

Governance and Women's Human Rights

Women's leadership and participation: gender equality and rights in the SDGs

Eleanor Blomstrom - WEDO with contributions from Marcela Ballara - ICAE

"...the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields" - CEDAW, Art. 3

Gender equality is a widely recognized global goal. It is not yet reality – and will not be as long as discrimination, restricted rights and access to services and decision-making spheres, and persistent violence persists. Reaching the goal of gender equality will require transformation of laws, policies, institutional and societal norms and behaviours – and progress toward equality will therefore bring with it risks, as well as profound opportunities for the betterment of all of society.)

Achieving gender equality cannot be separated from human rights. Women's rights are human rights and must be respected, promoted and protected by all actors in all sectors.

And neither gender equality nor human rights can be separated from the concept and process of sustainable development, with its interlinked social, economic and environmental dimensions. Gender equality is a driver of sustainable development – and vice versa.

The policy framework

Internationally, a strong framework for gender equality exists – both legal and normative - with a base in human rights, from the Universal Declaration on Human Rights to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women to the Beijing Platform for Action. A strong framework also exists for sustainable development, including Agenda 21, the Rio Conventions on biodiversity, desertification and climate change, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, as well as the recent Rio+20 outcome agreement. With the understanding that one cannot be achieved without the other, sustainable development and gender equality/women's rights policies must work together.

Sustainable development agreements should take a gender-sensitive human rights approach to promote more effective policy, as well as to fulfil globally agreed obligations, but in the past 20 years, "a gender-sensitive understanding of human rights has been only inconsistently integrated into sustainable development agreements" (WEDO 2013). The lack of attention to the social dimension is common in environmental and sustainable development policies, and it continues to be a potential gap going into post-2015 and post-Rio+20 discussions. It is a shortcoming often justified by calling attention to the technical nature of the issues. For example, in the climate convention (UNFCCC), gender was absent in the outcome texts from 1992 to 2009. It is important for governments and the women's community to learn from the climate change experience and take measures to avoid a repeat in future sustainable development agreements. Technical does not mean there is no human face to the issue; and as women encounter challenges in breaking into science and technology fields yet have valuable knowledge and expertise, incorporating gender equality considerations and social justice should be a central component of such agreements and policies.

As the world discusses and develops the next global development framework (Post-2015), including a possible set of sustainable development goals, it is critical to recognize and draw

upon the policy framework (see Box X). While sustainable development agreements do not necessarily address women's rights and gender equality comprehensively and need further strengthening, it is also critical to acknowledge the women's advocacy, organizing and expertise that made the inclusion of existing text possible and to continue those efforts.

Box X - Framework linking women's rights/human rights/sustainable development

- 1945 UN Charter, "respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (Article 1, paragraph 3).
- 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), "Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UDHR Preamble, paragraph 6). It affirms respect for human rights "without distinction," including based on race, sex, language, or religion
- 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Ratified by 187 out of 193 States as of December 2012. Also known as the International Bill of Rights for Women.
 - Article 14 highlights issues of environment and sustainable development
 - 2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
 - To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels;
 - (g) To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes;
 - (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.
- 1992 Agenda 21 (Chapter 24 on Women and women integrated), Rio Declaration (Principle 20), from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
- 1992 UN Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- 1993 World Conference on Human Rights
- 1994 International Conference on Population and Development's (ICPD's) Programme of Action highlights the key influence of women's reproductive health and rights on environmental protection and sustainable development. " (Paragraph 1.2).
- 1994 UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
- 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), "Governments must not only refrain from violating the human rights of all women, but must work actively to promote and protect these rights" (BPfA Chapter 4, Section I, paragraph 215). Strategic Objectives K and C address women and the environment and women's access to health care.
- 1997 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions on Women and the Environment

3. In designing and implementing environmental programmes and policies, including those related to the implementation of Agenda 21, 14/ and the Beijing Platform for Action at the national and local levels, all responsible actors should ensure that a gender perspective is fully integrated into them, through the development and application of analytical tools and methodologies for gender-based analysis. Monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be in place to assess gender mainstreaming and its impact.

