

**NOT YET PARADISE: GENDER, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN AFRICA**

Paper Presented at the Conference:

**Sustainable Development, Governance and Globalization
an African Forum on Strategic Thinking and Acting Towards the Earth Summit 2002 and
Beyond
(17th-20th September, 2001 Nairobi, Kenya)**

By

**Esther Mwangi
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University
emwangi@indiana.edu**

Not Yet Paradise: Women, Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa

Introduction:

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, affirmed women's critical contributions to environmental management and to development more generally. At this meeting, the global community adopted Agenda 21, which emphasized the role of women in sustainable development.

Women were considered a "major group" whose involvement was necessary to achieve sustainable development. Participation in decision-making and new forms of participation are the two elements of the major groups concept. Participation in decision-making refers to the active presence of major groups in the design, execution and monitoring of sustainable development activities at all levels. While the introduction of new forms of participation demands a continuous search for optimal mechanisms of engagement that are meaningful, influence outcomes and generate partnership.

The focus on increased and creative participation is not only a challenge to the global community to ensure that women are empowered, but also an admission that their inclusion in the decision making process is central to all efforts to achieve sustainable development. Not least because women are central to environmental management. Due to their responsibility for production, for example in arable and livestock farming, water collection and gathering firewood, wild plants and fruit, and in consumption like when making choices about what to produce or how to process waste, women are critical actors in environmental management. They therefore have an interest in ensuring an adequate supply of high quality natural resources.

However, present trends in land use such as commercialization, scarcity of and competition for natural resources as well as increasing environmental degradation, have an adverse impact on women. Sadly, women do not have sufficient autonomy to ensure that account is taken of their

needs and desires in the decision-making processes relating to these resources. Consequently the definition of gender relations, and the anticipation of the opportunities and problems relating to them are prerequisites of the more sustainable use and management of natural resources and of improvements in the position of women in general.

There is a compelling body of evidence that shows that gender inequalities undermine development. Societies that discriminate on the basis of gender pay a significant price in the well being of their people, in their economic growth, in their governance and in their ability to reduce poverty (World Bank, 2000). These costs are particularly large in low-income developing countries. Thus improving gender equality has to be part of any sustainable strategy for development.

The international community's focus on sustainable development, and its translations of sustainable development imperatives into action beneficial to women must take into consideration new trends and emerging realities in today's world. Globalization, a historical process that represents the increasing connectedness in the world's economy, cultures, and environment, has rapidly become the defining context of international relations this past decade. It has specific implications for the environment, for equality among nations and more generally for sustainable development. Yet the UNCED process at Rio did not take into account these emerging trends and implications. The Earth Summit, 2002 provides an opportunity for integrating gendered perspectives on globalization into the longstanding discourse on sustainable development. At this summit the values of social justice, of equality, of environmental equality must be reiterated to achieve a caring earth and to sustain the vision of the earthly paradise that the concept of sustainable development ultimately suggests.

This paper addresses the gender-environment-sustainable development nexus in Africa. It discusses these linkages within an increasingly global context. The impacts of globalization were

not addressed at Rio, yet it is self-evident that globalization poses a serious challenge, perhaps a real contradiction to the concept and practice of sustainable development. The paper talks about successes and challenges in implementing Agenda 21 in Africa, and provides insights into cross-cutting strategies that may help renew efforts to strengthen African women's ongoing contributions to environment and sustainable development in Africa.

Women and environment in Africa:

The dominant role of Africa's women in environmental management cannot be overstated; it is often understated. In 26 countries in 1991, between 80 and 97.8% of all economically active women worked in agriculture (UNECA, 1996). Research confirms that 70-80% of all subsistence farming in Africa is carried out by women (World Bank, 1997). On average African women are responsible for 60% of all harvesting, 70% of all weeding, and 90% of all processing; 50% of livestock rearing, and 60% of the marketing of agricultural products (Green and Thrupp, 1998).

