

Chapter 5

Darfur: Action Contre la Faim, the European Commission, the U.S. and the Integration of Gender Perspectives into Humanitarian Assistance—A Case Study

Domitille Kauffmann

This case study¹ analyzes whether and how gender is promoted by the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) and the Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the two key agencies for humanitarian assistance in the European Commission and the U.S. Government, in their humanitarian response to the Darfur crisis. The case study focuses on Action Contre la Faim France as implementing partner in the region, since the organization implements both ECHO and OFDA funded programs.

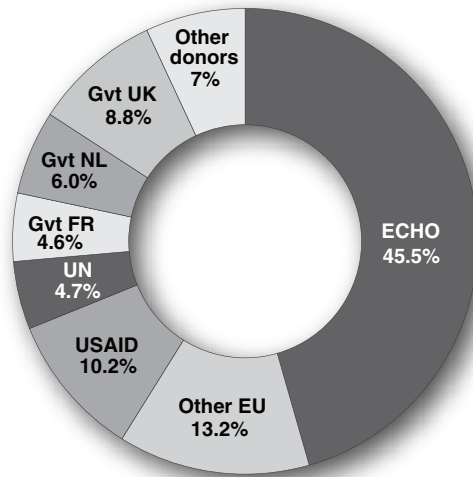
Since its creation in France in 1979, Action Contre la Faim has become an international NGO network committed to fight hunger in the world. With nearly 3,000 staff, Action Contre la Faim currently conducts operations in over 20 countries. The organization specializes in four sectors: nutrition, food security, water, sanitation and hygiene, and advocacy. In 2007, 55 percent of the organization's funding came from public donors, of which 45 percent came from ECHO and 10 percent from USAID, as shown in the graph below.²

Action Contre la Faim's total budget for 2007 amounted to €34.5 million, of which more than 25 percent was linked to the organization's activities in Sudan. There has been a great deal of activity in Sudan, particularly in Darfur, but in 2007, Action Contre la Faim significantly reduced its operations in the region due to security reasons.

The following chapter is divided into three sections: The first introduces the issue of gender in Darfur; the second analyzes contextual and institutional factors which limit the integration of lessons learned; and the third highlights different mechanisms that enable changes to current practices.

¹ This case study would not have been possible without the cooperation of Action Contre la Faim France staff and ECHO field experts. The author is extremely grateful to Action Contre la Faim staff at headquarters and in the field as well as ECHO field experts for the time that they gave. The author would also like to thank Action Contre la Faim France for the confidence they had in her and for accepting to be the subject of this study.

² Action Contre la Faim Financial report 2007.

Figure 1. Institutional Funding Per Donor for Action Contre la Faim

Source: Action Contre la Faim Financial Report 2007

Tackling Gender Issues: A Challenge in the Darfur Crisis for Action Contre la Faim and its Transatlantic Donors

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence— A Sensitive and Complex Protection Issue in the Darfur Context

Widespread conflict has plagued the Darfur region of Sudan since February 2003. This has created a real “protection crisis” with numerous violations of international humanitarian law, forced displacement and forced return, the destruction of villages and belongings and attacks on civilians (including humanitarian workers). Sexual and gender-based violence is an additional disturbing feature of the ongoing protection crisis. Women are the victims of rape and other human rights violations. However, while the existence of violence in Darfur is acknowledged by Sudanese society, the idea of sexual violence against women is categorically denied or taboo.

Since 2005, coordination mechanisms between NGOs, UN agencies and representatives of Sudanese ministries have been put in place. Even though the formal UN cluster mechanism is not yet established,³ coordination has been organized around theme-based working groups at field level. There are also general coordination meetings at field level. The Inter-Agency Steering Committee⁴ is run from Khartoum and is represented in each Darfur state.

³ As of this writing, the UN Country Team had recently voted that clusters would be formally introduced in Sudan. However, the details were not yet clear (one cluster for all Sudan or different ones for South Sudan and Darfur).

⁴ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. It is a forum involving the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners.