- 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)
- 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in its confirmation of the rights of indigenous peoples, it strengthens a rights-based development agenda.
- 2012 Rio+20, the Future We Want (UN Conference on Sustainable Development)
- Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolutions on human rights and the environment and climate change (e.g., HRC Resolutions 7/2, 10/4, 16/11, and 18/22)

Also, the link has been made through gender mainstreaming plans developed for some agencies and issue areas: the 2006 UN Environment Programme Gender Plan of Action, the 2009 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Gender Plan of Action, and the 2011 Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) Advocacy Policy Framework on Gender

Women's Rights, the Environment and a Sustainable Development Agenda

As codified in the Beijing Declaration, women's rights are human rights. Human rights include the right to food, water, shelter, security, freedom from gender-based violence, etc., as well as the right to political participation and access to information and justice. The current development framework, and specifically the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), falls short of addressing human rights and other comprehensive structural issues. But in setting goals to address issues of gender equality and women's empowerment, the success of the MDGs necessarily rely on rights being respected; the new framework must make rights explicit. For example, the MDG3 indicator on education for girls is theoretically a good measure (although assessing achievement needs to be based on quality, attendance and future schooling as opposed to simply enrolment), but promoting equal access/enrolment in school is difficult when women's rights to water and food are violated due to privatization of water sources or land grabbing and insecure land tenure (AWID 2008). At the same time, people may not be as well equipped to fully exercise their rights without quality education (See box Y on lifelong learning). The complexity of linkages between rights and sustainable development goals must be incorporated, and human rights need to be the basis of any new framework.

The distinct, compartmentalized ("siloed") nature of the MDGs has drawn much criticism. Environmental sustainability (MDG7) is a cross-cutting issue like gender equality. It merits a goal – or even several – to focus on key environmental issues that contribute to sustainable development. But additionally, the fundamental understanding that resources are limited and must be managed with a sharp focus on intergenerational equity and justice needs to be integrated throughout a post-2015 sustainable development agenda and any development goals. The agenda also needs to tie in the concepts of sustainable consumption and production, including the different responsibilities for action in different countries. A new agenda will need to track the progress toward environmental sustainability, recognizing the intricate relationship to global poverty, health, food security and marginalized populations. For example, as biodiversity and forest cover is lost, people dependent on forest services for their livelihoods are further marginalized, increasing inequalities, losing access to traditional foods, lands, seeds and customs that sustain communities, and likely increasing migration and the population of urban slums. It is important to continue to work toward achieving MDGs 3 and

7, but the limited indicators and targets hamper understanding the nuanced layers of gaps and achievements.

Achieving gender equality and sustainable development requires taking steps to change - to transform – the status quo and ensure that rights, access, control, equity, equality and justice are core tenets in a new development framework. Women's rights and gender equality advocates and activists ask, *What is the value in a new set of goals, even if they are "sustainable" development goals, if they are implemented within a system that perpetuates inequalities (social, political and economic) within and between countries, that legitimizes inequitable power structures, that prioritizes economic growth and corporate profit over development and well-being, that insists on trade restrictions and perverse subsidies that penalize local (sustainable) production and innovative solutions from the ground up?*

Box Y The role of lifelong learning

Box Y

“Only when adults have agency as learners, will we get good nutrition, clean water, improved health outcomes and better governance. Therefore, lifelong learning, as a human right demand, should be an integral part of the definition of a new development paradigm” – Marcela Ballara, ICAE

When discussing women’s leadership and participation, education and learning are central. Lifelong learning incorporates traditional education but extends beyond it to encompass all forms of education (non-formal and popular education) and the different learning needs at different stages of the life-cycle. Learning and education have links to economic power; women in the informal economy are least likely to have access to literacy or lifelong learning.

Adult learning plays a catalytic role in the achievement of sustainable development for all, including for models of consumption and production that foster gender, social and environmental justice. Lifelong learning policies and practices are inevitably involved in responses to all of these issues, and a fundamental pre-requisite for the achievement of a range of other social policy goals. When recognizing and assessing learning needs, central goals will be equality of access for women, for indigenous peoples, and for all at risk of discrimination.