Women's roles in natural resource management are not limited to crop production; they are also responsible for water, fuel wood and animal fodder collection. Through their daily contact with the environment, women are familiar with traditional plants and herbs, and are also knowledgeable about forest products.

Since women constitute a significant group as users of natural resources, it is a matter of course that they be at the forefront in making decisions on how to manage them. For instance, if women wish to have a part in deciding how revenue earned from a forest partly managed by them is spent, they need to be able to enter into negotiations in the matter. To be able to be party to such negotiations, women must have sufficient power and influence. The issue of women's land rights clearly illustrates how closely related the interests of women and sustainable development really is.

Despite women's unquestionable dominance in the agricultural and environmental management, they still lack access to and tenure of land and other natural resources. Their rights to land ownership are often prohibited or restricted by traditional norms and/or state laws. In Africa, women generally do not own land; they are granted use rights and only have access as wives, mothers or sisters of male relatives. For married women, these usufruct rights are secure only as long as their marriage lasts (Gray and Kevane, 1996); divorced or widowed women lose access to their land. Titles to land are vested in males. Data from Cameroon indicates the near absence of women from land registers, where less than 10% of those who obtained land certificates were women (World Bank, 1997).

In addition, when traditional ownership gives way to private and individual ownership, as is the situation currently over most of Africa, men are generally favored over women. These new systems ignore community property rights that sometimes provide women with access to land; and informally arranged rights no longer provide sufficient guarantees.

When women do not control land or when their access rights are stripped and insecurity persists, they will lack the incentive to invest in land improvement or even engage in activities that protect land sustainability. They will have little incentive to use productivity-enhancing inputs, to increase labor-intensive soil conservation efforts, or to plant slow-growing tree crops. In Tanzania women are reluctant to plant trees since they do not control the benefits of doing so. In Katheka, Kenya, women can plant trees on family land, but the benefits accrue only to the male family head. Research from Burkina Faso indicates that women's insecurity in tenure dampens their interest in combating soil erosion or moisture loss.

Clearly, sustainable resource use depends on people's ownership and control of land and other resources, and on the sense of security that this provides. For women in Africa, control over land and secure land rights are the basic and absolute conditions for making agricultural systems

more sustainable and for women to invest in more sustainable land use. Securing land rights for women, in their own right, is the most practical means of reinforcing the relationship between gender, environment and sustainable development, to their mutual benefit. The sustainable use of natural resources can only be achieved in the long term if the women's autonomy is assured; and if women can have sufficient power and influence to enter into discussions and negotiations on their land rights.

Additionally, women throughout Africa are rarely involved in community government or leadership. In Katheka, Kenya, males are better represented than females on sub location development committees. Even fewer women are members of modern local government systems. This gender imbalance is also evident in other levels of government. Women hold only 2.5% of the ministerial posts in Africa and only 3.6% of the four highest sub ministerial decision making positions (Green and Thrupp, 1998). Since women are denied the opportunity to exercise a leadership role, their influence on decisions affecting land-use practices and environmental and natural resources is correspondingly diminished.

Assessing Agenda 21s contribution to women's environmental management capacity in Africa:

One is confronted by several challenges when they try to assess the implementation of Agenda 21 in Africa. First, though processes at the macro and meso levels have effects at the micro level, where most gender relations manifest themselves, it is difficult to determine the precise impact of macro and meso processes at the micro level. Not least because information on this subject is scanty. The implementation of activities is therefore taken as an indicator of progress, making it even more difficult to connect outcomes with the different activities being undertaken. Second, because of the diversity of African society and cultural patterns, it is difficult to draw

general statements and to formulate suitable guidelines. This notwithstanding, this paper attempts to do so, with the express recognition that such assessments are important little steps in the long march towards practicing sustainable development.