Since 2005, the Protection of Civilians department of the United Nations mission for Sudan (UNMIS/ POC) has led the protection working group in North and South Darfur. The protection sector holds regular coordination meetings with several working groups around child protection, general protection and sexual and gender-based violence. In West Darfur, the protection lead was given to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees because of its mandate and the presence of Chadian refugees in the West. However, in 2008, UNMIS was replaced by the United Nations African Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). There was no UN lead agency during the transitional period. This made the work of humanitarian actors involved in protection difficult, particularly because of pressure from the Government in South and North Darfur. According to the ECHO field expert in charge of protection issues, this gap in coordination was harmful to the collective learning process and made it difficult to follow up protection issues. At present, UNAMID is slowly implementing its activities and has added new people to the protection working groups. The increase in the number of actors has created confusion. This highlights how important it is to have clear mandates in order to have a successful coordination mechanism and to create an environment that makes lesson learning possible.

Funding Implications

OFDA has been particularly proactive on the issue of violence against women and has funded many initiatives since 2005. In addition, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives provided all the funds for the United Nations Development Program's activities on sexual and gender-based violence in Darfur in 2006.

OFDA's 2008 funding guidance for Darfur clearly states that "USAID/OFDA encourages partners to incorporate protection considerations into the design and implementation of all programs through the application of Protection Mainstreaming as a Cross-Cutting Theme, in order to help internally displaced persons and other vulnerable people to reduce or manage the risk of violence, abuse, harassment, and exploitation. [...] In particular, OFDA is interested in supporting programs that prevent and/or reduce the impact of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls in Darfur. Activities may include medical and psychosocial services for SGBV survivors [as well as] training programs that focus on women, youth, and children. Women need appropriate income-generation opportunities to reduce their exposure to risks."⁵

Since the beginning of Action Contre la Faim's Darfur mission, almost all of its nutritional programs have been funded by OFDA. Initially, Action Contre la Faim experienced low recovery rates in its therapeutic feeding programs⁶ and observed that this was partly due to the violence that had been inflicted on the mothers. Indeed, such violence often negatively affects the mother-child relationship (rejection of child, lack of care given by mother, etc.) and reduces the effectiveness of treatment that the child is receiving. As a result, Action Contre la Faim introduced a mental health component into its nutritional programs in 2005.

⁵ USAID/OFDA. Funding Guidance for Darfur, Sudan; February 2008.

⁶ Therapeutic feeding programs are implemented by NGOs to take care of severely malnourished children. In Darfur, the children are accompanied by their caretakers, usually their mothers.

Similarly, ECHO has been involved in protection and has provided a lot of support to various protection programs. In addition, ECHO has funded several health programs which take into account issues such as sexual and gender-based violence and reproductive health. In December 2006, ECHO carried out an evaluation of its strategy in Darfur since 2003. The evaluation underlined that individual care for victims of sexual and gender-based violence is provided in most camps for internally displaced persons.

Contrary to other countries, in Darfur, ECHO only funds Action Contre la Faim programs in the sectors food security and water, sanitation and hygiene.

Men Who are Idle—Another Gender Issue in Darfur

After more than four years of conflict and the displacement of millions of people, Darfur's society has been significantly weakened. Men have endured unemployment and inactivity in displacement camps and feel neglected and helpless. They are no longer able to play their traditional role and have thus been losing their social identity. In addition, a significant proportion of men have been cut off from their families as they have stayed in their home areas in order to protect their land.

Though the issue of gender is generally raised to highlight the importance of taking women's roles into account in programs, Action Contre la Faim also has difficulty integrating men in its nutritional and food security programs in Darfur. Many of the organization's programs in Darfur concern women, because of their relationship to food and childcare. However, in the current social climate, this can create tension and discord within households and can lead to further domestic violence and divorce.

