

Response to the  
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development  
DRAFT RURAL STRATEGY 2007-2013

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- 1 Introduction
  - 1.1 The WRDA is a regional organisation with a mission to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to bring about social, political and economic change'.
  - 1.2 The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) welcomes the opportunity to comment as part of the consultation process on the DARD RURAL STRATEGY 2007 - 2013. 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.
  - 1.3 This document is based on a consultation session with the rural community based women's sector. Discussions in the session were collated by the WRDA and are presented on the basis of each strategic aim.
  - 1.4 The WRDA endorses the response of the Rural Community Network and shares the concerns as articulated in its response. This document is supplementary to the RCN response.
- 2 **General**
  - 2.1 The statistical information in the proposed strategy is not gender-disaggregated. This represents a fundamental flaw in the document. The needs, priorities and life experiences of women and men are different. These differences need to be taken into account in an effective planning process and reflected in strategic thinking. The document reads as though it is premised on an understanding that everybody in rural communities is the same. Effective mainstreaming and integration is based on an understanding that people are different but those differences are taken into account at the earliest possible stage of the planning process.

- 2.2 Gender disaggregated data would not only allow for more effective planning in terms of ensuring equity of outcome; it would also enable others to plan and target goods and services to rural communities more effectively. Social roles in rural communities are such that women are the main consumers of goods and services. Information on women in rural society, their roles, lifestyle and preferences as consumers is essential information in any strategy which refers to business development.
- 2.3 While recognising that the document is a strategic one; the potential outcome of the strategic aims are difficult to assess and the aims themselves therefore difficult to comment on, given the absence of information on delivery mechanisms, targets and indicators.
- 2.4 The strategy is underpinned by an 'economic' way of thinking. It needs a stronger community focus and an absolute commitment to community development as the key method of affecting change in rural communities.
- 2.5 There needs to be a strategic aim on rural communities themselves and more specifically on the type of rural community we envisage for the future. Within this, the rural community development infrastructure, with all its various components needs to be identified as central and essential to rural life.
- 2.6 There is a worrying lack of reference within the plan to cross cutting themes such as the race strategy or the gender equality strategy. The rural strategy reads as a stand alone document and as such does not reflect government commitment to cohesion.
- 2.6 Each aim should contain an objective on gender proofing to ensure women and men benefit equitably from the strategy as a whole.
- 2.7 The document refers to 'access' to services in rural communities. Rural communities require **provision** of services; 'access' could be interpreted as provision in an urban centre.
- 2.8 The 'bottom up' approach to community development has, to date, not been promoted by DARD. It is therefore difficult to accept DARD as the rural champion.

- 2.9 The community and voluntary sector which are central to the quality of life and sense of empowerment of people in rural communities are not identified as partners in the strategy.

### 3 Key Aim 1: DARD as the Rural Champion

- 3.1 At the outset, there is disappointment that what is being presented is a rural strategy document rather than a White Paper on Rural Development.

- 3.2 While the sector welcomes the commitment to an integrated approach and 'joined up' thinking as is suggested throughout aim 1, there is concern within the sector over the extent to which this is inspirational rather than feasible in practice. Experience to date suggests little evidence of inter-departmental and in some cases, intra departmental cooperation.

- 3.3 The sector believes that DARD is not in a position to be a rural champion in that it is neither representative of, nor accountable to, people who live in rural areas. In particular, the absence of women in senior decision making positions and the lack of a gender balance on key committees within DARD means that the perspective of 52% of the rural population is, for the most part, absent from the decision making process.

Should DARD assume the role of rural champion, it is essential that mechanisms be built in to ensure that DARD be representative<sup>1</sup> of the rural constituency. Furthermore, the culture of the department, ways of working and the processes of decision making need to be adapted to enable women and others to assume an active role in representative structures. (For example, holding breakfast meetings in Belfast precludes the participation of women from rural areas with children of school going age.)

- 3.4 The integrated approach in principle, is however, welcomed on a number of fronts. The role of DARD in influencing other departments on decisions which affect rural communities, in the **best interest** of those communities (and from a quality of life rather than a cost effective standpoint), was stressed. Integration was also noted as being important given the fluidity between rural and urban life.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the absence of women, the lack of representation of ethnic minorities and other sectors of rural society was also noted.

- 3.5 Central to the efficacy of any rural champion is a distancing from centralisation of services which currently characterises the government approach. Local needs in rural communities are lost in the process of centralisation. Championing rural areas must be based on a belief that centralisation militates against rural communities.