Education has proven to be a key issue for poverty eradication and an accelerator for development especially for groups that face multiple forms of discrimination. To ensure gender equality, women’s rights and empowerment, education must be included as a cross-cutting issue for the post-2015 development framework and the possible SDGs, with lifelong learning explicitly included.

Recommendations

- Include a lifelong learning target that covers each of the phases of the education life-cycle: early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary, as well as adult and young people's education
- Recognize the different learning needs at different stages of the life-cycle
- Recognize the need for equality of access for women, for indigenous peoples, and for all at risk of discrimination

Checking the box: gender equality

In international agreements and conferences, language on gender equality has carved out a place. Or, rather, advocates have carved out a place for gender equality to be considered, described, written into policy and then implemented.

As gender equality becomes a ubiquitous phrase, it offers great opportunity for women and men and is testament to the advocacy of women and gender activists at all levels and in all sectors. Bringing gender equality as a goal/as an expectation/as a priority in the post-2015 development agenda and the potential sustainable development goals can be very positive, as long as the rights component is not lost. Including and aiming for gender equality can have great impact when women are explicitly recognized as leaders, change agents, decision-makers and beneficiaries of policies and programs; actions can raise awareness, bring women's traditional and expert knowledge to policy and community discussions, improve educational opportunities and quality for girls, improve health access, provide better support for those caring for children, the sick and the elderly, focus on household energy, increase market access, push development of transportation alternatives, transform information sharing, prioritize safe and sustainable technology development, ensure safe spaces for women to speak their minds, fund projects, secure access to and control of credit – beyond microcredit, secure land tenure rights, expand social protection, improve access to decision-making and participation as decision-maker.

Such positive outcomes are important for women and the community at large. In most cases, it is women that are not ensured of their rights, it is women who are burdened with care work in addition to any other productive or reproductive work, it is women who suffer discrimination in education, finance, trade, health, institutions, and it is women who suffer physical violence.

But the ubiquity of 'gender equality' also brings risk. Implementation is lacking for gender equality, as evidenced in scores of reports, including those on MDG3. Women's human rights are not always understood as a component of gender equality. Even as the phrase becomes more accepted by governments worldwide, even many conservative governments, it may be losing its power. Gender equality risks becoming a phrase to be added to a list and checked off when it is included in text or when a woman participates in a meeting – even if that woman has no background in the subject or process and does not contribute a gender perspective. Gender equality also risks being demonized and relegated to a goal of interest only to women, or even resulting in backlash against and undermining of the women who challenge the status quo. Advocates and activists for gender equality must engage men and boys, and ensure that gender equality is understood as a means to better the lives of all of society. Further, gender equality risks becoming equated only with women's participation and gender balance. They are not one and the same. Gender balance or parity is a tool; it is part of a set of equity measures to overcome/overturn/transform the current male-dominated and patriarchal power structures. Other tools are necessary – including many in the list of opportunities of above.

The current trend to 'check a box' for gender equality is reductionist and threatens hard-fought gains by advocates and allies. Including the phrase still offers great opportunity to actually mainstream gender and make progress toward equality, but success will not be possible without the transformative measures recommended throughout the chapters ahead.

Participation and Leadership

Although Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration from 1992 states, “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development,” women’s full participation is yet to be achieved. Thus sustainable development is yet to be achieved. Participation and leadership are linked; with leadership crucial to shifting policies, laws, norms and behaviours. One only needs to look at statistics of male and female leaders to see that structural sex discrimination exists and that as a result of social construction, women are in a different space in terms of political power at all levels, from parliaments to local municipalities.

With the recent UNFCCC decision, “Promoting gender balance and improving the participation of women in UNFCCC negotiations and in the representation of Parties in bodies established pursuant to the Convention or the Kyoto Protocol”, the UNFCCC has taken an important step forward in recognizing that women’s participation is a key element to success in addressing climate change and in broader decision-making, and that gender-sensitive policies must be developed. **Just as important is the understanding that the decision does not go far enough.**¹ Gender balance, without complementary and targeted efforts to achieve gender equality, will not necessarily directly promote gender equality, accomplish fundamental changes in human behavior, nor lead to substantive progress in policies, programs and practices that benefit both women and men.

