

Gender Mainstreaming Climate Change¹

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There is increasing high-level policy attention at global, regional and national levels to climate change – now widely recognized as one of the world’s major challenges with potential devastating long-term consequences if not adequately addressed in a timely manner. Effective responses require a holistic, multi-sectoral approach with focus not only on technical and economic aspects but also on socio-cultural perspectives. Explicit attention to gender equality is also important for effective and sustainable responses to climate change.

Climate change reduces agricultural productivity, impacts food security, constrains access to energy and increases natural disasters, and in the long run impacts on the overall security of families, communities and nations. Women and men in rural areas in many parts of the world have varying strategies to sustain livelihoods and access and use natural resources in different ways. Identifying and addressing potential impact

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of climate change requires improved understanding of the differences and inequalities between women and men in relation to natural resources management and livelihood strategies.

Poor women in developing countries are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change because of their productive responsibilities. In Africa, for example, women have primary responsibility for food security and the provision of water and energy for household use. Drought, deforestation and erratic rainfall negatively affect their ability to carry out these responsibilities. Women's time burdens increase where the quality and quantity of water and energy resources is depleted. Girls may have to drop out of school to help gather fuelwood and water, with long-term consequences for their education and future livelihoods. In many areas, women do not have equitable access to extension services, technology and credit and other essential resources.

Women should not, however, be perceived as solely victims of climate change. It is important to identify the capabilities and contributions of women as well as their vulnerabilities. Women are powerful agents of change with unique knowledge and expertise, especially at the grassroots level. In many areas, women play a leadership role in community resource management, for example, in planting and caring for seedlings and small trees on homestead woodlots and plantations on public lands. Overall, however, women tend to be underrepresented in decision-making on sustainable development, including climate change, and in many contexts are also excluded from awareness-raising, information dissemination and capacity-building opportunities which reduces their potential to contribute fully to efforts to address climate change.

INCREASING ATTENTION TO THE GENDER PERSPECTIVES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Member States of the United Nations have agreed to explicitly address the gender perspectives of climate change, providing a critical mandate for work at global, regional, national and local levels. The Commission on the Status of Women addressed climate change in 2002 when it focused on environmental management and the mitigation of natural disasters. The Commission called for action to:

“Mainstream a gender perspective into ongoing research by, inter alia, the academic sector on the impact of climate change, natural hazards, disasters and related environmental vulnerability, including their root causes, and encourage the application of the results of this research in policies and programmes” (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 2002, para 7c).

On a more general level, the General Assembly recently (2007) highlighted the need to involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels; integrate gender perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development; and strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels to assess the impacts of development and environmental policies on women.²

The Commission on the Status of Women returned to the issue of climate change in 2008 by identifying “The gender perspectives on climate change” as the emerging issue theme for its 52nd session. A well-attended interactive expert panel discussion resulted in a Moderator's Summary outlining key issues for attention.³ The panel discussion identified actions being taken to increase women's participation in climate change activities, including through awareness-raising and advocacy for involvement in climate change negotiations, and efforts to incorporate gender

perspectives in policy formulation and follow-up. The critical role of civil society organizations, particularly women's groups and networks, and the need for sustained support to their efforts, was highlighted. Examples of practical initiatives on the ground led by women included massive tree-planting efforts, household waste-recycling initiatives, and projects to produce fertilizers from organic waste.

Concern was expressed that gender equality has not been given sufficient attention in international negotiations on climate change. International instruments, such as the Kyoto Protocol and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), make no reference to gender aspects of climate change.

The recommendations arising from the panel discussion included the need to ensure that gender perspectives are integrated into all national policies and programmes on sustainable development, including those focused on mitigation and adaptation strategies, financial arrangements, technology development and capacity-building in the context of efforts to address climate change. Participants called for increased use of research on gender aspects of climate change, gender impact assessments, gender-sensitive indicators and gender-responsive budgeting, as well as improvements in use of sex-disaggregated data. Partnerships should be forged between international organizations, national mechanisms for gender equality, the scientific community and civil society to increase advocacy and support for the incorporation of gender equality perspectives in all areas of climate change efforts.

Considerable efforts have been made by a range of United Nations entities – including among others the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the International Food and Agricultural Development Organiza-

tion (IFAD) – to address the gender perspectives of climate change, in accordance with their specific mandates. Efforts have included research, data collection and development of methodologies and tools required to ensure effective gender mainstreaming in ongoing work on climate change, as well as programmes on the ground. An interagency information portal is being developed to provide an overview of the work of the United Nations system.⁴

IMPACTS TO ADDRESS IN RELATION TO FOOD SECURITY, ENERGY AND NATURAL DISASTERS

The important gender perspectives of the impact of climate change in three areas – food security, energy and natural disasters – need specific attention.

Food security is negatively impacted by climate change. Although women play a critical role in food production in many parts of the world, they face significant constraints which significantly limit their potential to ensure sustainable livelihoods and food security for households and communities. These constraints include persistent inequalities in relation to land rights and access to water; lack of access to agricultural inputs and credit; diversion of women's scarce time and labour from food to cash crop production; and acute labour shortages when men leave rural areas in search of employment. These constraints are exacerbated in periods of drought, erratic rainfall or floods resulting from climate change.

