

DARD Strategic Plan 2006-2011

Response from the Women's Resource and Development Agency

1 Introduction

1.1 The WRDA is a regional support and development organisation for women's groups throughout Northern Ireland.

1.2 The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) welcomes the opportunity to comment as part of the consultation process on the DARD Strategic Plan 2006-2011. The WRDA response will, in the main though not exclusively, focus on those elements of the document which have particular implications for women in rural communities.

The document in the first instance will comment briefly on gender responsive agricultural planning and secondly will comment on specific points within the DARD Strategic Plan.

2 Gender Responsive Agricultural Planning¹

2.1 There is an increasing global emphasis on the need to "take women into account" in agricultural policy development. This stems in part from the lacklustre performance of projects throughout the world that have ignored women's roles in farming systems. Two decades of gender-sensitive project evaluations have resulted in a growing recognition that many projects, while improving men's situations, have actually made women worse off.

2.2 Lack of information is one of the main constraints to incorporating gender issues in agricultural policy and planning. Data on women is still seen as only marginally relevant to policy-making and reliable sources of such data, particularly in the agricultural sector, are generally lacking. Gender biases are present at every stage from conceptualisation and design to field interviews, analysis and implementation. This compounds the difficulties of data collection in rural areas, particularly in the informal sector. Data disaggregated by sex cannot alone provide insights into the processes that determine the differential impacts of policies on women and men. For policy-making purposes the

¹ *'The Key to Gender Responsive Agricultural Policy'*, Sustainable Development Department, United Nations.

analytical framework necessary to understand gender relations must accompany these data.

- 2.3 The current policy environment advocates "involving women", but does not necessarily promote an analysis of gender issues in policy, programme and project planning and implementation. Gender analysis studies the different roles and responsibilities of women and men, the differences in women's and men's access to and control over resources, and their consequent constraints, needs and priorities. Incorporating gender analysis into the tools of participatory agricultural planning helps policy-makers and planners to understand how the structure of policies and programmes needs to be modified if women are to be involved equally with men. It can demonstrate why some projects and policies have negative consequences for women.

DARD Strategic Plan 2006-2011

3 The Context – Changes in Rural Society and Farming Culture

- 3.1 One of the additional significant changes which has taken place in the composition of rural society is an increase in the numbers of both 'non-nationals' and people from the cities living in rural areas, not as commuters but having chosen to live in the country as an alternative lifestyle. This fundamental change in composition has created a new dynamic and a differing set of needs which must be considered in policy formulation.
- 3.2 In this context, the document refers to increased pressure for improved transport networks, better schools, shops, etc. as a result of the increased number of commuters living in the countryside. There is also a pressing need for the development of an infrastructure of childcare provision. With an increasing number of women in the paid economy, many of whom in rural areas commute to work in urban centres, the need for locally provided, affordable childcare is essential to enable and support the participation of women in the paid economy. In its absence, the challenge of balancing employment commitments with school times and other childcare logistics means that many women in rural communities choose employment on the basis of what 'fits' with family commitments rather than on the basis of qualifications, skills, experience and potential. Similarly, there are consequences for rural women in terms of career progression as women are less likely to opt for jobs which may require longer working hours (which is sometimes not an actual necessity but part of the culture of organisations) given the conflict with family commitments. This is both contrary to the principle of equality and that which seeks to

maximise human resource potential in the paid labour force. Society cannot afford to operate without the skills and experiences that women have to offer.

4 Vision

4.1 While the spirit of the vision is welcome, it lacks a 'people' focus. A rural community can neither thrive nor be sustained without its people. A useful addition to the vision statement would be '*....where all residents can realise their full potential.*'

4.2 The paragraph on promotion of equality and good relations is unfortunately placed at the end of the section on the unpacking of the vision. That which refers to people being valued, realising their potential and living together harmoniously should be afforded a greater degree of priority. The ability of the other factors to have a positive affect on the quality of life of people in rural areas will be limited if that which pertains to their own opportunities and relationships is not prioritised.

4.3 Similar to point 3.2, reference to increased demand for education, health and transport services should be extended to include 'childcare' as an essential service.

5 Aim

5.1 There is a need for increased emphasis on 'people' in this section. Increased performance in the market also requires an investment in people.

6 Our Role

6.1 The reference to 'helping to promote access to services' needs to be strengthened. What is needed is not simply increased access to services, which could be interpreted as increased access to services located within urban centres, what is needed is *increased services in rural areas.*

6.2 The paragraph at the end of this section, that which refers to the Equality agenda and 'obligations continuing to be developed' is disappointingly weak. Unlike the other areas covered within this section, it does not offer any sense of DARD's role or vision in relation to equality; it simply refers the reader to an annex and does so in relation to an outline of responsibilities rather than an understanding of DARD's role and vision. DARD's

understanding and interpretation of its responsibilities reflected in a vision or role statement is essential to give meaning to this section.

