



Gender Policy and Practice



2007

Help for Progress Gender Policy and Practice (2007)

Help for Progress is an NGO that acts as an agent of change to support the development of rural communities in Belize. We work for the empowerment of people, for gender equality, and for the elimination of poverty. We carry out our work through training, microcredit services, community development and advocacy.

Help for Progress Mission Statement

Help for Progress (HfP) was established in 1981. Since that time, it has worked with marginalized rural communities in Belize, with special attention paid to the needs of women, young people and Central American refugees. Recently, HfP has also worked with communities in the Belize-Guatemala Adjacency Zone to promote cooperation and sustainable livelihoods in this area.

Throughout its history, HfP has recognized that both women and men must benefit from its development work. While some steps forward were made, the organization has recognized the need for the systematic integration of gender concerns into all areas of its work.

Gender inequality in Belize is serious and persistent. Structural barriers and patriarchal values prevent or limit women's participation in their households and communities, and in the society as a whole. Women continue to be subject to violence in their homes and on the street. Employment opportunities are often limited. The contribution of women's work in the home to the local and national economy is not valued. The particular needs of women are generally neglected in the allocation of scarce resources.

By specifically including the goal of gender equality in its mission statement, HfP has recognized that real development must be inclusive of both women and men. This Gender Policy and Practice document is intended to provide a guide for integrating this recognition into all areas of HfP's work.

Integrating Gender in the Work of Help for Progress

HfP believes that development should be based on the needs and aspirations of people – women and men, girls and boys. It is a comprehensive economic, social and cultural process whose success must be measured by the impact on people's daily lives.

A Gender and Development (GAD) approach implies more than setting up special projects for women. It recognizes that socially constructed¹ differences between women and men have led to inequality and male dominance. It stresses the need to account for the different roles, needs and interests of women and men (as well as girls and boys) in developing, implementing and evaluating strategies for change. It also emphasizes the need to challenge the power structures that prevent both women and men from reaching their full potential and achieving equal access to the opportunities, resources and benefits of development.

In practical terms, HfP's application of a GAD approach supports change in 3 key areas²:

Decision making: HfP promotes more equal participation of women and men as decision makers. This includes empowering women to define their own goals and act upon them, increasing the capacity of women (and women's groups) for participation in public life, and increasing the representation of women in decision making bodies.

Development resources and benefits: HfP works for equality of access to and control over the resources and benefits of development. This includes supporting women's access to productive resources³, ensuring that women's priority basic needs are met, and advocating for policies that support gender equality by institutions that manage development resources and benefits.

Rights: HfP recognizes that women's rights are an integral part of human rights and supports women and girls to fully realize these rights. This includes responding to gender-specific rights violations, working for public awareness of the rights of women and girls, and promoting the protection of the rights of women and girls in law and public policy.

While gender integration means that both women and men will be involved in the process of addressing gender concerns, support for work among women and women's groups continues to be central to HfP's approach. Women's empowerment is a necessary precondition for gender equality. Strong beliefs and structures supporting inequality can only be effectively challenged by a "bottom-up" approach that supports women to engage their communities in a process of change.

Belize is a diverse country and, of course, other variables such as ethnicity, culture, age, socio-economic status and geographical location must also inform development strategies. At the same time, accounting for these other variables must not become a barrier to addressing gender inequality. In many communities, developing an approach

¹ By "socially constructed" we mean that women and men are not born with these differences, but rather acquire them because of the roles and responsibilities we assign to each. These differences are learned and they can, and do, change over time.

² These key areas are adapted from CIDA's Framework for Assessing Gender Equality Results (2006)

³ "productive resources" include land, capital/credit, technology and skills

that will preserve positive cultural traditions while promoting women's equality is a difficult but necessary challenge.

Integrating gender into the overall work means keeping the different interests of women and men at the forefront at each stage of programme development. Tools for needs assessment and programme planning should be gender-sensitive. Implementation methods must include the meaningful participation of women and men. Monitoring and evaluation of gender impact must be done to ensure real progress toward equality.

Gender in Help for Progress Programme Plans

The work of HfP is organized into 4 programme areas: Community Development, Microcredit, Refugees and Displaced Persons, and Organizational Development. The organization recognizes the need to actively apply a gender perspective in each programme and to implement specific activities and approaches to ensure that the interests of both women and men are accounted for.

Community Development

HfP has defined *community development* as...

...a participatory process through which communities define and act on their own issues and concerns. It is based on principles of self-reliance, equity, and respect for all members of the community. It leads to the transformation of the social and economic life of communities, so that communities can participate in, and benefit from, the national development of the country.

A major problem with many approaches to community development is that they are gender-blind – that is, they begin from the assumption that women and men have the same needs and that they prioritize community needs in the same way. Often, they have implicitly accepted the marginalization of women in decision making and accepted violations of the human rights of women and girls as difficult, if not impossible, to challenge.

