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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent and significance of organizational learning in international development agencies (IDAs) concerning gender and education; the manner in which IDAs learn; and the factors that create obstacles to learning. Research was divided into four steps: (1) tracing the relevant academic literature on organizational change; (2) contacting consultancy firms in the field and obtaining a selection of reports from organizations that have developed learning strategies; (3) analyzing agency reports and projects to trace their conceptions of development and the provision of development assistance materials; and (4) interviewing personnel in selected IDAs. A group of two bilateral and three multilateral agencies was contacted, and data were obtained by means of semi-structured interviews with persons covering a variety of roles and responsibilities. Agency visits were limited to 3-4 days. The case study on organizational learning in girls' education took researchers through an examination of policies, structures, processes, and cultural norms. Much of the transformation in IDAs to address girls' education, and gender in general, has come from outside sources and outside pressure rather than through the internal realization that some elements in development assistance were missing. Training has been provided on gender, but it has been short and voluntary. So far, the kind of learning that goes on in IDAs emphasizes improving practices and refining rules and procedures rather than questioning the principles in use. Contains 5 notes and 18 references. (BT)

Organizational Learning in International Development Agencies: The Case of Girls' Education

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Introduction

With the increased financial constraints and concomitant public budget reductions in most developing countries, the importance of international development agencies (IDAs hereafter) in those countries has increased dramatically. IDAs represent a very important source of additional funding for education in the Third World. Although these funds are not large in absolute terms, they constitute a substantial resource for engaging in innovative projects and even undertaking educational reforms, thus enabling education systems to address explicitly issues pertaining efficiency, quality, and equity, thus enabling them to go well beyond the simple provision of schooling.

For many years, IDAs have rejected studies focusing on their functioning and performance, fearing that such a concern would attract only critics. In addition, their overemphasis on a normative view of development did not promote attention to organizational problems (van Ufford, 1988). In recent years, this position has changed; in fact, the study we present here was requested by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Gender and Development

The importance of considering women in development took hold with the First World's Women Conference in Mexico in 1975. At that time, the concept of women in development (WID) highlighted the inferior condition of women and called for measures to ensure parity with men. Through the years, this concept was replaced by another that was seen as more comprehensive and more correct in that it considered the subordination of women as the result of interactions and relations between women and men; thus gender and development (GAD) emerged.

Gender, unlike any other development issue, addresses the basic core of who and what we are as human beings and implicates our most intimate relationships. Since it is unavoidably personal, it generates resistance as it seeks to change relations between men and women (Kabeer, 1994). While in the end society may benefit from the breaking of barriers between conceptions of femininity and masculinity, the perception of imagined and real loss of power deters many governments from giving it serious consideration. On the other hand, an impressive collection of formal agreements in global forums highly influenced by nongovernmental (NGO) work--from Rio in 1992 to Rome in 1996--increasingly commits governments to consider gender in their national plans and development efforts.

Notwithstanding the increased salience of gender within the policy objectives of donor agencies, its treatment remains weak for several reasons: (1) there is a reluctance to ideal with ideological and cultural sources of gender inequality (Moser, 1989; Jaquette, 1997), (2) the main interlocutor of development assistance continues to be the state even though feminist analyses have demonstrated that the state itself is implication in the

subordination of women, (3) there is a tendency to keep a distance from women's organizations, particularly feminist groups (Stromquist, 1996), and there is strong avoidance of dealing with structural obstacles to women's productivity and participation such as: women's lack of property rights, including inheritance of agricultural lands; the prevailing sexual division of labor; women's limited access to credit and technical assistance; and women;s control over women;s bodies through sexual and physical violence, forced motherhood, and limited physical freedom (Kabeer, 1994, Jahan, 1995). Another feature of IDA's work on gender is that, although the GAD concept is often invoked, its operationalization seldom reformulates the relations between men and women.

Organizational Learning

There are multiple definitions of organizational learning. In this study we choose to use a definition proposed by Swieringa and Wiersdman (1992), who state that organizations can be said to have learned only when people who work in it behave differently. In other words, while individual learning need not materialize in specific behaviors, when we transfer the concept of learning to organizations, the sensible way to demonstrate new knowledge would be through its application and the creation of "collective elements and patterns in the behavior of people working in an organization" (Swieringa and Wiersdman, 1992, p. 6).