When discussing gender balance, it is important to unpack the idea. On a gender balanced committee, the members also need to be aware of the subject at hand and able to access the information. When women are routinely denied access to education and opportunities for community engagement because their rights to food, water and sexual and reproductive health services are not fulfilled, effective participation suffers. Thus, to support participation and leadership, as rights are being fulfilled, a concurrent stage is capacity building for women, in terms of content, technical issues, business practices and finance. And women (and men) need to be supported in their efforts by financial contributions for travel and per diem, and by child/elder care options that free some of women’s traditional care responsibilities.

Further, effective participation is inclusive and supports effective decision-making and leadership development. Daily life on this planet is a global concern incorporating a multitude of ecosystems, peoples and cultures. As such, it requires collective input in its management, protection, and ultimately, its sustainability. While there is not one specific women’s interest in terms of sustainable development, it can be argued that “the variety of women’s interests [in sustainable development] does not refute the claim that interests are gendered” (Phillips 1995:68). Women do not necessarily have specific leadership skills that will transform sustainable development (Phillips 1995:65), but greater diversity and different perspectives in all levels of decision-making lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Measuring progress in participation using top level indicators does not fully capture the degree of inequality or equality that women encounter at sub-national and local levels, which is important to understand and address the gaps and discrimination. A goal of equality is one

¹ For analyses of the UNFCCC Decision, see genderCC,

http://www.gendercc.net/fileadmin/inhalte/Dokumente/UNFCCC_conferences/COP18/Press_statement_Doha_GenderCC.pdf, WEDO, <http://www.wedo.org/news/the-doha-gaps-seeking-miracles-solidarity-and-good-old-fashioned-hope-to-fill-them>, GGCA, <http://us6.campaign-archive2.com/?u=512f29767f8439084da9be65e&id=f578b28192&e=f347865875>, UN Women, <http://www.unwomen.org/2012/12/cop-18-adopts-a-decision-promoting-gender-balance-in-climate-change-negotiations/>

that, when reached, will make the need for equity measures such as gender balance obsolete. The world is not yet there, but thoughtful, inclusive development of the Post-2015 framework and any new sustainable development goals has the potential to move the world forward.

Looking ahead

In a new development paradigm that includes gender equality as an outcome/goal, the international community must remain focused on achieving gender equality, incorporating realistic, challenging and aspirational aspects. Post-2015 has to include gender equality universally and comprehensively, encompassing much more complexity than the MDGs. Goals and targets for gender equality will need to recognize the different starting points of countries and the different paths necessary, while recognizing the many globally shared indicators of gender inequality. Almost all countries see gender inequality and discrimination in the pay gap, concentration of poverty among women and children, violence against women, lack of women in leadership roles, the unequal care burden, uneven childcare and maternity/paternity leave. Some countries may have additional gender issues linked to resource access and gender roles such as girls' time for and quality of education, access to sexual and reproductive health care, time spent fetching water, food and fuel, incidence of respiratory disease and death from indoor air pollution.

Gender equality, women's rights and sustainable development are intertwined with the concept of intergenerational justice. It necessarily means making changes in laws, policies and attitudes today that will bring about a world where gender equality is a reality, where rights, access and control over natural and financial resources is sustainable and a given for all.

References

Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). 2008. Women And The Millennium Development Goals. <http://www.awid.org/Library/Women-and-the-Millennium-Development-Goals>

forthcoming, Abigail E. Ruane, with Nicky Broeckhoven and Rachel Harris, WEDO, "Gender Equality, Human Rights and Sustainable Development at the United Nations: An Analysis of Agreed Language and a Strategy for Moving Forward"

IWHC, RESURJ, DAWN and YCSRR Analysis of Rio+20

MDG report 2012

UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2012