HfP believes that community development must support self-reliance, equity and respect for both women and men. It also recognizes that women generally have quite different perspectives and priorities from men and that these are often neglected because of women's lesser role in decision making in their households and communities.

In its community development work, HfP promotes the development of a participatory, gender-sensitive model that supports the involvement of both women and men in the process. Key to this model is an approach to needs assessment that incorporates the

views of both women and men as the basis for equal access to development resources and benefits.

HfP also supports the empowerment of women and their efforts to play a greater role in decision making. HfP believes that women's groups have a critical role to play in this process, giving women a collective voice for their concerns and a forum in which to define and promote action on common issues. Women's groups also help ensure that work on gender concerns is well-grounded in the community and not perceived as being imposed from outside.

An important part of all efforts to integrate gender into an organization's work is assessing the impact of that work. HfP undertakes regular monitoring and evaluation activities and revises its gender work accordingly.

In its 2008 – 2010 Strategic Plan, HfP is implementing this approach to community development through the following activities⁴:

- Development and testing of a participatory, gender-sensitive model of community development.⁵
- Development of gender-sensitive community needs assessment tools and training of staff in the use of the tools.
- Support for the establishment of women's groups in all communities where HfP works, including training for participants in organizational development and leadership skills.
- Inclusion of gender issues in a media strategy to reach communities in very rural areas of the Toledo district.
- Support for a Women's Assembly of the Network of Friends of the Adjacency Zone (REDAZCO)
- Monitoring and evaluation of the gender impact of HfP's community development work (including the development of monitoring and evaluation tools)

Microcredit

Help for Progress believes that microcredit has an important role to play in the development of rural communities. HfP microcredit programmes have focused on investment in productive resources so that families and communities in rural areas see real improvements in their standard of living.

In rural areas, credit services are generally unavailable to women. Furthermore, women lack experience in planning and operating a small business enterprise. They also do not have access to conventional forms of collateral that could support a loan request.

⁴ More details on all activities outlined in this policy can be found in *Help for Progress Strategic Plan, 2008 - 2010*

⁵ Following the testing and revision of this model, it will be made available to rural communities across Belize.

Women in the poorest and most marginalized communities could have the most to gain from developing small businesses, but may also be the most difficult to reach.

The primary mechanism for integrating a gender perspective into HfP's Microcredit Programme is through the Women's Loan Fund. This fund is intended to provide women who do not have access to other credit services with loans to start or expand small businesses. A focus for the Loan Fund is to reach the most marginalized women, especially very poor women and Maya women in isolated villages.

Providing women with access to productive resources through the Loan Fund is intended to promote women's ability to financially contribute to their households and communities. Equally important is the role this support can play in the empowerment of women. Empowerment is the process through which women take ownership and control of their lives. This includes the ability to define one's goals and act upon them, as well as the development of self-esteem, self-confidence and a greater role in decision making in their households and communities.

The Women's Loan Fund supports rural women to establish small businesses. In addition to administering loan funds, it also provides assistance to women in setting goals and developing a business plan. HfP also monitors the results of all loans to assess their impact on the empowerment of women.

In its 2008 – 2010 Strategic Plan, HfP is implementing this approach to microcredit through the following activities:

- Implementing a publicity campaign in the Stann Creek and Toledo districts to ensure that women in the poorest and most marginalized communities are aware of the Women's Loan Fund.
- Development of a borrower training programme, including support for women to set and reach personal goals through accessing microcredit.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the Loan Fund, with particular attention to the role of microcredit on the empowerment of women.
- Assessment of the BGA Housing Loan⁶ programme, to ensure that women are represented proportionally to their participation in the banana industry workforce.

Refugees and Displaced Persons

For many years, Help for Progress has been involved in providing practical support and promoting the rights of refugees. HfP is currently the representative of the UNHCR⁷ in Belize. In this capacity, HfP provides displaced persons with survival basics such as shelter, food, medical attention, transportation and legal assistance. The organization also works to ensure that all displaced persons have access to due process, and

⁶ This housing programme is sponsored by the Banana Growers' Association for workers in the banana industry. It is funded by the European Union and administered by Help for Progress as a special project.

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

promotes public awareness of human rights in general and the rights of refugees and displaced persons in particular.

In the 1980's, Belize became home for thousands of Central American refugees seeking safety from conflict in the region. Since that time, changing social and political conditions have also changed the face of displaced persons entering Belize. There is a general recognition that protection must be extended beyond the conventional category of refugee. People victimized by trafficking in persons, gang violence, commercial sexual exploitation and domestic violence must also be afforded protection and support as displaced persons.

Women face particular issues as displaced persons. First, women (as well as young people) are more likely to be victims of trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation and domestic violence. In addition, women are often targets of sexual abuse at border crossings and other locations where they seek protection and support.

