



Photo by: Eliza Villarino

## How MCC went beyond 'gender mainstreaming'

By Michael Igoe, published Apr. 7, 2014, by Devex

What distinguishes a policy document only a handful of people read from one that helps an organization adopt an integrated approach to a vital issue like gender equality?

For the [Millennium Challenge Corp.](#) and the leaders inside the agency who have sought to make it a social and gender equality leader among its donor peers, the difference comes down to whether policy is backed by capacity, accountability, resources and a clear mandate for change.

Ginny Seitz, senior director for social and gender assessment, knows what it takes to ensure that guiding documents serve as more than just a

repository for talking points and "check-the-box" solutions.

"One of the reasons why I wanted this position and the opportunity to develop the policy was I wanted it to be operational," said Seitz, who has engineered MCC's social and gender integration process over the past seven years.

The first step in that process was the creation of a new policy.

"It's a very simple policy. It says: These are our responsibilities, these are our partner country responsibilities. And that's it," Seitz told Devex.

When she joined MCC in 2006 as a director in the environment and social assessment team, Seitz was

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the only staff member with gender expertise. She was also one of the few social scientists who was not an economist; the mandate of the agency, which was barely 2 years old at the time, is to alleviate poverty through economic growth.

"Understanding the dynamics of gender within the economic sectors, whether they be infrastructure, or finance, or roads ... was really critical," Seitz said.

She recalled earlier experiences watching small, "woman-focused projects" achieve positive results that were ultimately undermined or destroyed by larger development projects that were not attuned to gender differences.

"I was determined we would focus on gender, rather than women," Seitz said.

At that time, gender mainstreaming had something of a bad name, in large part due to the perception that many organizations and agencies appointed junior-level staff without significant expertise to enact insufficient operational changes that could either be ignored at crucial decision points, or satisfied through relatively superficial actions during project implementation.

"I didn't want us to be associated with that approach," Seitz recalled.

### **Early wins generate political buy-in**

The creation of MCC's gender policy was an important first step, but the integration effort benefited significantly from some early wins in linking gender equality with economic growth and poverty reduction.

While conducting due diligence research for a new compact in the small mountain kingdom of Lesotho, MCC discovered that married women there held the same legal status as children, as they could not independently apply for a bank loan, own a business or purchase property.

Recognizing that a large segment of society was barred from full participation in growing the economy,

the U.S. development agency's gender staff, which consisted solely of Seitz, recommended that Lesotho's development compact — worth \$360 million — be contingent on the parliament's willingness to advance gender equality legislation.

Parliament passed the "Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act of 2006," and MCC's first compact included efforts to educate people in Lesotho about their legal rights under that law. The country became eligible for a second compact in December 2013.

That concrete achievement "established our seriousness early on in the agency's history," and "fueled our ability to work within the agency," Seitz said. It also created buzz within the administration and on Capitol Hill — then-Senator Hillary Clinton attached her signature to a resolution congratulating the government of Lesotho and MCC — which lent MCC's gender focus additional credibility and helped generate the necessary political buy-in to help Seitz in her campaign to build a more robust social and gender assessment team.

Still, at that point, MCC only had Seitz and one other staff member focused on social and gender equality, and located within the environment and social assessment team. Gender integration, she explained, was still seen as a "risk management" issue, with many agencies and organizations focused on ensuring their programs "do no harm" to women's rights as opposed to designing programs with social and gender equality goals embedded within them.

When the Obama administration took office in 2009, that brought with it an increased receptivity to addressing social equality, Seitz said. Then-Secretary of State Clinton appointed the first ambassador-at-large for global women's issues and Cassandra Butts, a key member of Obama's transition team, became senior adviser to the chief executive officer at MCC, with responsibilities including promoting gender equality.

The new political landscape saw Seitz's ongoing "quest for staff" gain new support. That quest led MCC

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to establish a distinct social and gender assessment team, which now includes nine employees and a mandate to influence where and how the agency spends its money.

### **MCC's 'innovation space'**

In 2011, MCC produced a set of operational procedures and milestones that impart specific and significant requirements for social and gender integration throughout the compact development and implementation process.