Anecdotal information from several countries shows that some progress has been made. The rate of progress varies depending on government priorities, and the availability of financial and human resources. The past five years has witnessed an increase in the formation of governmental and non-governmental structures that focus on the role of women in relation to the environment and natural resource management (UNECA, 1999). This has led to an increased awareness of the necessity to involve women in decisions and programs to preserve the environment. Examples of actions taken include the increased participation of women in the development of alternative sources of energy and capacity building of women in the use of natural resources such as water and fuel wood in a sustainable manner.

In Sudan, though no women's organization was officially represented in UNCED, and though Rio failed to secure resources or provide technology to address environmental issues that affect and/or are influenced by women, it has brought considerable attention to the importance of women as users of the environment and resources. It has highlighted negative the negative impacts of environmental degradation on women; it has brought to the fore the differential effects on women's health of environmental pollution; and it has seen more resources from NGOs and UN agencies committed to women.

With regard to changing law and policy frameworks to make them gender sensitive, many African countries have taken decisive steps. Uganda and Tanzania, in particular have taken aggressive measures in changing land law to feature the needs of women (Benschop, 2001). Uganda's 1995 Constitution and Land Act of 1998 proffer upon women the implicit equal right to

buy and own land. In addition, the Land Act has a consent clause, which provides greater security of tenure for legally married women.

In Tanzania, both the Village Land Act and the Land Act, which came into operation in May of 2001, have provisions that explicitly recognize women's equal rights to land, and which also provide for the proportional representation of women in land boards at different administrative levels. Other African countries such as Eritrea, Malawi, Senegal and Tunisia have also reviewed their constitutions and related laws to make them more gender sensitive. In Mali, the economic management project, approved in 1996, includes a component to address gender issues in the country's economic reform program. The 'pilot' component specifically includes measures to address gender-based constraints to access to land and credit. Reform operations in Malawi and Mozambique also address gender issues.

In Eritrea, Namibia, South Africa, and Uganda, affirmative action and a quota of women in public institutions required by the constitution has guaranteed women access to policy and decision-making organs of society at various local, regional and national levels (UNECA, 1999).

In Ethiopia, considerable effort to integrate women's energies into on-going sustainable development efforts are underway (Zewdu, 2002). A national women's policy has been designed to ensure that gender concerns are not overlooked in the country's development policy and planning, and to strengthen women's participation in decision-making processes. The policy, among others, entitles women to property, employment and pension rights, empowers and strengthens women's participation in decision making; guarantees their rights to credit schemes; and creates an environment conducive towards the establishment of women's civic organizations. Women's bureau/desks have consequently been set up in each line ministry and in the regional states to monitor the policy's implementation and provide the necessary support to women.

Despite these many in-roads in women and sustainable development, there have been curious delays in implementing full and nationally agreed upon programs. Though Kenya's National Gender Policy was finalized in 1998, cabinet approved it in 2000.

While it is an important first step to review and amend laws, there must be a complementary component to ensure that policy is implemented and the law enforced. The law loses its edge when not enforced and policy without implementation is as good as no policy. Enforcement is a major problem that affects African countries' progress towards sustainability (UNECA, 1999). The capacity (or perhaps the will?) to enforce is lacking. For as long as this is the case, the new laws and policies will not translate into the benefits intended for women. In a cross-sectional study of attempts to routinize gender in public sectors of several developing countries, which included Uganda, Mali and Morocco, Goetz (2000) finds that such attempts have been ineffective because gender units have not received a positive reception in government departments.

Environmental impact assessments that are being carried out in relation to the rapid industrialization are not taking into account the specific impacts on women's health, social, political and cultural well being. Neither do they take into account the negative impact on women's lives of the destruction of the environment.

African governments' deficiencies in enforcing required gender reforms need to be built through further sensitization and awareness programs, institutional building, stronger lobbying, networking and advocacy. The intended beneficiaries of these reviewed laws and constitutions still need to be informed, educated, and trained in making use of the laws and constitutions.