Belize currently lacks comprehensive documentation of the situation of refugees and displaced persons in Belize. Given this shortfall, it is impossible to know how many women are affected and the extent to which the human rights of displaced women are being violated.

In its work for refugees and displaced persons, HfP advocates for the protection and support of all categories of displaced persons. The organization believes that the particular rights of women, especially the right to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation, are an essential part of human rights as a whole and the rights of displaced persons in particular.

In its 2008 – 2010 Strategic Plan, HfP is implementing this approach to work for refugees and displaced persons through the following activities:

- Inclusion of victims of trafficking in persons, commercial sexual exploitation and domestic violence in mechanisms for asylum and due process for displaced persons.
- Collection of available information and research on displaced persons in Belize with particular attention to gender implications.
- Identification of methods of filling the gaps in information as they affect both women and men.
- Integration of information on the realities facing both female and male displaced persons in an overall public awareness campaign.
- Production of materials on sexual abuse and exploitation of refugees and displaced persons and publicity for HfP's support to victims in these circumstances.

Organizational Development

As an organization working with and for rural communities in Belize, Help for Progress strives for accountability to and participation by the people it serves. Given barriers to

women's participation in rural communities (and in Belizean society as a whole), HfP recognizes the need to pay special attention to the involvement of women in the organization. HfP also believes that effective work to address gender issues and promote women's empowerment is only possible if all personnel develop the perspective and skills to apply a gendered approach in their work.

As part of its overall process of organizational development, HfP works toward gender balance at all levels – in its community level activities, in the decision making structures of the organization, and in staffing. It also carries out education and training in gender analysis and tools in recognition of its commitment to making gender a central concern in all areas of work.

A particular area of attention for HfP is the strengthening of its advocacy work. Once again, understanding the role of gender analysis in developing and implementing more focused advocacy campaigns is key to ensuring that these efforts are inclusive of the needs and aspirations of both women and men.

In all areas of HfP's work, monitoring and evaluation are essential to guarantee that efforts to promote gender equality are effective and have the intended impact. Monitoring and evaluation work is used to identify and build on effective strategies and develop new approaches based on experience.

In its 2008 – 2010 Strategic Plan, HfP is implementing this approach to organizational development through the following activities:

- Inclusion of the issue of gender balance in developing a new model for participation and structure.
- Inclusion of the gender dimension in the selection and development of an advocacy campaign.
- Training on gender analysis and issues for staff and other HfP personnel.
- Incorporating input from specific gender monitoring and assessment activities in HfP's annual evaluation.
- Review of the impact of this Gender Policy as part of the annual evaluation process.

Additional Guidelines

In addition to the specific strategies and activities in the four programme areas, HfP implements a gender aware approach to its work in these ways:

- **Promotion of gender balance in the HfP staff.** HfP works toward achieving gender balance in staffing decisions. Women will be specifically encouraged to apply for new or replacement staff positions and will be given priority in hiring until gender balance is achieved.

- **Use of gender inclusive language:** HfP ensures that all documents or statements made by the organization use language that is inclusive of both women and men. As part of gender training, all personnel will become conscious of the need to use inclusive language (both spoken and written) in all work for HfP.
- **Provision of a gender friendly work environment:** HfP ensures that the workplace is a supportive and secure environment for both women and men. In particular, sexual harassment (through actions or words) is not tolerated. Women and men are provided equal access to training opportunities and other job-related benefits.
- **Inclusion of gender in the staff evaluation process:** HfP staff are expected to bring a gender aware approach to their work. An assessment of this is included in the annual evaluation process.

Conclusion

Help for Progress is committed to integrating a gender approach into all areas of its work. It can be assessed by its impact on the 3 key areas of change outlined earlier in this document:

Decision making: Through a gender-sensitive approach to community development and support for women's groups in rural communities, women will develop a greater role in their households and communities. The Women's Loan Fund will enhance self-confidence and promote a greater role in decision making. Within HfP as an organization, greater gender balance will be achieved at all levels.

Development resources and benefits: Gender-sensitive assessment tools will ensure that the perspectives of both women and men are included in the development and implementation of community plans and projects. Access to the Women's Loan Fund will increase the resources available to women in poor and marginalized communities. Ongoing monitoring and assessment of all programmes will ensure that women and men benefit equally from all HfP programmes.

Rights: Work for refugees and displaced persons will establish women's rights as human rights. Inclusion of a gender perspective in HfP advocacy campaigns will see improvements in the rights of women in rural communities. Gender conscious work in rural communities will establish a base for greater understanding of women's rights at the local level.

Ultimately, the success of this Gender Policy will be measured by change in the rural communities that HfP serves. HfP is dedicated its mission to work for "*the empowerment of people, for gender equality, and for the elimination of poverty*". This Gender Policy is a key tool in fulfilling that mission.