OFDA has also tackled the issue of involving men in programs. OFDA's funding guidance for Darfur 2008 states that "Nutrition education is an integral part of any successful nutrition proposal to OFDA. Nutrition education should focus not only on women, but also on men, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and other stakeholders."⁷

Contextual and Institutional Factors Inhibiting the Implementation of Gender Lessons

A Difficult Context Hampers Gender and Protection Initiatives

Limited Room for Maneuver within Projects Due to Security Constraints

The security situation in Darfur has deteriorated considerably for humanitarian actors since the beginning of the conflict, as they are increasingly the target of attacks. Action Contre la Faim was itself violently attacked in December 2006. As a result, the organization restructured its project management system to include more 'remote control' management.

⁷ OFDA (2008) Funding guidance Darfur 2008, p. 2.

In such a context, the possibility of working in close proximity to the local population and carrying out needs analyses or in-depth diagnoses using participatory methods is very difficult, if not impossible. Without such preparatory work, however, it is very difficult to design projects which address the sensitive issue of gender in Darfur.

A Government That Does Not Accept Protection Activities

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Government of Sudan has been very reluctant about the involvement of international organizations in the Darfur crisis. This is especially true regarding protection issues. NGOs such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, Médecin Sans Frontières, and the International Refugee Committee have faced difficulties because of their advocacy on protection and sexual and gender-based violence issues. The Government's position became even harder in the middle of 2008 when the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court applied for an arrest warrant for Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, the president of Sudan, for genocide⁸, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Since 2008, the Government of Sudan has opposed protection activities in South Darfur. The situation is a little better in North Darfur, where protection programs are still running.

Lack of Operational Capacity, Experience, and Coordination Between the Three Darfur States

At the beginning of 2006, the signature of the Darfur Peace Agreement created hope that the conflict might be resolved and enable better access to the population. However, parties failed to implement the agreement and since July 2006 insecurity and displacements have increased and humanitarian actors have faced more and more difficulties in implementing their programs. As a result, ECHO is not currently in a strong position with regard to selecting projects in Darfur. On the one hand, programs are difficult to implement and access problems often have a negative impact on the quality of programs. On the other hand, there is more money available than operational capacity in the field, which means that ECHO can only work with a limited number of partners. As a consequence, ECHO is often less demanding with regard to projects than it is in other contexts and gender issues are not considered of primary importance. However, ECHO hopes to improve the quality of the projects it finances in 2009, and particularly for projects in camps where access is less of a problem.

Another issue highlighted by ECHO is the high turnover within NGO teams, with expatriate staff staying in the field for nine months on average. Such a high turnover prevents effective lesson learning. The ECHO experts interviewed felt that “they have to keep going back to square one.”⁹ What is more, expatriates are often young and inexperienced. Despite their enthusiasm and technical competence, their lack of humanitarian expertise often limits their vision of what contributes to the quality of a project and the place of gender issues within it.

Finally, OFDA and ECHO staff reported that there is not enough sharing of experiences between the three Darfur states and this hampers the learning process. Coordination mecha-

⁸ This arrest warrant was issued in early 2009.

⁹ Interview by the author with the ECHO field expert in Darfur, October 2008.

nisms are not used to their full potential in this respect. However, they also recognize that travel and coordination meetings are significantly hampered by operational difficulties and a hostile government.

Transatlantic Donors and Action Contre la Faim: Different Approaches to Gender

Changing Attitudes within ECHO with Respect to Gender

As discussed in more detail in the summary chapter, ECHO has a weak gender culture. In Darfur, the technical assistants confirmed that ECHO does not have a gender culture and this is fully felt at field level. One of the technical experts interviewed pointed out that, “Only 18% of ECHO field experts are women,”¹⁰ and added that “gender should not be limited to a bracket in the single form¹¹ but should be present throughout the proposal.” The experts interviewed are in favor of a complete change of approach. For them, taking gender into account is a question of good practice which should be part of the ‘spirit’ of the program in order to ensure its overall quality. The experts also recognize that some progress is being made at ECHO in Brussels, with, for example, a guideline on protection soon to come out.

