

Response to
Programme for Government
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1 INTRODUCTION

The Women's Resource and Development Agency is a regional organisation operating across Northern Ireland, with a mission to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The organisation was established in 1983 and continues its focus on working with women and community organisations located in disadvantaged areas. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 190 members comprised of women's groups, organizations and individual members.

2 COMMENTS

WRDA very much welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Framework for the Programme for Government (PfG). Although we agree in principle basing the PfG around outcomes based accountability, there is an urgent need for a robust action plan to ensure the outcomes within the Framework are fit for purpose and that Departments are indeed delivering.

WRDA are disappointed that a gender perspective has not been mainstreamed within the Programme for Government. The current Gender Equality Strategy states that "a gender perspective will be taken into account during the whole process of policy development in all the Government functions."¹ It is therefore our belief that without a gender perspective within the framework,

¹ OFMDFMNI *Gender Equality Strategy: A Strategic framework to promote gender equality for women and men 2006-2016*, Pg 35.

the outcome “We have a more equal society” is already flawed and the unequal position of women within Northern Ireland will continue.

WRDA also have concerns that the outcomes are not aspirational enough and are somewhat limiting. We do, however, welcome the commitment of the Executive to Outcomes Based Accountability. As highlighted by Ellen Taylor-Powell², an expert in Outcomes Based Accountability and Evaluation, OBA should start where people are at, to build on existing knowledge and experience as well as ensuring relevance. Which is why we believe the document also fails to draw upon the knowledge and experience and work already undertaken by the women’s community and voluntary sector and more widely the community and voluntary sector in delivering outcomes based accountability. This oversight and connection with others seems to be a fundamental flaw that limits prior learning and fails to build on what already exists.

We would urge the Executive to include separate outcomes within the Framework to eliminate gender inequality and child poverty within Northern Ireland. We need outcomes that help ALL people but we also need TARGETED outcomes to ensure those at most disadvantage get the help and support they need. There is a danger that such narrow outcomes could indeed narrow the types of programmes, services and funding streams on offer later down the line.

We wish to point out that the evidence and indicators used need to be looked at again as they are unlikely to offer an adequate measurement of progress against outcomes. Important and available information has been overlooked, limiting the understanding of the issues overall and what is likely to make a difference. Taking the issue of poverty, it is somewhat a simplistic and crude

² <http://aea365.org/blog/ellen-taylor-powell-on-teaching-and-learning-materials-for-evaluation-capacity-building/>
(accessed 28/06/16)

approach to use % of population living in (absolute) poverty (BHC) and 2: % of population living in (relative) poverty (BHC), without even touching on the issue of childcare. Although these statistics can identify broad patterns, different factors often interact to compound any links between social disadvantage and poverty. A range of indicators are needed, without which the curve will not be turned.

We also wish to highlight the need for an outcome based around community education. It is often our members (Women's Centres/Groups/Organisations) who provide that first step back into learning for women, and it is often these personal development courses which provide a strong foundation to move on to other skills based courses. Women's Centres/Groups/Organisations often remove the many barriers women face with formal education systems. Research³ has illustrated barriers faced by women from disadvantaged backgrounds which can lead to social exclusion. These include lack of access to adequate and affordable childcare, limited skills, qualifications and experience and confidence which can impede women in entering/re-entering education, training and employment. It is therefore extremely important that an outcome is inserted to ensure that women's centres/groups/organisations can continue providing training courses and skills courses to women living in areas of disadvantage to allow them to access training and employment opportunities.

Overall, the consultation document oversimplifies the process of OBA, limiting its effectiveness. Moreover, it is disappointing that the PfG makes no reference to the full implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.⁴ The necessity of women's equal representation at all levels of society is recognised internationally as a prerequisite to a fair, equal and

³ Women's Centres Regional Partnership "Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation" (2009)

⁴ http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

peaceful society, we believe without this commitment within the Framework then a number of outcomes within the PfG will fail.

While we recognise that the consultation period has been reduced from twelve weeks to eight as outlined in the Stormont House Agreement, it is not in line with best practice. Due to the restricted time frame we believe engagement with women from areas of disadvantage has been significantly compromised. Furthermore, we do not believe there has been proper application of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. WRDA firmly believe that the legislating of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 allows for the promotion of equality of opportunity for all. We are therefore extremely concerned for all vulnerable groups of women and their families to engage fully with this consultation.

Conclusion

The complex nature of dealing with issues contained within the PfG cannot be under-estimated. WRDA believe that the approach taken in this document is a top-down one which fails to address the inequality experienced by women living in areas of disadvantage. While we very much support Outcomes Based Accountability, we believe this Framework is a watered down version as it fails to make the links with other OBA work and also lacks explicit commitment to equality and to truly outline how a joined up government will work.