

Gender Action Plan

Department of Disarmament Affairs (DDA)

First in UN Secretariat to launch

Before he left the Organization, Cheryl Larsen interviewed Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala, former Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, about the implementation of his cutting edge mainstreaming programme. This came to be after the Secretary-General asked all programme managers to look at how policies, programmes and services impact men and women.

CL: How did your Department begin the process on gender mainstreaming?

JD: It was a challenge to apply the broad gender parity and gender mainstreaming policy guidelines of the UN in the very complex field of disarmament and security. Grappling with the issue, we sought and received the help of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI).

CL: What concrete steps did the Department take to begin the process?

JD: In cooperation with OSAGI, we developed a series of Briefing Notes entitled "Gender Perspectives on Disarmament." This was the first attempt to make the connection between gender and weapons of mass destruction. These Briefing Notes were widely distributed in both "Gender" and "Disarmament" fora.

I had a personal experience, when leading an evaluation team to Albania for weapons collection. After broad consultations, including women's groups, the "weapons for development" pilot project followed. Perhaps the men were too macho or bashful to hand over the weapons themselves, so it was the women and children who brought the guns in. I think that was a dramatic example of how women can play a pivotal role in achieving disarmament in a practical way.

CL: What was the reaction of your senior staff to gender mainstreaming? I can imagine that the concept could not have been readily acceptable to them.

JD: I did not really encounter resistance although, I suspect, some skepticism. We sought to overcome any doubts through discussions with the Senior Management Team and staff meetings. We had people working energetically on this issue help to push the programme further, including two past presidents of GERWUN, Ms. Agnes

Marcaillou and Ms. Cheryl Stoute.

CL: Your Department is the first in the UN to have developed a Gender Action Plan. How did you get from Briefing Notes to such a detailed, concrete Action Plan?

JD: The Plan was proposed to us in an alas report which commended our gender perspective papers. They suggested we go a step further and design a coherent plan with targets and goals which could be monitored. In cooperation with Division for the Advancement of Women and OHRM, we hired two consultants - one conversant with "gender" and the other with "disarmament" issues. Through a consultative process, involving New York, Geneva and the field Regional Centres, they gained a good grasp of the Department's day-to-day activities. The resulting draft was circulated to all members of staff who provided feedback, and then "fine-tuning." The Gender Action Plan was launched in April at a well attended Panel Discussion entitled "Making Discussions More Effective: Men and Women Working Together."

CL: What steps will you be taking to monitor implementation of the Gender Action Plan?

JD: The Plan will be put into the PAS's of staff, particularly those who are in supervisory positions to ensure compliance.

CL: What about gender equality in your department? DDA has still not reached the 50/50 balance. Why?

JD: At the moment we are at 39 percent. I believe we will get to 50%, although being such a small department, we face a number of disadvantages. We are, however, doing a lot of networking. For example, we are linked to the Women's Group



Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala
formerUSG for DDA

for International Security based in Washington, and we consult with them regarding vacancies that arise. We also try to disseminate our vacancies to as wide an audience as possible in order to encourage a broader selection of candidates.

CL: What has been your experience in trying to find women experts, participants for your meetings, consultants?

JD: We continue to encourage governments to nominate qualified women. In our Disarmament Fellowship Programme, for example, the percentage of female fellows has risen from 20% in 1998 to 27% in 2002. I believe that it is important to maintain this pressure on governments. Out of 20 eminent persons on the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament matters we now have 8 women, and two years ago a woman was nominated to chair this body for the first time in its 20 year history. Our steady progress will continue and I am sure my successor will also follow the same policy. I believe that with the Secretary-General's drive and persistence throughout the system we can achieve success.

CL: What have you been able to do in

your department to improve job satisfaction and career advancement opportunities for your General Service staff?

JD: I am glad that the Secretary-General's recent reform document has recommended that GS staff be described as international civil servants. The terms and conditions under which this category works now, belatedly, are being remedied.

Unfortunately, in the UN system the only avenue for promotion is the G to P exam. I think that additionally staff should be rewarded on merit and seniority. We have some excellent G7s who are not inclined to take examinations at this stage of their lives. However, they are as good or better than some of the professionals with whom I have worked. It is a great injustice to them that they cannot move any further because of the structural blocks that we have.

There are other ways in which the GS category can have job satisfaction. I have tried to ensure that they get opportunities to service conferences in different parts of the world and to travel on missions, as well as for training away from Headquarters. They are active participants in the weekly staff meetings; and play an integral part in the people management

exercise. The entire department went on retreat and participated in team building. I believe more of those exercises should be carried out.

CL: Your department piloted the Work/Life programme. How is it working out?

JD: The UN is lagging behind in the application of work/life arrangements. Several years ago, as Ambassador for my country in Washington, I was aware of the World Bank's work/life programme. I

agreed to allow OHRM to use DDA for the pilot where for nine days you work an extra hour and in return you get the tenth day off. We excluded the GA period, during which activity is intense for all of us. Despite misgivings on the part of some managers, it was a great success. It

improved productivity, one of the ultimate aims of the exercise; and led to a happier and more contented workforce. In the end, about 20% of the staff participated.

In real life, people have to bring up their children or do chores which can only be done on weekdays. A Friday off every two weeks, I think, is a great bonus for those who wish to take advantage of the 10 in 9. My Special Assistant and her colleague take turns being away on Fridays, and have found the arrangement extremely beneficial. We also have staff with special writing assignments who find it much more convenient to work from home. The bottom line is that the quality and quantity of the work have not suffered.

CL: I think it is very important that men and women participate in the flexible working arrangement programmes as they do in the US Federal Government; are men in DDA participating in the flexible working arrangement programme?

JD: Yes, of course. A staff member in my own office, for example, participates in flexi-hours to help his wife who has recently given birth. He comes to the office a little later, but he makes up the hours in the evening. The main thing is that the work continues to get done and we have a fully functioning staff member despite his having to stay up some nights with a crying baby. We have also stopped scheduling meetings on Fridays - and this we did long before the work/life experi

ment last year.

CL : On looking back, is there anything you would have done differently? Do you have any advice for other managers?

JD: There is a level of suspicion and distrust that appears to exist between senior management and the rest of the staff. I believe we can break down this wall of distrust in a number of ways without simply going through a hollow public relations exercise. Meaningful steps must be taken, I referred to the structural problem confronting the GS staff. I think that it is an important step and it makes the GS staff feel more a part of the entire structure of the UN.

The scheme of promotions has to be revised so that there could be a certain degree of automaticity of promotion, unless there is some very grave reason why a staff member should not be promoted. For example, in most foreign services in the world the promotions from Third Secretary to Second Secretary, and then to First Secretary happen on a timeframe basis. If you perform efficiently, your progress in the service is fairly predictable. Why can't we devise something like that instead of having this very competitive process that sometimes creates unfortunate side effects? This could be done in a way to retain most of the bright P2s and P3s who come in, and then leave for greener pastures because of the dismal promotion prospects.

CL: Thank you Mr. Dhanapala for your time and we wish you all the best!

Special thanks to Juliet Gilbert and Cheryl Stoute for assistance in preparing the article and interview