USAID/OFDA: Mainstreaming Gender throughout the Organization

Within USAID, various publications and studies show the organization’s commitment to gender and related protection issues, especially in development. Gender issues have been mainstreamed throughout the organization in different ways (training, guidelines, scoring criteria for proposals, etc). For example, in the OFDA guidelines for unsolicited proposals and reporting, one section is dedicated to cross-cutting themes. It states that “Cross-cutting themes are used to describe a topic, activity, or population that do not apply to any one sector or intervention exclusively but are common throughout a humanitarian response. [...] OFDA expects that protection and gender will be addressed in most applications.”¹² Thus, protection and gender are noticeably more emphasized than other cross-cutting issues. As mentioned above, the ECHO proposal template is more silent on this issue.

OFDA believes that a stand-alone gender policy or mere lip service is not as strong as mainstreaming and institutionalizing gender issues throughout the office operations, particularly since there are already many well known and accepted gender policies in the humanitarian area. OFDA supports and references these documents in its publications and guidelines.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The single form is the form that has to be used to present proposals to ECHO. Last version 27/1½007. To consult the single form: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/about/actors/fpa/single_form_en.pdf

¹² USAID/OFDA. Guidelines for unsolicited proposals and reporting, Dec 2006.

Action Contre la Faim's Perception of Donors' Interest in Gender

At Action Contre la Faim, gender is not seen as a priority emphasized by donors, but as a mere paragraph in proposals. In the organization's donor matrix, which includes all the elements demanded by donors, gender is not even mentioned. In mid-2008, the donor relations department managed to get new cross-cutting issues included in the matrix. To do this, they consulted the operational departments about what they felt should be taken into account when addressing proposals to donors. Several new issues arose, such as HIV/Aids, the food crisis and nutritional policies, but gender was again never mentioned. ECHO and OFDA are both perceived to have a similar level of interest in gender. Only DFID is frequently mentioned as a donor with a real gender approach.

Informal Approaches to Gender Issues at Action Contre la Faim France

Several documents tackling gender issues are available in the international Action Contre la Faim network. A policy document for the international network entitled "Integrating Gender - Mainstreaming in Action Against Hunger—Action Contre la Faim—Accion Contre la Hambre" was produced in 2004. This policy included a list of proposed objectives for 2004. The non-French members of the international network, especially Action Contre la Faim UK, played an essential role in pushing gender approaches within the network and the design of a gender policy.

A report entitled "Women and Hunger—women play a central role in the fight against hunger" illustrates the specific risks and capacities women encounter in dealing with food shortages. This includes an analysis of the general workload women have at household and community levels, and analyzes how this workload is affected by particular crises. "How, for example, does conflict, a financial crisis or drought affect relationships within the household? What do they mean for women—as both wives and mothers? Can outsiders support gender roles exposed to an extreme situation, and if so, how best can we do so?"¹³ In addition, some publications about other topics such as Water and HIV/Aids address gender issues. Also, the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene department has produced its own policy that includes a gender approach.

These documents could be seen as proof that Action Contre la Faim France is genuinely concerned about gender issues. However, according to management staff, Action Contre la Faim France is not really proactive in this area. Staff also agreed that, contrary to NGOs from the English-speaking world, French NGOs generally do not tend to take gender issues into account systematically, and Action Contre la Faim France is no exception to the rule. There is no formal attitude to gender within Action Contre la Faim France over and above having gender balanced teams at headquarters and in country offices.

Action Contre la Faim International Network's 2004 gender policy is not very well known within Action Contre la Faim France. It appears that, within Action Contre la Faim France, the professional experience of individual members of staff determines the extent to which gen-

¹³ Action Contre la Faim—Hunger Watch. "Women and Hunger—Women play a central role in the fight against hunger."

der is taken into account. Those who are the most committed are former employees of OXFAM or Action Contre la Faim's London office.

The Action Contre la Faim staff interviewed felt that there was a need to raise gender awareness within their organization and to develop guidelines and training sessions as they are not yet equipped to incorporate a real gender approach in project designs.

