equal and more sustainable world.

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