Perhaps some areas critical for gender mainstreaming may include National Development Plans and National Budgets. Both constitute public statements expressing political priorities for change and development. For most countries in Africa, there is a disjuncture between national policy commitments to the integration of gender in development and the budgetary allocations that

are necessary to realize these commitments. Equally important has been the political ‘weakness’ of gender constituents outside the state. In the politics of policy-making a critical point of leverage on decision makers is popular pressure and public opinion—the presence of an active constituency is vital.

Also there are pressing issues to do with a lack of autonomy and authority to operate independently and effectively. The central government gender structure is placed within a larger composite ministry that has a single budget. The Women’s Bureau in Kenya, for example, is a unit within the division of Social Services which itself is within a ministry that has several other divisions i.e. the Ministry of Home Affairs, National Heritage, Culture and Social Services.

At the national level, inadequate financial, human and material resources is the major constraint to progress in enhancing institutional capacity for the advancement of women. Almost all countries have mentioned that they have inadequate human and financial capacity to effectively coordinate, monitor, and evaluate national efforts of gender analysis and mainstreaming (UNECA, 1999). Consequently, most efforts to empower women and advance their status, are dependent on the generosity of development agencies.

Sustainable Development and Globalization:

The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development adopted sustainable development as a common strategy of development for all countries of the world.

Generally sustainable development is used to imply continued improvement in living levels, particularly those of the poor and of disadvantaged groups. Although improved living levels may be dependent upon an increased consumption of resources, sustainable development has as its core imperative the rational exploitation of natural resource to ensure future availability. Sustainable

development is a development strategy, which is not only economically feasible, but also ecologically responsible and socially just.

Freedom, democracy and human rights are seen as prerequisite values for a social and economic development that would benefit the world's population. Besides economic development, the equitable distribution of development should be guaranteed; efforts to alleviate poverty should be accompanied by efforts to combat inequality on the basis of class, race and gender, and in particular to redress the power differential between men and women.

Growing evidence from around the world shows that building gender concerns into the design of development policies and programs can help bring about more equitable, more efficient, and more sustainable development. The 1998 SPA status report on poverty in sub-Saharan Africa argues that reducing gender inequality increases growth, efficiency and welfare.

Micro-level analyses portray that gender-based asset inequality is a constraint to growth and poverty reduction. For example, the agricultural growth that sub-Saharan Africa does not achieve because of gender inequality is not marginal to the continent's needs, as it affects food security and well being, contributes to greater vulnerability, and further reinforces risk aversion. A case in Burkina Faso shows how differences in access to key inputs, notably labor and fertilizer, lead to marked differentials, and different supply responses, between plots controlled by men and those controlled by women.

The years that have elapsed since UNCED have been characterized by the accelerated globalization of interactions among countries in the areas of world trade, foreign direct investment and capital markets. Globalization is a historical process, the result of human innovation and technological progress. It refers to the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through trade and financial flows (IMF, 2000). The term sometimes also refers to the

movement of people and knowledge across international borders. There are also broader cultural, political and environmental dimensions of globalization.

In its economic sense globalization refers to an extension beyond national borders of the same market forces that have operated for centuries operated at all levels of human economic activity. Though markets are presumed to promote efficiency through competition and the division of labor, they do not necessarily ensure that the benefits of increased efficiency are shared by all. Developing countries for example, are surviving at the periphery of global integration. While it is not clear whether globalization results in increased poverty and inequalities, results show, disturbingly, that the income gap between the rich and poor countries has widened considerably over the past decade. Results of the most recent World Economic Outlook study shows that though output per capita has risen, the distribution of income among countries is now more unequal than at the beginning of the 20th century.

There is no guarantee that increased market efficiency will automatically lead to an optimal use of raw materials and energy. Though market efficiency may reduce the amount of input per unit of output, it creates further opportunities for economic growth and expansion. There is thus a risk that growth effects may end up overshadowing efficiency effects (Sachs, 2000). The flow of investment capital from the OECD countries is promoting intensive use of resources in host countries, since the favored targets for investment are raw materials extraction or energy and transport infrastructure.