Men and women smallholders often cultivate different crops and have distinct knowledge on crop varieties and their suitability for local conditions. Women have unique knowledge on traditional seed varieties and cultivation practices and play key roles in the preservation of land and water resources which form the basis of efficient and sustainable food production. In many areas, women farmers conserve soil fertility

through traditional cropping methods that protect natural resources. Because women perform most of the work of cultivating, harvesting and processing, they also possess valuable knowledge about crop pests and ways of combating them. Efforts to conserve, manage and improve crop diversity and productivity, and reduce vulnerability to climate change, can only succeed if both women's and men's knowledge and roles are recognized.

The constraints faced by women in many parts of the world in their efforts to ensure food security, and to respond to the impacts of climate change, must be taken into account in all immediate responses to food crises and climate change. Equally important is the need to more systematically and effectively take the critical roles of women in food production into account and to specifically address their constraints in access to productive resources in long-term responses to climate change.

Energy crises resulting from climate change impact on the economic activity of rural women since inadequate access to energy increases women's workloads and makes agriculture less profitable. Agriculture remains a burdensome and inefficient activity for women in many parts of the world. Many of women's income-generating activities in rural areas, which are critical for household survival, require access to energy sources such as fuelwood and charcoal. Women and men have different roles in energy provision in rural areas. Women bear the main burden of providing household fuels such as firewood, dung and crop residue for cooking.

Production of biofuels may put pressure on common property resources which are an essential element in the livelihoods of poor rural women, pushing them into more marginal and less productive land, negatively affecting their ability to meet food provision responsibilities and impacting on climate change. Women may not be able to fully benefit from employment and

income-generating opportunities created by because of existing inequalities in access to resources such as land, water, credit and agricultural inputs.

An increase in incidence and impact of disasters over recent years has required significant responses with greater frequency and increasing costs. An increasing number of disasters are related to climate hazards – droughts, floods or storms. The importance of viewing disaster risk reduction efforts as an integral part of overall development strategies has been increasingly emphasized. Social and economic vulnerability to disasters is enhanced by population growth, urbanization, environmental degradation, poverty, inadequate planning processes, climate change and gender inequality. Poor countries and poor people in rich countries are more vulnerable to the impact of disasters and climate change. The great majority of people killed by disasters in recent decades were from low-income or lower-middle income groups. Disasters wipe out poverty reduction gains and push more people back into deep poverty, preventing the achievement of other Millennium Development Goals. Protecting development gains from impact of climate-related disasters is a critical development investment.

Natural hazards become disasters because of the vulnerabilities of societies. Where and how people live, how land and resources are managed, and how urban environments are planned all impact exposure and vulnerability to hazards. Adequate prevention and risk reduction are therefore critical for reducing the negative impacts of climate-related natural hazards. Work on disaster risk reduction over past decades, including in the context of implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-2015), has provided important methodologies and tools which could be effectively utilized in the context of combating climate change (United Nations 2005). Identifying and building on the

gains already made is critical and the accumulated knowledge and experience from disaster risk reduction efforts must be viewed as a tool for climate change adaptation, providing opportunities for immediate action to reduce the impact of climate-related disasters.

There has been increased attention to the gender perspectives of disaster risk reduction in recent years, stimulated by the growing evidence that women and men are affected by disaster differently.⁵ Pertinent examples include the fact that women made up the majority of those who lost their lives in the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, and that far more women than men died in the 2004 tsunami. Such evidence provides a strong rationale for increased attention to gender perspectives to ensure that the effectiveness of disaster prevention and response efforts is improved. Women are more vulnerable in disaster situations and have less opportunity to address the disaster risks in their lives. Women are, however, at the same time, a largely untapped resource of knowledge and experience which could be more effectively utilized. While efforts to mainstream gender perspectives in disaster risk reduction may create additional challenges in an already complex area, the potential rewards are considerable since attention to gender dimensions can significantly improve the effectiveness of disaster reduction efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

The important recommendations that already exist on gender equality, sustainable development and climate change – including on strengthening women's participation, on reducing their vulnerability, and on incorporating gender perspectives into all areas of work on climate change – have not been fully implemented. As a result, there has not been broad-based and sustained change in policies and legislation and in planning, implementation and evalu-

ation of activities on the ground. Gender perspectives have not been adequately taken into account in global discussions and negotiations on climate change and women's participation has not been significantly increased.

The work on translating policy commitments into action on the ground, through implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy, must be strengthened. The approaches, methodologies, and tools developed, as well as lessons learned and good practice examples generated in the process, should be broadly disseminated and replicated.

To move forward, sustained attention must be given to gender perspectives in ongoing policy development at all levels, including global-level negotiations. Research and data collection and awareness-raising on the gender perspectives of climate change, and the dissemination of findings, needs to be significantly increased in order to support systematic consideration of gender perspectives in global and national policy development and translation of policies into practice.

NOTES

1. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the United Nations.
2. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 62/137: Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (paragraph 7d).
3. See: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/52sess.htm>. for the Moderator's summary and other documentation.
4. See: www.un.org/womenwatch/.
5. See: Paper prepared by Carolyn Hannan for the "International Conference on Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction", Beijing China, 20-22 April 2009, at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/statements/speech2009/2009%20Disaster%20risk%20reduction%20China%20April.pdf>.

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