In considering the extent and complexity of knowledge that can be acquired, several writers have proposed three levels of learning, moving from single loop to double loop and triple loop (Swieringa and Wiersdman, 1992; Argyris and Schon, 1978). Single loop refers to learning that permits the improvement of rules and solutions within existing insights and principles. Double-loop learning is generally concerned with conflicts, disputes, and contradictions within the organization, and thus seeks to engage in renewal. Triple-loop learning, sometimes called deutero learning, is concerned with the questioning of existing organizational principles and the development of new ones with which an organization can proceed to a subsequent phase of existence.

A Conceptual Framework

In an effort to gather a more complete understanding of organizational learning, Huber (1990) proposes a distinction between four processes that are integrally linked to organizational learning: (1) knowledge acquisition, (2) information distribution, (3) information interpretation, and (4) organizational memory. These are useful distinctions for a closer look at processes that sustain learning in organizations. They focus on practical things that can be done to develop and sustain higher levels of organizational learning. Therefore, this framework was selected for our investigation of IDA learning.

In addition to these concrete elements in the process of

organizational learning, it is also important to pay attention to how learning is embedded in three aspects of organizational life: structure, process, and culture. Culture makes learning activities either normal or extraordinary, may foster particular forms of information interpretation and may prevent the creation of an institutional memory. Structure may create divisions among roles that segment knowledge and thus render difficult knowledge acquisition and information distribution. Processes that are rigid, vertical, and time-consuming absorb energies and produce divisions that affect the distribution of information.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine three issues:

(1) the extent and significance of organizational learning in international development agencies (IDAs) concerning gender and education; that is, to what extent do project staff and management in these organizations learn about effectiveness and successful policies and practices?;

(2) the manner in which IDAs learn; i.e., what does it mean to learn and which are the organizational features that appear to facilitate and consolidate learning?; and

(3) the factors that create obstacles to learning, i.e., those that block the acquisition of new knowledge or that make people and organizations hesitant or reluctant to use the knowledge they may have?

Mode of Inquiry

This study is part of a larger study that comprised three issues (girls' education, technical assistance, and evaluation). The focus on "girls' education" was determined by the IDA sponsoring the study. This in itself reflects a particular way of framing the problematic situation concerning gender, since it evinces a concern for girls but not for adult women.

The topic of girls' education constitutes an example of fairly rapid change since it is characterized by the generation of nw knowledge and application in development cooperation. Since the early 1980s, much has been written on women and education and, more specifically, on the performance of girls in school more specifically. Many large educational programs today comprise components that try to promote girls' education and to address social structures that force girls out of the educational system.

Our research can be divided into four steps: (1) tracing the relevant academic literature on organizational change, (2) contacting consultancy firms in the field and obtaining a selection of reports from organizations that have developed learning strategies, (3) analyzing agency reports and projects to trace their conceptions of development and the provision of development assistance materials (policy statements, project descriptions, annual reports, country strategies, etc.), and (4) interviewing

personnel in selected IDAs.

A group of two bilateral (the Swedish and the Norwegian agencies--Sida and NORAD), and three multilateral agencies (UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank) was contacted over a six-month period. Interview data were obtained by means of semi-structured interviews with persons covering a variety of roles and responsibilities in the structure of the agencies (ranging from program officers to evaluators and managers); these data were triangulated with those of peers, consultant report findings, and observations in the field, to ensure reliability and validity. Further, field observations of actual projects and interviews with project partners and personnel took place in two countries, India and Bangladesh. While IDAs are complex organizations and depth is lost through multiple comparisons, important similarities also emerge through comparative approaches. Further, the nature of the linkages among IDAs can also be observed.

A major limitation of the study is the short time period during which it had to be conducted. Agency visits lasted about three to four days. Project visits in India and Bangladesh took a similar amount of time. With respect to learning itself, we are almost totally confined to assessing what people told us and what we could find in the written material as well as in the practices we observed. Tacit knowledge--the things one knows but does not talk about, or that are implicit--could not be grasped during our short visits.

A significant conceptual limitation of the study is that, although IDAs are extremely political organizations that operate in the area of relations among countries, the political nature of this activity is downplayed to focus instead on their managerial and organizational conduct.

