

MISSING PERSPECTIVES: PEOPLE AND GENDER

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According to its foreword the *World Development Report 2004* is about people. In my view it is more about systems and institutions. The grasp on people slips. In spite of the title *Making Services Work for Poor People*, there is no analysis of 'the poor'. Who are these men and women, young and old, ethnic minorities, people living in remote areas or in slums, people with disabilities – or whatever? What do they have in common or how do they differ? Why is it difficult to make services work for them? The report is in fact kind of abstract.

A proper gender perspective is missing. It is not that the report is gender blind. There are references to gender, girls and women here and there, but it is in a random way, as ad hoc examples. There should be a proper analysis. Even if the report does not enter into specificities, it should underline the widespread existence of gender differences and discrimination, though roles and institutions vary in different contexts. If we don't deal with these basic facts in a conscious and systematic way, we get an incomplete picture of realities and our solutions will be less effective. It is part of the picture that the great majority of politicians and providers of social services all over the world are men. There are relatively few women and they are usually in subordinate positions. Clients and citizens, on the other hand, include 50 per cent or more women. Women appear to be particularly numerous among the poor. The spotlight in the report on Kerala and Urdah Pradesh (pp. 44–45) has the beginnings of a gender analysis that is very interesting, but this is about all. It is amazing that the relationships between poor people and providers and between poor people and policy-makers, the heterogeneity among clients and the participation of citizens can be addressed without bringing out the consequences of the fact that men and women in many cases have different roles and act differently; amazing, too, that the challenges related to girls' education and women's health are not discussed either.

I have worked with the Bamako Initiative in West Africa for many years (see *Continent of Mothers*, *Continent of Hope*, Zed Books, 2003). The Initiative entails a revitalisation of primary health care

services on the basis of cost-sharing and community participation. The spotlight on the Initiative in the report (pp. 76–77) defends its place and is quite accurate – as far as it goes. But it is incomplete with regard to the relationship between providers and the poor. The committees that are created by the communities to manage the local health centres are mentioned, but their role is not described. Most often these committees are elected by the communities and represent them in relation to the frontline health personnel. The traditional division of labour, with men as the heads of the household, results in the committees usually being made up of men. The women are not included, although they are the majority of the health centre clients – due, among other factors, to their reproductive role. Without a gender perspective this imbalance is not noticed. And the obstacles it entails for effective health services are not dealt with.

Many people use the revitalised health services, but not everybody. People do not always need them. It is difficult to get away from home. The distance might be long. People may be dissatisfied with the services or have problems paying the fees. They might also prefer other solutions, such as going to drug vendors in the market, traditional healers or others. When asked what they think of the health centres, some women complain that they are not received with understanding and respect. Health centres frequently have a male health worker and a female midwife. It is particularly delicate for male health workers to deal with female patients. The health workers may have higher status. They may come in from the outside and have little knowledge of local culture and language. Some are sympathetic and discreet, while others may be ‘professional’ and quite arrogant in the way they relate to ‘ignorant’ women.

As far as we know, the health committees typically value capital accumulation and investment, while women are more preoccupied with the outreach and quality of services. It is not easy to bring women in, but their participation in the management of services is key to increased coverage of both preventive and curative health care. The most promising efforts are taking place where the local leaders have been persuaded to hand over the tasks of the health committee to a women’s co-operative. This has not happened in many places, but where it has been done, the management of funds and drugs has worked well. Health staff has received assistance. Contact with the population has improved and more women have visited the centre.

The World Bank has been criticised because it often promotes standard solutions to problems without taking local contexts into

account, favouring market-oriented arrangements. The present report has a more open and flexible approach. The emphasis is on 'no size fits all' and the possible merits and shortcomings of different service delivery frameworks. Successes and failures of both the public sector and markets are analysed. The report stresses that ensuring access to basic services is a public responsibility and the public sector should meet this responsibility in such a way that the services do not fail poor people. The report presents and discusses alternative service delivery arrangements including the public sector, the not-for-profit sector and the private, for-profit sector. Here the report is admirably nuanced and straightforward in dealing also with sensitive issues like corruption and clientelism.

The report uses examples and 'sizes' to illustrate different service arrangements. These are stimulating, but do not provide much guidance for action. To make progress we need to gain a better understanding of different implementation strategies: what works or does not work, why and how. Even if there are no standard solutions, innovations and lessons learned in one context can be very helpful in other contexts and the sharing of experiences can promote more effective solutions than otherwise would be the case. Further studies are needed in this area.

A key message of the report is that making services work for poor people requires extensive efforts and reforms. Planning, financing, monitoring and evaluation are not sufficient to achieve education and health for all – there must also be a careful and wise implementation of policies. Dealing with implementation difficulties to obtain successful and sustainable results demands patience. Quick results will be hard to come by. In this light we must consider carefully how we relate to the Millennium Development Goals. The report notes that at the present rate of progress the Goals in health and education will not be reached by 2015. Trying to accelerate developments and disburse funds, we risk not only falling short of the targets, but of doing more harm than good to the services for poor people. In addition we might be criticised because development efforts do not work, when we have to note the shortcomings in 2015. The Millennium Development Goals are important to inspire common action in pursuit of priority goals, increase the efforts of the international community as well as national and local leaders and make all of us accountable in a concrete way. But they must not become a straightjacket and it must be clear that they are not realistic measures of what can probably be achieved, but optimistic hopes on the basis of what we think should be done. This must be

acknowledged while the programme is underway. Otherwise we are in for a tough backlash some years from now.

The systematic focus of the report is on accountability, particularly that of policy-makers and service providers in relation to citizens and clients. This is extremely useful and should inspire a rethinking by international, national and local actors. The last chapter deals with aid and accountability, advising donors to reform their aid programmes. What this implies for the operations of the World Bank is not clear. The report is a World Bank document, prepared by a team of Bank staff with a foreword by James D. Wolfensohn, the Bank's President, though it is not attributed. But the findings, interpretations and conclusions are not the responsibility of the Board of Executive Directors of the Bank or the governments they represent. And the follow-up of the messages in the report by the Bank is not spelled out. This remains an open question.