On the other hand, it should be noted that Action Contre la Faim is trying to gender-balance its teams, which is especially hard to do in humanitarian settings. Indeed, Action Contre la Faim has established human resource management policies (recruitment, salary policy, preventing abuse of power) for national staff to guarantee equal treatment of men and women.

Tools for Improving the Implementation of Lessons Learned— What Works and What Does Not

Action Contre la Faim's Program Evaluations: Limited Impact

Evaluations are the main tool commonly used to learn lessons. In this chapter, the different evaluations carried out in Darfur are reviewed in order to analyze their impact concerning gender.

Action Contre la Faim's guidelines for external evaluations are based on the OECD DAC¹⁴ criteria of relevance/appropriateness, coverage, impact, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and coherence, adding two criteria, namely cross-cutting issues (including gender equality) and monitoring. Since 2006, there have been four external evaluations of the organization's Darfur mission, including projects funded by ECHO. However, there have not been any evaluations of OFDA-funded programs. External evaluations are usually requested by Action Contre la Faim field teams and results are communicated to the donors. Thus far, every operational sector has been evaluated and gender has always figured in these evaluations, because it was included in the terms of reference of the evaluations. The conclusions have sometimes been quite critical (cf. Box 1).

Concerning the mid-term evaluation of the food security program, the then program coordinator reported that no specific action plan for gender was implemented in response to the evaluator's criticisms or the recommendations that were made. One of the obstacles which prevented these recommendations from being implemented was clearly the security situation which made it impossible for the teams to increase their presence in the field. However, it is also interesting to note that the project donors, DFID and WFP, did not react to evaluation results on gender. This lack of reaction no doubt contributed to the fact that the recommendations were not followed up.

In addition, Action Contre la Faim staff stressed that the organization has no formal mechanisms for taking evaluation recommendations into account, which can be a weakness in some

¹⁴ Within the OECD, the Commission in charge of development aid (DAC) developed this framework of 7 criteria. Originally designed for development programs, they are commonly used for humanitarian programs.

Box 1. Extracts about Gender from Evaluation Documents

End of Project Evaluation—Water Program in North and South Darfur States—December 2007

“It is noted that neither North Darfur nor South Darfur Water and Sanitation sectors plans have anything to say about gender: either the specific needs of women, or the role of women in decision making and planning. The 2008 Action Contre la Faim draft strategy is equally silent.

[...] During the meetings with Water Point Committees trained by Action Contre la Faim before the security crisis, a few women took active part in the discussions and were active in the management of the water. [...] With the community modality, it appears that women have been excluded from effectively participating in the management of a water point, especially the Operation and Maintenance.¹ Yet, as women and children are the ones drawing water, they need to be more involved in being mobilized to better manage the segregation between humans and animals, as well as the collection, transportation and storage of water.”

Mid-term External Evaluation—Distributions of Food and Agricultural Inputs to Conflict-Affected Populations of North Darfur through New Modalities of Intervention—2007

“[...] Action Contre la Faim was fully aware about the pivotal role played by women in food management. Nevertheless, the evaluation comes out with the conclusion that Action Contre la Faim failed in giving significant space to women participation in the distribution process as well as in the remote control and communication system: Women haven’t been consulted to define specific vulnerability among the communities, both in camps and in rural areas and Action Contre la Faim didn’t ensure women were properly informed about their entitlement. While Action Contre la Faim South Darfur has put a special emphasis on collecting women opinion during post-distribution monitoring (PDM), North Darfur report reflects little concern for it. FA/FS team (expatriate and national staff) in North Darfur is male orientated and we do believe the presence of female staff would be of great benefit for those sectors of intervention.”

¹ Operation and Maintenance (O&M) refers to all activities needed to operate and manage water supply and sanitation systems.

cases. In general, recommendations are taken into account by program managers in new proposals, but this is a question of individual initiative.