Responses to Gender by IDAs

IDAs today show official concern on the question of gender in development. In the area of education, the "Education for All Declaration," signed in Jomtien in 1990 represented a major watershed in support of education. It introduced a commitment to much greater levels of educational funding by other agencies, and identified girls and women as key targets for educational efforts. The importance to all levels of education expressed in international meetings such as those in Cairo, Jomtien, and Beijing has been endorsed by IDAs. Consequently, there has been a number of projects designed to support the education of girls and women.

Sida's strategies on gender and education cover a wide range, from curriculum development to remodeling of schools to make them more girl-friendly [1]. NORAD considers it fundamental to train women personnel in ministries of education in developing countries and to strengthen the connections between governments and NGOs providing educational services (NORAD, 1995). While Sida seeks to

protect women, it also holds that "the responsibility for gender equalities lies with national governments (DESO, 1996; Lexow, 1996; Ehrenpreis and Johansson, 1996). The 1990 World Bank's policy paper on primary education gives priority to issues of educational effectiveness (thus paying attention to curriculum, learning materials, and classroom teaching) and equity for rural children, girls, and poor children. Specifically in the area of girls' education, the World Bank seems to make schools more accessible, to support the recruitment and training of female teachers for at least 50 percent of the classrooms to be constructed, to provide incentives and eliminate disincentives for girls' attendance and completion of the primary cycle, and to educate parents about the importance of girls' education. UNICEF has been concerned with gender issues over the last 20 years. It is especially concerned with girls' access to basic education, particularly in regions in the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

It is evident that gender figures prominently in agencies and that educational policies focusing on gender are common. The discourse of IDAs have become more progressive and terms used within the women's movement, such as "empowerment" and "participation," are used routinely. Participation, however, is limited to the involvement of governments, thus the strongest voice of women--that of women-led NGOs--is often not at the negotiation table in country and sector agreements.

Additional challenges at present include that competition that gender must face with other issues--environment, human rights, democracy, and poverty alleviation--in the design of projects. While there should be substantial complementarity among these issues, the fact that many staff members in these agencies see them as mutually exclusive in terms of resources suggests a limited understanding of how gender relates to many other aspects of social and economic life.

There is a trend among agencies to translate gender and education policies into projects with multiple components such as construction, teacher training, curriculum and textbook review, community information campaigns, and girls' scholarships. At the same time, there is an overwhelming emphasis in defining problems in girls' education as essentially those concerning access to schooling. Heneveld and Craig (1996), after reviewing 26 World Bank projects in Sub-Saharan Africa to improve primary education, found that most textbook support is for publishing, printing, and distributing books; only eight projects included plans to train teachers in the use of the new books and "not one project included a reference to the supervision of the books' pedagogical use in the schools." And while 25 of the projects had components for strengthening pre- or in-service training, only eight included in-school dimensions to the training. None of the 26 projects was found to deal with issues related to school climate (teacher expectations and attitudes toward students, rewards and incentives for students, order and discipline) (pp. xiv-xiv)--issues that directly affect the lived experience of girls and boys in schools.

in education, deny this reality, stating, "We are always presenting the solution. We have very few conversations [with country nationals] on how we can help people to get organized and solve their problems."

The fact that there is considerable agency intentionality in these "partnerships" could be a means to be more proactive in gender issues when negotiating with host governments. The intention to promote gender requires not only that IDA program officers be knowledgeable of gender issues but that they also be committed to putting new ideas into action, even though host governments may be reluctant to accept the initiatives. This directionality requires also that IDA personnel develop contact with community-based groups and women-led NGOs, the most likely sources of gender knowledge about the immediate environment.

Obstacles to Knowledge Acquisition, Distribution, and Use

Several such obstacles can be identified. Some operate to obstruct knowledge in general; others function particularly in the case of gender and education.

Time Constraints. Among both bilateral and multilateral agencies a factor that affects individual and organization learning is the lack of time for learning either from the existing literature or even from reflecting on one's own experience. Regardless of rank in the organization, IDA staff face serious time pressures. At headquarters, officers complain of being "inundated with work" as requests for input, participation in committees, comments on forthcoming projects, etc. take an inordinate amount of time. All staff refer to huge workloads and pressure to get them done. This work concerns "contracts, disbursements, mundane stuff." In the opinion of many staff members, there is "an enormous amount of paper processing but very little value added to the quality of the project. After projects are negotiated we do not receive many comments from anybody."