- 6.3 Similarly, equality commitment should lie at the heart of policy documents and should be embedded and reflected throughout; rather than being listed in an Annex.

7 Overview of Strategy

- 7.1 It would be useful to include a goal which is about 'people' in rural communities.
- 7.2 The diagram on page 10 refers to vibrant rural communities, a more resilient economy and meeting rural needs for services. In terms of what a rural community 'will look like'. '*being responsive to the variety of people's needs*' would be a useful addition as it is an important component of what a rural community should look like. Rather than meeting 'rural needs for services' which again could be interpreted as urban provision', it would be useful to refer to '*meeting needs for services in rural areas.*'

8 Strategic Goals and Objectives - Goal 2: Contribute to the Social and Economic Infrastructure of Rural Areas

- 8.1 Under the heading 'what success will look like' reference is made to '*confidence that the needs of rural communities are addressed by public services.*' There needs to be more than confidence that the needs are being met. The commitment should be to needs *actually* being met.
- 8.2 Reference is made to '*increased resources committed to rural development*'. This needs to be more specific; it is what those resources will contribute to which will be the measure of success.
- 8.3 There also needs to be a statement within this section ('what success will look like') which reflects a commitment to equality. As stated earlier, equality commitments need to be at the heart of documents and impact assessments must be reflected throughout the substance of policy, rather than processes which are added or alluded to after the bulk of the policy has been outlined.
- 8.3 A childcare infrastructure to support the needs of parents active in the rural economy needs to be included within the strategic objectives.

8.4 The 'Key Actions' section should include one on equality proofing in addition to rural proofing.

9 Strategic Goals and Objectives - Goal 5: To deliver effectively our Services to Customers

9.1 Within the ICT and processes section, there needs to be a commitment to the maintenance of gender-disaggregated data; generated and recorded in a way which assists the Department to effectively carry out gender impact assessments on its work and to set targets for change.

10 Corporate Governance

10.1 The Equality and Rural Proofing Division provide an essential function within DARD and where possible should be represented at the most senior levels of corporate governance.

11 The Way Ahead

11.1 This section refers to addressing issues such as equality, diversity and disadvantage. There needs to be evidence of how this is going to be carried out throughout the document. These areas merit sections on 'resources', 'what success will look like', 'strategic objectives' and 'key actions'. Cross cutting issues must be reflected in this way; otherwise there is no evidence of commitment to addressing them.

12 Annex 1- Resources

12.1 In order to demonstrate commitment to other government strategies, It would be useful to have a statement or indication of commitment to finance being ring-fenced to implement other strategies such as the Gender Equality Strategy, Anti-Poverty Strategy, etc.

13 Annex 5: Customer Service Principles for the NICS - Standard 3 Service Accessibility

13.1 This section outlines the type of public service office DARD will present to the public. This section is important as it is indicative of the message DARD sends out to the general public. In addition to making public offices accessible to people with special needs, offices should also have children's areas containing toys, children's seats, etc.

This would send out a clear message that DARD welcomes families, children and parents.

14 Annex 6 – Equality Overview

14.1 This section refers to the EU commitment to gender mainstream policies and programmes in receipt of structural funds and explains this as being ‘*an attempt to get below surface patterns and achieve a deeper level of understanding and awareness*’. In so doing, it appears to have misinterpreted the concept of gender mainstreaming.

Gender mainstreaming is not concerned with developing a deeper level of awareness and understanding. It is a policy designed to establish equality between women and men. It ‘*involves the incorporation of gender considerations into all policies, programmes, practices and decision-making so that at every stage of development and implementation, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, and appropriate action taken*². The latter part of this definition is crucial. The analysis must result in proactive measures being taken in order to eliminate the inequality. A response which stops short of this fails to meet the EU commitment to gender mainstreaming.

14.2 This section further refers to the likelihood of gender mainstreaming continuing to be a feature of EU programmes and therefore it will seek monitoring information to evaluate the outcomes of EU funding. This again appears to have missed the spirit of the policy. DARD’s focus should not be on the production of monitoring information; it should be on the development of actions and targets which will reduce or eliminate gender inequality as is the intention of the gender mainstreaming policy.

14.3 This section concludes with a statement of DARD’s intention to ‘uphold these objectives’ but there is no evidence anywhere in the document of how this is to be achieved, what its targets are, how it will measure success or what its priority areas are. This element of the Plan requires expansion.

We hope you find these comments useful.

Women’s Resource and Development Agency
6 Mount Charles, Belfast BT7 1NZ
028 90230212

² Crawley & O’Meara, ‘*Gender Impact Assessment Handbook*’, OFM/DFM Gender Equality Unit, 2004