To conclude, it is difficult to establish how much evaluations have contributed to promoting gender issues. It is important to note that the terms of reference of the evaluations do take gender into account. However, it would appear that none of the evaluations carried out in Darfur led to any genuine changes on the question of gender even if it was the object of criticism and recommendations. A certain number of obstacles have made it difficult to take up recom-

mendations. First, instability and insecurity in Darfur do not allow for stable processes to be implemented. Second, the formal processes for implementing recommendations within Action Contre la Faim and the donors concerned (i.e. ECHO, DFID, CIDA) need to be reinforced.

The Difficulty of Evaluating the Impact of Donors' Field Strategy Documents

OFDA has published a strategy document for its implementing partners that “provides guidance to award applicants for humanitarian activities in Darfur.”¹⁵ This document is very detailed and gives information about the type of activities which are financed for each sector. As mentioned above, OFDA's Funding Guidance for 2008 focuses both on protection activities linked to sexual and gender-based violence and, in the nutrition section, on the importance of targeting men in nutritional education actions. The existence of such a document will hopefully encourage good practice within Action Contre la Faim.

ECHO, on the other hand, did not have any documents of this kind until recently. The main reference documents were the Global Plan for Sudan, which has a section on Darfur, and an Operational Strategy for Sudan, which was not very detailed. Its Operational Strategy for 2008 states that “cross-cutting issues, such as the environment, child protection, gender and HIV/Aids will receive special attention” without any further guidance or recommendations to the reader. Indeed, one of the main criticisms made in the evaluation of ECHO's programs in Darfur 2006 is that its strategic document is too general and that it does not “provide the implementing partners at field level or the evaluators with a sufficient sense of DG ECHO priorities or of activities it wants to promote.”¹⁶

In response to this finding, ECHO has produced a document called Operational recommendations for proposals for humanitarian projects in Sudan for 2009. This document has the same sector-based approach as OFDA funding guidance documents. It includes a specific section about Sudan divided into three sub-sections: a) Water, sanitation and hygiene, b) Health and nutrition, and c) Food assistance and short-term food security. It is worth mentioning that it includes very little about cross-cutting issues except the environment. The word gender never appears. This absence of any reference to gender is clearly not the best way to encourage implementing partners to develop the gender component of their programs.

Presence of Donors in the Field: An Important Factor in Raising Awareness about Gender among Action Contre La Faim Field Staff

ECHO has set up a permanent office in Darfur, staffed with two Technical Assistants, who are responsible for different areas of Darfur (North and South/West) and different sectors of intervention. The relation between ECHO and its operational partners is mainly managed at this level. ECHO's strategy clearly states that “proposals should be submitted to Brussels headquarters after having been discussed at field level.”¹⁷ Consequently, Action Contre la Faim staff

¹⁵ USAID/OFDA, “Funding Guidance for Darfur, Sudan,” February 2008

¹⁶ ECHO, “Evaluation of DG ECHO Financed Operations relating to the Darfur Crisis,” Dec 2006. SHER Ingenieurs-consultants, sa.

¹⁷ ECHO, “Operational recommendations for proposals for humanitarian projects in Sudan 2009.”

in charge of Darfur at French headquarters often have very little or no direct contact with donors. This mechanism was perceived as very positive in the evaluation of operations funded by ECHO in Darfur 2006.

Until the summer of 2008, OFDA also had offices in Darfur, in Nyala and El Fasher. Interaction between OFDA and Action Contre la Faim took place at this level. Due to a series of security events including the murder of a USAID employee, OFDA decided to leave Darfur and limit their presence to Khartoum only.

Coordination meetings between donors are regularly organized in Khartoum and in Darfur. Gender is rarely discussed in these meetings. In Khartoum, the meetings are often held to share information between donors (ECHO/OFDA/DFID and other bilateral donors), whereas in the field they consist of bilateral discussions between ECHO and OFDA about implementing partners, projects and any gaps or constraints that exist.

In conclusion, ECHO and OFDA field experts play a determining role through their close relations with Action Contre la Faim program coordinators. There are four ways in which they can help their partners' programs evolve:

- 1) Commenting on partners' proposals;
- 2) Conducting field visits to monitor projects;
- 3) Participating in coordination meetings;
- 4) Carrying out joint needs assessments in the field with partners which have a gender perspective (e.g. in the selection of people to interview).