The Development Environment. In an organization in which it is important to spend large amounts of funds within a fixed period of time (the financial year), most effort goes to the front-end of projects. The prevailing norms are to spend the funds for "acceptable purposes"; in consequence, there is little emphasis on innovation in either procedures or content of projects.

A concomitant element of exerting energy in project design and approval is that monitoring and evaluation of the projects as well as of the departments and individual staff members of most agencies is limited. During the interviews of IDA personnel, not a single staff member, at any level, mentioned self-evaluation of unit-evaluation as a source of learning. A recent analysis of the various efforts conducted within Sida to promote gender equality in developing countries corroborates this, noting that, "While the implicit strategy is that all Sida personnel should take

responsibility ... there are no accountability mechanisms to ensure that this actually happens. There is also little evidence of explicit monitoring and support from senior leadership" (Sida, 1996).

In development cooperation the technology regarding procedures to attain intended outcomes is not well defined. The current emphasis on "indicators" of success presupposes that levels of performance can be identified unambiguously. Yet, the terrain is full of hazards. For instance, one project addressing girls' education identified as a success indicator a growth of 5 percent per year in the enrollment rate of girls in primary school. While this rate seems satisfactory at first face, it turns out that the regular enrollment growth for girls in the public education system of the country was 4.8 percent and that the project itself had been attaining an average growth rate of over 11 percent per year (Lok Jumbish, 1996, p. 126). The question, then, is how to determine the appropriate level of intensity or frequency of an indicator. This can be done only in relational terms, vis-a-vis the existing educational system. But often, indicators are accepted as having intrinsic values.

Fragmented Knowledge. Another feature of organizational life that blocks learning in the area of girls' education is the adoption of single-output mind frames. It was observed at various points in the case study that agencies place almost exclusive emphasis on increased enrollment as an indicator of success. The single-measure perspective prevents IDAs and governments from seeing girls' education as a multifaceted phenomenon in which several factors are simultaneously at work (requiring multiple interventions). The addition of corroborative assessments would make a project on girls' education more complicated and time consuming. But it would also make it more sound.

Many projects on gender and education continue to be predicated on a single intervention. Such is the case of the secondary-school stipend for girls in Bangladesh. A single measure is often seen as powerful enough; this was considered sufficient for several years. But recent evaluations of enrollment show that this method has been much successful than initially anticipated. Today, an increasing number of projects on girls' education consider several components, such as increasing enrollment, promoting more women teachers, providing gender-sensitive training for teachers, removing sex stereotypes from the curriculum. However, very few projects consider more than two or three simultaneous components. Moreover, there are often few mechanisms within a project to interconnect these interventions, as different governmental units are in charge of different components in the host countries. In consequence, what one component may attain and the difficulties it may encounter during implementation are not discussed in the context of the overall project.

It has become fashionable among IDAs to see the problem of the

low enrollment of girls as a "demand-side factor." Framing the problem thus leads one to see the family as the main culprit and does not fully recognize that families, after all, are products of their own society and culture. Often this problem definition casts family preferences not as reflections of cultural beliefs but rather as "instances of market failure in information," caused by parents' inadequate knowledge of the changes taking place in the labor market, and particularly by the demands that urbanization and industrialization will make on women's work. These prevailing economistic views of gender tend to result in the avoidance of ideological and cultural factors in project design and in a reluctance to work with partners (e.g., women-led NGOs) who explicitly seek to create new relations between women and men.

The Promise of an Institutional Memory

One of the strongest concepts in organizational learning considers the need for an "institutional memory," in which knowledge may be available at the organizational level and easily retrievable by all members of the organization.

As a living concept within development agencies, institutional memory is the object of great variability in definition. It is seen as "a system that protects people from having to start all over again," as "a set of complete files," as "individuals with experience and wisdom who become known through informal networks within the agency, and sometimes outside it," and as a feature that "had to do with learning and dissemination of knowledge." Although these definitions are not mutually exclusive, some IDA members thus see such memory as a written product while others relate it to a person-located knowledge.

Institutional memory, in the form of computerized data banks containing knowledge about gender projects, is only now beginning to be developed. Under current plans to use the computer, there are efforts to reduce research findings or project information to only a few lines of text that will be easily retrieved by asking for a pertinent keyword. It remains to be seen whether such simplified information carries much value. Most knowledge about previous projects seems to reside in project officers who develop and monitored those projects.

