Women’s Economic Empowerment Platform
Concept Note

Final Draft – June 10, 2016

I. Introduction

The establishment of a Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) Platform will serve to promote coordination and collaboration between different actors within the WEE sector and act as a vehicle to the social, political and economic empowerment of women. The platform will be strategic in cross learning and research and information sharing. Ultimately, it will work towards ensuring that good practices within the sector are effectively scaled up and that discussions and advocacy on WEE are anchored in sound research.

II. Situation Analysis

In Malawi women face various gender-differentiated constraints to economic empowerment, including: higher labour burdens; lack of access to financial resources; time poverty due to weak infrastructure and care responsibilities; limited access to markets; lack of female voice in decision making processes; negative cultural and traditional factors; violence against women; and low levels of literacy and education.

Efforts to promote Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) in Malawi continue to be challenged by numerous constraints. The current situation can be characterized by a lack of information, inadequate conceptual understanding of economic empowerment processes among key stakeholders, insufficient binding to rules and regulations, inefficiencies in networking and communication, and differing expectations.

Malawian women continue to lag behind in terms of the attainment of economic and political power. According to the United Nations Development Programme’s 2014 report, Malawi has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.611, ranking at 140 out of 155 countries. According to the same report, only 16.7% of Malawi’s parliamentary seats are held by women, and about twice as many males than females have received secondary educations (11.1% for females, and 21.6% for males).
Most Malawians earn their incomes in the agriculture sector or through small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). In both of these trades, women remain significantly disadvantaged. According to USAID’s 2014 report on Agribusiness SMEs in Malawi, there exists great disparity in the proportion of men to women owning small and medium-sized businesses, with an average ratio of 75:25. In the agricultural sector, male-managed plots produce on average 31% more than female-managed plots, largely due to the barriers women face in accessing labour, land, farm-inputs, technical know-how and education. A 2015 study by the World Bank determined that closing the gender gap in Malawi’s agricultural sector could alone add 100 million US dollars to Malawi’s economy.

The most recent Malawian Labour Force Survey (2013) shows that women have less access to decent work, have higher levels of unemployment, lower levels of educational attainment, less beneficial employment statuses and higher levels of informal employment than men. There are also gender gaps in sectoral and occupational segregation, wages and access to productive resources such as finance and land, which are particularly important in the agricultural sector. The results reveal the negative effects of historical discrimination and gender inequality and shed light on the burden of the caretaker role and the undervalued unwaged work of women.

Realizing women’s economic empowerment requires sound public policies and a holistic approach. Long-term commitment and gender perspectives must be integrated into the design stages of policy and programming. Women must have more equitable access to assets and services; infrastructure programmes should be designed to benefit both men and women and employment opportunities must be improved while increasing recognition of women’s vast unpaid work. There is a need to promote increased dialogue amongst development actors, improved coordination amongst donors and to mobilize support for women’s organizations at national and global levels. The Women’s Economic Empowerment Platform aims to establish innovative approaches and partnerships which work towards these objectives and scale up successful interventions in the economic empowerment of women.

III. Alignment to National Development Strategies
The WEE Platform is aligned with the Malawian Growth and Development Strategy II 2011-2016 (MDGS II) and the National Gender Policy 2015 (NGP).

The Platform is in line with MDGS II Theme 6, Gender:

Government will, therefore implement a number of strategies to reduce gender inequalities in the country. These strategies include: promoting women entrepreneurship and involvement in cooperatives; promoting equal access to appropriate technologies and micro-finance schemes; advocating for affirmative action to increase representation of women in politics and decision making positions; strengthening Gender Based Violence (GBV) service delivery systems; strengthening legal and regulatory framework; and mainstreaming gender at all levels.

The Platform is also in line with NGP Policy Statement 6.2:

Women and other vulnerable groups participation in economic empowerment initiative is increased and strengthened.

IV. Objectives

The overall objective of the WEE Platform is to promote economic empowerment to enable women and men to have equal opportunity to participate in and to benefit from profitable economic activities.

Specific objectives are;

1. To influence a conducive policy environment for WEE
2. To strengthen coordination, collaboration and networking among stakeholders working within the WEE sector
3. To strengthen the capacity of key players to promote WEE
4. To promote gender sensitive monitoring, evaluation, knowledge management and learning for the WEE sector

V. Deliverables

The WEE Platform deliverables, designed to be measurable and tangible indicators of success are as follows:
1. A more coordinated policy environment for MSMEs
2. Improved incorporation of gender provisions in legal and policy frameworks governing the labor market by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism
3. Increased number of jointly initiated and implemented projects with involvement of WEE Platform key stakeholders
4. Improved access to vocational and educational skills for women entrepreneurs
5. Increased number of policy briefs/reports disseminated on the topic of Women’s Economic Empowerment by key stakeholders
6. Increased documentation of good practices in scaling up efforts within women’s economic empowerment
7. Increased level of trained entrepreneurs
8. Supportive infrastructure for MSMEs established
9. Establishment of a data bank which collects gender-sensitive, quantitative and qualitative data which illuminates the impacts of WEE activities on women’s lives and livelihoods
10. Dissemination and access to data bank shared with stakeholders of WEE

Other proposed areas for consideration for the WEE Platform and its members are; ensuring the property and inheritance rights of women, capacity building for MSMEs and the creation of a credible data bank that reports on MSMEs, improving access to vocational skills and technical training for women and the formation of strong women’s associations.

VI. Structure

The WEE Platform’s governing body will be a Secretariat, which will be chaired by the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. The WEE Platform will be co-chaired by a suitable representative from the private sector. In the initial phase of founding the Platform an interim task force will assume the responsibilities of spearheading logistical issues and firmly establishing the WEE Platform in Malawi. The interim committee will have representatives from government, private sector, NGOs, CSOs and associations of women. It is anticipated that the future stakeholders in the platform will be active members of the Malawian economic empowerment sphere. The interim task force will have the duty to spearhead the establishment of the platform which will be run as an entity on its own. See Annex 1 for a list of members of the interim taskforce.

VII. Key Target Beneficiary Population
The key target beneficiary population are Malawian women, who, due to a myriad of barriers preventing effective participation (see Situation Analysis), have been largely left out of the pursuit of economic independence and empowerment. The platform will target women who are of working age and who will benefit from the advancement of WEE activities. The platform will strengthen preexisting enterprise support structures as well as women entrepreneurs who work in isolation and need a stronger voice. All women entrepreneurs are illegible to join the platform for the common cause of advancing their participation in the socio-economic development of the nation through Economic Empowerment. The platform will be governed by rules and regulations (Constitution) agreed by members of the platform.

VIII. Conclusion

The Women’s Economic Empowerment Platform (WEEP) will provide a forum for key stakeholders to coordinate and collaborate on establishing practical solutions and an enabling environment for the realization of the economic empowerment of women.