There have been a variety of occasions on which field experts have pushed for gender to be given greater consideration in Action Contre la Faim programs, whether this was when reading proposals (cf. box 2).

When we referred to the example above about women in Darfur not having time to participate in water committees in our conversation with OFDA staff, they stressed that it is an excellent example of why it is so crucial to be able to monitor programs with beneficiaries and local populations in the field. This could have revealed other reasons for the women's non-participation. Gender quotas are not effective if they lead to the participation of some token woman or a prominent individual's wife who does not represent most women's interests or issues.

In the specific example of the Kass program illustrated in box 2, according to Action Contre la Faim staff, when ECHO asked for the role of women in the household to be given a more prominent place in a proposal, this involved only changing the proposal, rather than the project design. Indeed, Action Contre la Faim staff considers that gender is integrated rather informally in their programs in Darfur. It is not an end in itself but rather an operational need. In other words, Action Contre la Faim does not design projects to specifically tackle gender problems in Darfur, but to respond to people's needs. Thus, Action Contre la Faim focuses its initial assessment on households and vulnerable groups rather than on women and men.¹⁸ Conse-

¹⁸ Interview of the author with Action Contre la Faim food security adviser for Darfur at Action Contre la Faim headquarters, October 2008.

Box 2.

Example of comments from ECHO field expert about gender in the first version of a proposal for an integrated water & sanitation and food security program in Kass:

“Gender: even though the proposal is very comprehensive in many ways, there is a total and absolute absence of any kind of gender analysis. You have not even mentioned this point under chapter 5.3 where it is explicitly mentioned. Of course, the gender-focus should guide the development of an entire proposal but not many agencies do that. But they put at least something somewhere while Action Contre la Faim managed to ignore the issue completely. Given the importance of women for the household food security as well as all issues related to family hygiene and handling of water, you have to add a gender focus both on the assessment/findings as well as on the involvement of the beneficiaries and the design of the activities.”¹

Example of comments about gender in the first version of a proposal for the rehabilitation of the Wadi Halouf earth-dam: (The comments came as a result of findings by OFDA teams both in the field and at headquarters.)

“Please provide information on the anticipated gender breakdown of the unskilled laborers. Will both men and women be employed for these activities? How will Action Contre la Faim guard against violence against any workers, particularly women, involved in these activities? Also, if women will be employed, what will Action Contre la Faim do to ensure that this work will not negatively affect the nutritional status of their children? OFDA has seen that an increased workload and working away from the home have a negative impact on care and feeding practices for children under five.”²

Report by the ECHO technical assistant after a field visit to the Kass water and sanitation project:

“A water point committee meeting took place during the field visit. No women were present at the meeting despite the fact that, in theory, the committee has female members. I asked the Action Contre la Faim staff why there were no women present and they answered that the women did not have the time to take part in the meeting. This kind of answer would have been inconceivable with other partners: water point committee meetings would not have taken place without the women.”

[...] During the meetings with Water Point Committees trained by Action Contre la Faim before the security crisis, a few women took active part in the discussions and were active in the management of the water. [...] With the community modality, it appears that women have been excluded from effectively participating in the management of a water point, especially the Operation and Maintenance.¹ Yet, as women and children are the ones drawing water, they need to be more involved in being mobilized to better manage the segregation between humans and animals, as well as the collection, transportation and storage of water.”³

¹ E-mail exchange of the author with ECHO field expert, October 2008

² E-mail exchange of the author with Action Contre la Faim water and sanitation coordinator, October 2008.

³ E-mail exchange of the author with the ECHO field expert, October 2008.

quently, if women are the direct beneficiaries of several Action Contre la Faim food security projects, it is because they were identified as the members of the household in charge of feeding their families, or of growing vegetables.