The economic differentials between developing and developed countries inherent in the process of economic globalization also manifest themselves in the environmental arena. Not only do 'dirty' industries that cannot function under strict environmental regulation relocate to developing countries, but the stages of an international production chain that cause greatest environmental destruction are usually in less-developed regions, while the cleaner stages tend to be in G-7

countries (Sachs, 2000). In the aluminum industry for instance, the quarrying of bauxite takes place in Guyana, Brazil, Jamaica and guinea along with Australia. The smelting of the aluminum occurs in Brazil, Venezuela, Indonesia or Bahrain. While the research and development stage remains located in the OECD areas.

Eritrea's liberal macro-economic policy has seen the state divesting itself of state-run enterprises and transferring them to the private sector. The absence of environmental standards, quality control and limited environmental consciousness coupled with a liberal investment code¹ makes the process of divestiture worrisome and threatening to long term sustainable development efforts (Gebremedhin, Undated). In Asmara, for example, the brake lining factory employs men and women who earn their living by making brake linings using asbestos. The World Health Organization has banned asbestos because it causes lung cancer.

A joint venture, called Seawater, established between the Government of Eritrea and an American enterprise with the aim of raising and exporting shrimps also poses serious environmental risks. Seawater aims to raise shrimps for the export market. It plans to cut a huge channel from the red sea to create a salt-water river wide enough for the navigation of small boats. It will also inundate natural wetlands to create 3 large salt-water lakes to raise shrimps. Finally, after shrimps are raised, seawater lets the soiled water into a sea garden planted with the patented sapphire² (*Salicornia* sp.). Seawater claims the ' water will percolate slowly through the soil on its long return to the sea—as clean or cleaner than it was before.'

Despite claims that investment returns will be to the tune of about \$100 million in the first five years of operation, several environmental questions remain unanswered. First, there is no data to support claims that the red sea will not be fouled. Second, the use of a patented plant raises

¹ Licensing procedures require that potential investors be given an answer within 24 hours after submission of application. This does not provide adequate opportunity for comprehensive impact analyses.

² Sapphire is a patented, soil tolerant plant, which is expected to provide gourmet vegetables from its young shoots; the mature plant provide edible oil, huge protein meal, biomass for animal fodder, particle board and fuel to fire bricks.

concerns regarding the identity of the beneficiaries. Third, it is unclear which measures have been taken to ensure that the exotic sapphire plant does not escape into the Red Sea. Fourth, no independent impact assessment has been conducted.

Similarly, in the agricultural sector, highly perishable items such as tomatoes, lettuce, fruit, vegetables and flowers come as airfreight to Europe from Kenya, Morocco and Senegal, among other African countries. While individuals enjoy season less supplies, plantations and glasshouses in the areas of origin impose irrigation, pesticide use and the repression of local farmers.

Flower farming in Kenya showcases the risks to the advancement of women's empowerment, their health and to environmental sustainability that unchecked globalization entails. Studies on flower farming by multinationals in Kenya's rift valley indicate that women, who comprise majority of the workers, work under high risk of exposure to dangerous chemicals such as methyl bromide³. They live under squalid conditions and are grossly underpaid. In addition, firms operating here release their pesticide- and fertilizer-laden effluents⁴ into a nearby 180 sq Km lake that does not have an outlet and that is rapidly shrinking. Worse still, other firms have undertaken to create dykes around the retreating lake.

Indeed, unbridled economic globalization, as is the case currently, and its socio-economic and environmental manifestations works to the detriment of sustainable development, and certainly against the long-term interest of developing countries in Africa.

Because the impacts of globalization were not addressed the UNCED meetings; it becomes even more urgent now that both rich and poor countries place sustainable development as a central policy objective, and to implement the plans agreed at UNCED.