Conclusions

The case study on organizational learning in girls' education took us through an examination of policies, structures, processes, and cultural norms. We interrogated ourselves about the dynamics surrounding individual and collective learning and the role that managerial incentives and institutional memory play in orienting new ways of thinking about girls' education.

Much of the transformation in IDAs to address girls' education, and gender in general, has come from outside sources and outside pressure rather than through the internal realization that

some elements in development assistance were missing. Agencies have responded to the environment (represented by the various world conferences addressing gender issues and their intersection with education, the influence of the women's movement, and--to a much lesser extent--the contributions from women in academia) in several ways. Structurally, they have created WID units and focal points, although the penetration of these units within the organization and their degree of authority and power has tended to be slight. Procedurally, agencies have engaged in attempts to use more multidisciplinary approaches and teamwork in the design and implementation of projects. The concept of mainstreaming of gender issues has been accepted and has been accompanied by various policy and operational guidelines to facilitate project development. Training has been provided on gender, but it has been short and voluntary. Agencies have also made substantial efforts to modify their organizational cultures by incorporating more women professionals and by including more participatory approaches with counterparts in the recipient countries.

IDAs still rely more on other IDAs' perceptions than on research findings from outside sources, notably university authors. As a result, even though development agencies engage in frequent changes in their structures and processes, their problem definition of certain issues varies little. By strengthening inter-agency contact and learning from their own limited experiences, IDAs acquire new knowledge but mostly within narrow parameters since few of these organizations tend to engage in boundary-crossing with other social actors in the developing countries. In the case of gender, an area that contests the status quo, IDAs have demonstrated a reluctance to learn the wide range of deep causes underlying power asymmetries between men and women. Often, the learning of IDAs is not theorized but rather limited to addressing a few obstacles facing women. Thus, for instance, they manifest a willingness to examine "girls' education" but not "women's knowledge." IDAs have also shown a reluctance to apply the knowledge that they do have. This may be explained not by the fact that the knowledge acquisition has been insufficiently collective, but rather by the tendency of bureaucratic routines to promote more exploitation of old knowledge than exploration of new knowledge. Coupling this with the possibility that gender efforts may create tension in the host countries, IDAs are moved to endorse a discourse that is much more promising in principle than in practice.

Returning to our conceptual framework of organizational learning, it can be said that knowledge acquisition among IDAs remains inward looking, as there is a reluctance to approach the women's movement to learn more about their definition of gender in society. The information distribution of gender-related materials exists in IDAs but due to organizational pressures and an organizational culture that relies mostly on informal sources of knowledge, the distribution is modest and mostly centered on specific project development, not on the acquisition of knowledge for unspecified future use. Because of their proximity to

governments in developing countries, IDAs interpret knowledge about gender in limited ways. As we have seen in the case of girls' education, such knowledge frames education for girls mostly in terms of access rather than content or the lived experience within schools. Schooling is not seen as a gendered institution, and the need to modify textbooks, teacher training, and the hidden curriculum of educational institutions is pushed aside. Further, by emphasizing girls' education, priority is given to basic education as opposed to secondary and higher education. By concentrating on girls in schools, attention to adult women in nonformal education programs also falls by the wayside.

In all, the kind of learning that goes on in IDAs can be best characterized as single-loop learning. The emphasis is on improving practices and refining rules and procedures. So far, it has not been on questioning the principles in use and reformulating new ways of understanding the social relations of gender and how these affect national development.

Notes

[1] Making schools girl-friendly usually involves making them safer by building fences around them or providing basic hygienic facilities such as potable water and latrines.

[2] These issues certainly intersect gender, yet many IDA officers perceive them as discrete and specialized aspects of development.

[3] The role of "focal points" was established following the World Conference on Women in Nairobi (1975). The purpose of this role was to keep alive the interest on gender issues. Often, IDA officials have been given this task as an add-on to their regular functions.

[4] This author has visited the Bank on at least five occasions. Often, officials in this institution announce new initiatives on gender, but it is not clear their degree of actual implementation nor the impact they have.

[5] The concepts of "just-in-time knowledge" and "just enough knowledge" have now become part of the Knowledge Management System developed by the World Bank. A recent brochure to KMS lists them as key features of its institutional memory (World Bank, 1997).

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