#### **4 Key Aim 2: Improving Performance in the Marketplace**

- 4.1 Farm families need to be included in this aim and the essential support role played by women on farms recognised.
- 4.2 The role of women in producing quality local farm produce (and sold at country markets) is not acknowledged or identified as a potential growth area which is surprising given increased interest in local home grown produce and concern regarding imported foods.
- 4.3 Reference to ICT both here and throughout the document does not in any way acknowledge the resource that women are in rural communities. Hundreds and possibly thousands of women throughout rural NI have participated in ICT training programmes (often provided by community organisations) and there is therefore a significant skills base which can be used and built on to maximise ICT opportunities.
- 4.4 The document refers to 'investment in human capital' thereby reducing people to units of economic production! This document should be about people; their potential, their quality of life, their activism within communities, their rich diversity, their hopes, expectations and roles in community life.
- 4.5 While undoubtedly, there is a role for economic development, the development of communities in themselves as good places to live, with choice in quality services should be integral to the strategy.
- 4.6 There is an over-emphasis on agri-business and food; increased emphasis on the social economy would be welcome.

#### **5 Key Aim 4: Strengthening the Social and Economic Infrastructure of Rural Areas**

- 5.1 Central to the lifeblood of any rural community is having a neutral place for people to meet. This is critical in terms of both creating capacity within communities and renewing villages. Many rural communities still lack a neutral meeting place.

- 5.2 Reference to tensions within rural communities need to take account of ethnic minorities and the changing composition of rural communities.
- 5.3 The potential of 'crafts' as a growth sector is questionable and many believe this to be a dated notion; there being more of a market for higher quality design products.
- 5.4 In looking to farm diversification, there is a need to specifically target farm women as anecdotal evidence suggests that in many cases, it is women who are more open to diversifying traditional activity on family farms.
- 5.5 Welcoming the reference to the social economy; it is important that the financial support necessary to initiate and sustain social economy enterprises in their early stages is essential in budget allocation. In particular, international experience has shown that women tend to initiate social economy enterprises and small businesses when micro-credit schemes are available.
- 5.6 In terms of childcare provision, rural communities need a government funded infrastructure of affordable provision which includes numerous options ranging from community childcare facilities, workplace facilities, support for home based childminders, etc. There is no simple solution to rural childcare needs. It is disconcerting to note the reference to '*local initiatives*' developing facilities. Many childcare facilities in rural communities have been established and are managed by voluntary efforts with staff paid a minimum wage on short term contracts as they are dependent on securing funding from a range of sources. This is not adequate or acceptable. Childcare needs a radical, well resourced government response to genuinely meet the needs of rural communities.
- 5.7 It is also cause for concern that the motivating factor is to encourage more women to enter the workplace. The provision of childcare in a modern society should be seen as a right not a motivating factor. Childcare provision is needed in order to enable women to realise their potential in all areas, including public service, community involvement, further education, etc. Furthermore, provision should not be limited to increasing the numbers of women in the workplace; the focus for women in the economy should be in terms of where women can **progress to** within the workplace. Childcare (and eldercare) is not just a barrier for workplace entry; it is a barrier for career progression.

- 5.8 The plan refers to infrastructure for rural services, combining diversification etc. An important factor in how effectively this will be rolled out in practice will include how existing facilities are used to their full potential. Buildings in the country whether they be schools, health centres or libraries should be multi-functional. Given limited facilities; community buildings / state owned buildings used by the community should be flexible enabling a number of activities to take place at the same time or after hours of the main activity. New buildings should be more creative in design, with multi-function in mind. They should be designed to be anti-crime, with childcare facilities and should facilitate a range of group work and activities.
- 5.9 The plan does not refer to the need to invest in specific groups of people to level the playing field in rural communities other than in basic economic terms. Underpinning this aim appears to be an assumption that there is equity between people in rural communities when this is simply not the case. There is a need for dedicated capacity building programmes with sections of rural society including women, ethnic minorities (and more specifically, migrant workers), young people, etc.
- 5.10 The way in which women and young people are linked is unacceptable and demonstrates little understanding of either as a constituency of interest in rural areas.

## **6 Principles**

- 6.1 The principles in themselves are welcome; but do not appear to be reflected in the document.
- 6.2 The 'evidence-based' principle refers to rural development being funding rather than demand led. This was objected to by those present at the consultation, all of whom represent needs led development organisations.
- 6.3 There was concern over the 'arms length' approach to policy and delivery. This would need to have safeguards built in to ensure minimum standards, equity of standards and adherence to government policy. '*Delivery residing external central to central government;*' could be interpreted as contracting out service delivery to private business. This would not be viewed as a welcome development.
- 6.4 Is simplification a principle or a method of delivery?

- 6.5 The principle of equality of opportunity makes no reference to the removal of barriers which frequently make the opportunity impossible to realise. It is more useful to refer to achieving equality of outcome for people in rural areas.