³ Exposure to methyl bromide affects the lungs, kidneys, eyes and skin; damages neurological and reproductive function; the incidence of miscarriages among women increases; blurred vision, dizziness and headaches.

⁴ Agrochemical effluent is known to encourage the proliferation of algal blooms, which decrease the quantity of light and oxygen reaching lower depths, resulting in significant fish kills.

Although the costs and benefits of globalization are unevenly distributed among the world's nations, some scholars are optimistic that increasing globalization could provide opportunities for women that have previously been closed off to them (Keller-Herzog, 1996; Goetz, 2000). New job creation for women may occur in fields traditionally considered as male. In addition, redistributing access to knowledge and skills acquired through globalization may be less challenging than redistributing assets such as land or wealth.

The greater permeability of international boundaries that is characteristic of the globalization process offers an important opportunity to efforts to integrate gender into sustainable development efforts. More than ever before, individual countries are now participating more fully in international development conferences and signing international agreements. They not only expose themselves for comparisons with other nations, but deficiencies and abuses at the national level are increasingly visible and a source of embarrassment to governments. Women have used and will continue to use such fora to articulate their demands for environmental justice, and more fundamentally, for their equal rights.

Future strategies and options:

- a. The knowledge and expertise that women have in conservation should be protected and fully used in the design and implementation of environmental management programs;
- b. Laws should not only be designed and revised to ensure that women have equal access to and control over land, but they should be implemented as well. These laws and policies should be communicated to beneficiaries to make them aware of their rights;
- c. Women should be fully represented in the decision-making bodies that allocate land and other forms of property;

- d. The gap between developed and developing countries points to the continued need for a dynamic and enabling global economic environment supportive of international cooperation, particularly in the field of debt and trade;
- e. There should be a balanced and integrated approach to trade and sustainable development, based on a combination of trade liberalization, economic development and environmental protection. Trade obstacles should be removed with a view to contributing to achieving more efficient use of the earth's natural resources in both economic and environmental terms;
- f. The liberalization of trade should be accompanied by environmental and resource management policies to enable this economic innovation to contribute to improved environmental protection and the enhancement of sustainable development. It is vital that the global community recognize the fact that environmental standards valid for the developed countries may have unexpected social and economic costs in the developing countries;
- g. There is a need to encourage an open, equitable and transparent multi-lateral trading system with measures that will effectively integrate developing countries into the world economy;
- h. National governments should strive to ensure policy coordination on trade, environment and development at the national level in support of sustainable development. They should ensure that policies for the liberalization of trade and investment are complemented by gender-sensitive environmental policies to avoid environmental deterioration, and to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared by all sectors of the society;

Conclusion:

The link between gender, environment and sustainable development is indeed a strong and straightforward one with regard to Africa's women who dominate the agricultural scene and who are the key environmental managers. This has been widely recognized and accepted and substantive progress made by many African governments and the international development community in their efforts to empower women. Nevertheless, serious challenges lie ahead. As noted in previous sections of this paper, the on going efforts must not only be sustained, but more decisive and aggressive action must be undertaken. Where supportive institutional frameworks have not been defined, they should be put in place. Where the rudiments of supportive institutional frameworks (to include laws, policies and organizations) are in place, they should be enforced and implemented and their impacts on women documented and monitored. This would assure long-term sustainable development, and reassure women that we are moving beyond rhetoric into the world of reality. There is an urgent need to shift gears.

And as the reality of globalization looms larger, there is increasing evidence that the link between globalization and sustainable development is decidedly tenuous; more so with regard to gender and environmental management in Africa. Translating the equity, social justice and environmental imperatives of sustainable development requires minimizing the costs of globalization to developing countries while amplifying its benefits. It is now even more urgent that both developing and developed countries place sustainable development as a central policy objective, and to implement the plans agreed at Rio while taking into account the reality of globalization that was not discussed at Rio. The invisible hand is indeed visible... and unjust; it must be guided towards greater global responsibility!