No Consensus about the Importance of Female Staff for the Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming

Several people interviewed mentioned that gender issues are more vigorously promoted by female expatriates in the field. Thus, a former male expatriate in Darfur stressed that the only time when Action Contre la Faim had problems because gender issues were not sufficiently taken into account in a proposal was when a woman was appointed as an ECHO Technical Assistant in Darfur and that the only evaluation which pointed out that women were not sufficiently taken into account in food security programs in Darfur was led by a woman. Similarly, the current ECHO Technical Assistant stressed that the small number of female expatriate staff in Darfur limits the extent to which Action Contre la Faim is able to tackle gender properly in the day-to-day implementation of its programs. OFDA staff stressed that there is a real need to train male aid workers about gender, but added that untrained female workers can easily overlook gender issues, too.

However, not all interviewees agreed on this point. As previously mentioned, Action Contre la Faim is trying to establish a balance between male and female national staff. As a result, among the 23 aid workers involved in water and sanitation programs in Darfur, nine are women.¹⁹ In addition, some Action Contre la Faim staff argue that the male/female ratio amongst expatriate staff is highly variable and some female staff at headquarters recognize that training on gender could be of great interest to them. As a matter of interest, when you visit Action Contre la Faim headquarters to find out about gender, you will be sent to a man who is recognized as the “gender” person.

In short, not only the gender, but also the professional experience of individual members of staff determines the extent to which gender is taken into account.

Conclusion

The Darfur case study shows that the opportunities for implementing lessons learned can be very limited due to the context. In Darfur the gender question is very closely linked to other themes, such as protection. It is therefore difficult to look at lessons learned on gender without also taking into account those learned on protection. More generally, it would appear that in complex humanitarian contexts, it is not enough to consider lessons learned in one area in isolation.

In Darfur, some political and operational factors hinder the implementation of lessons learned. At a political level, humanitarian actors are limited in their commitment to protection issues by the Government of Sudan, which does not allow them to implement related pro-

¹⁹ Source: Internal statistics given to the author by the Action Contre la Faim human resources management department in Sudan.

grams. In other aspects, the complexity and turbulence of the relations between the Government of Sudan and the international community has led to changes in the set-up of the United Nations presence in the country. For example, the UN mission in Sudan (UNMIS) has been replaced in Darfur by an integrated mission with the African Union (UNAMID). Consequently, the mandate, role and responsibilities of United Nations agencies have been vague, creating coordination gaps between the different humanitarian actors. These gaps have been harmful to the learning process.

At an operational level, the constraints that are inherent to humanitarian action are very pronounced in the Darfur context: the young age, lack of experience and high turn-over of expatriate staff, the security problems and the difficulties of gaining access to the population. These operational constraints are a serious obstacle to the learning process for donors and their partners. Also, the lack of coordination between the three Darfur states slows down the process.

In such a political and operational context, the implementation of lessons depends strongly on donors' field presence and human interaction. These factors are one of the real strengths of ECHO and OFDA. They are both present at the field level and are able to provide guidance to their partners via their field strategy documents and the advice provided by their field experts. This enables them to be involved and have an influence at each phase of the project cycle: initial assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation.

However, with regard to the specific issue of gender, at an institutional level, ECHO, OFDA and their partner, Action Contre la Faim, do not have a real gender policy defining their level of commitment to the topic. However, an absence of a policy does not necessarily mean that there is no commitment at all, as the example of OFDA demonstrated.

Shared or Shirked Responsibilities?

How should gender issues be promoted in such a context? Who is responsible for making sure lessons learned about gender are incorporated—donors or implementing partners? To improve the way that gender issues are dealt with, three issues stand out. The first of these is the idea that responsibility for this question should be shared. Both donors and implementing agencies need to define their own gender policies and establish what level of priority the issue has. Then, to raise awareness amongst staff, the necessary tools need to be developed, perhaps via coordinated/joint training sessions. The second issue is that of donor field presence. ECHO and OFDA should maintain their field presence and close collaboration with their partners which has had a positive influence in the past. Finally, the third issue concerns the composition of expatriate team. Making donor and NGO expatriate teams gender-balanced could encourage field experts to take gender issues more seriously.