"Our operational procedures and milestones, I believe, are the biggest accomplishment I've had at MCC," Seitz said.

Now, when partner countries assemble a "core country team" for compact development, they must include a social scientist with gender expertise among those who participate in the compact development process. That person is responsible for overseeing a relatively new MCC requirement, the "initial social and gender assessment" piloted only within the past year. This assessment accompanies MCC's constraints to growth analysis and, according to Seitz, puts social and gender equality "on the table from the very beginning."

"This is the innovation space for MCC," she said, regarding research related to the interrelationships among social inequality, constraints to growth and the persistence of poverty.

Seitz added: "We have an opportunity to get more rigorous analytically, do more pilots with rigorous data collection. That's why this initial tool is putting us in the right direction moving forward."

Once a compact is signed and implementation begins, the MCA implementation team must also include a social and gender assessment position. That person is considered "key staff," a director-level position over which MCC maintains the "right of no objection," meaning they can review the credentials and approve

— or not — the partner country's hiring choice for that position.

"We learned from experience that if it wasn't a director-level person, they didn't have the authority to participate in decision-making," Seitz said.

In what Seitz called a "singular and major achievement" within the international development community, the second disbursement of MCC funding for compact implementation requires MCC's approval of a social and gender integration plan. That plan must reflect the findings of the initial assessment and be harmonized across all of the compact's project work plans and sectors. In other words, MCC has the authority to cut off the flow of compact funding on the basis of insufficient attention to social and gender equality.

On both the MCC side and the partner country side, the key social and gender assessment staff have the authority to clear project documents — including each sector's work plan — to ensure those plans are harmonized with the social and gender integration plan.

While that clearance is "a step under approval" and can be overruled, Seitz said it constitutes a "rigorous role" for the social and gender assessment staff.

### **From 'gender-blind' to 'talking gender'**

With specific requirements in place and specific, high-level people responsible for implementing them, MCC's counterparts in-country truly "talk gender," Seitz said, and speaking with MCA representatives from those country teams substantiates her claim.

Mongolia, for instance, began implementing its compact in 2008, when the agency's gender policy had been written but the specific operational policies in the procedures and milestones were not yet in place.

"When the project started, [it was] more like a very general mission: 'The project will ensure the meaningful equal participation of women and men in

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the project activities.' That was the only provision stated in the compact program implementation agreement, and that's the one key principle all project documents relied on," Begzsuren Tsolmon, MCA-Mongolia gender specialist, told Devex.

Almost two years into compact implementation, MCA-Mongolia received the new operational procedures and milestones from MCC that required a social and gender integration plan. It made a difference, according to Tsolmon.

"Before the gender integration plan ... the overall program and six different projects' activities were mostly gender blind. With the gender focus [launched] by MCC, we started to see ... whom we should be targeting, and for that group, what are the major constraints ... and where are we in addressing those challenges," she said.

In Cape Verde, where one compact was implemented before MCC put in place the new procedures and milestones and one compact was initiated after those guidelines took effect, their impact appears in equally stark relief.

Cape Verde's second compact benefited from "better direction and a ... sharper orientation" toward social and gender integration, a result of MCC's new requirements for its partner country teams, said Cláudia Rodrigues, gender and social assessment manager for MCA-Cape Verde II.

The second compact focused significantly on water and sanitation issues. Among other things, it helped create a new institution within the government, established by parliament and responsible for gender mainstreaming in the country's water and sanitation sector, even after the completion of the compact.

According to Rodrigues, the "turning point" for gender integration was MCC's operational procedures and milestones, and their insistence on high-level expertise. Cape Verde's first compact, which was also one of MCC's first compacts, did not require a social

and gender expert, whereas for the second compact, that position was mandatory.

"My job is to guarantee that social and gender integration is in all the processes, from the procurement until the final product," Rodrigues told Devex.

For Rodrigues, simply raising awareness of the importance of social and gender inclusion throughout an institution is insufficient if that process does not also establish someone to be accountable for the integration process.

"The social and gender integration plan is my day-to-day instrument that supports me to create not only awareness but for each activity, each project, we know exactly what we should do," Rodrigues said.

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