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EMERGING ISSUES PANEL

Gender Perspectives on Climate Change

Written statement*

Submitted by

**Rachael Nampinga
Programs Director
Eco-Watch Africa ***

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

Historical climate records show that Africa has already experienced a warming of 0.7°C, with global models predicting a further increase at a rate of 0.2–0.5°C per decade (IPCC,2001).There are also observed changes in rainfall distribution with decreased rainfall expected in the Sahel and an increase for central Africa. Further physical impacts include sea-level rise, changes in temperature extremes (such as heat waves), and an increase in the frequency and intensity of storms. Such physical impacts combined with a high dependence on natural resources and an overdependence on rain fed agriculture mean that many African countries face high vulnerability in the coming decades. Poverty, inequitable land distribution, conflict, HIV/AIDS, and debt also mean that many African countries lack the adaptive capacity to cope and adjust compared to more developed countries.

Indeed, it is widely recognized that climate change will pose a real and long-term threat for the Millennium Development Goals. The 2006 drought in East Africa is one of the worst on record with more than 8 million people in need of food aid. It is a stark reminder of how development and the economy are still largely dependent on the climate.

The millennium development goals recognize the need to promote gender equality and empower women to participate in all facets of economic and social life with the aim of achieving sustainable development. Climate change poses a significant challenge to the achievement of sustainable development for the rural poor, especially women, who will suffer disproportionately from its impacts. To date little has been done to mobilize and empower women and men particularly in Africa to address global environmental challenges such as climate change. This paper focuses on the interrelations between climate change, energy and poverty in the African context through a gender lens.

Why Gender and Climate?

Biological differences between men and women are obvious and acknowledged by all, however the difference in roles within communities, access to information, economic and social factors have to be analyzed for successful implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures. There is a need to differentiate between men and women as far as the climate change process is concerned because of the different roles the two sexes play in society today hence the different ways in which they will be affected by the climate change policies designed.

Behavioral patterns of women and men, young and old, rich and poor differ greatly. The activities carried out by women and men differ significantly, and they both impact climate change differently. Men and women perceive climate change differently and they react differently to it. It is therefore important to note however that even then climate change will affect both groups differently.

The social roles and responsibilities of women and men are different as well leading to the different degrees at which they depend on the natural resources within their communities which will be destroyed by the impacts of climate change.

Vulnerability

Africa's ability to adapt to climate change is dependent on resources at its disposal; financial and human. Africa is likely to suffer more from the impacts of climate change because of its lack of sufficient resources to adapt to change and its extreme vulnerability.

It is widely acknowledged that the negative impacts of climate change will hit the poorest in the poorest countries hardest. Since women constitute the majority of the world's poor and are often more dependent on natural resources, they are likely to be disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Gender, Poverty and Vulnerabilities

Poverty is one of the world's fundamental problems in Africa and different strategies have been designed to address it. Poverty can be conceptualized in a number of ways; for example; in economic terms (an income of less than a dollar a day), in social terms (lack of access to adequate levels of energy, food, health care, education, shelter, sanitation and clothing).

Poor women and men don't become poor in the same ways nor do they save moneys in the same ways. Within the household, women and men have different access to resources and goods. Data from households may reveal hidden discrimination according to age and gender. In order to design appropriate Poverty Reduction Strategies, there is need to consider the persons status within a family because men and women experience poverty in different ways.

The Millennium Development goals include a target of reducing by half the number of people living in poverty by 2015. A 2004 World Bank review of poverty projections indicated that Sub-Saharan Africa had witnessed an increase rather than a reduction in poverty. The largest concentration of poverty is found in Sub-Saharan Africa, with women suffering most from the worst forms of poverty (UNDP/ENERGIA, 2004). The Women's Manifesto on climate change (WEN/NFWI, May 2007) quotes that women make up 70% of the world's poor making them more vulnerable to environmental damage, while they also make up 85% of people who die from climate-induced disasters.

Agriculture

Agriculture represents 30% of Africa's GDP and climate change threatens this economy because it is highly dependent on agriculture. Food production in Sub-Saharan Africa has not kept the pace with the growing population over the past 3 years and is susceptible to decrease for example it is predicted that cereal crops yield will decline up to 50% by 2080. Women are the main producers of the world's staple crops up to 90% of the rural poor's food intake and producing 60-80% of food in Africa. Maize, Sorghum, millet and groundnut yields have a strong

For southern Africa, productivity is expected to drop by 20-50% in extreme El Nino years. If global climate change moves more towards El Nino-like conditions, crop production will decline.

An overdependence on a fragile agricultural system that relies heavily on direct rainfall increases women's vulnerability, and work overload in ensuring household food security.

Forestry

Forests and woodland occupy about 21% of the land area in Africa. Climate variability and change is predicted to cause increasing shift of 25-30 km of the Sahel, Sudan and Guinean vegetation zones. Since forest products account for as much as 6% of the economic product of several African countries, climate change is a critical threat. Women's livelihoods and social roles rely directly on forest resources to meet the nutritional, health and cultural needs of families and communities; forest resources are crucial to woman's income generating capacities, while men are involved in timber extraction and the use of non timber forest products for commercial purposes. Due to this division in labour, women living or near the forest are differently and disproportionately harmed by deforestation and have stronger interest in preservation.

Access to traditional biomass energy is likely to be negatively impacted especially since the absolute numbers relying on this is projected to increase from 583 million in 2000 to 823 million in 2030. Forests are already stressed due to harvesting of timber, fuel wood and clearing land for settlements and agriculture.

Water scarcity

As rainfall declines, the quality of water deteriorates because sewage and industrial effluents become more concentrated, thereby exacerbating water-borne diseases and reducing the quality and quantity of fresh water available for domestic use. River flow rates are predicted to decrease. The Nile region for example, most scenarios estimate a decrease in river flow of up to 75 per cent by 2100. Women have limited access to tillable land therefore such impacts of global warming reduce the productive land available thus reducing crop yields.

The time consuming task of gathering and transporting water is also usually the responsibility of the women, as water becomes scarce the work overload increases drastically as they have to walk longer distances in search of water. It has been estimated that women in developing countries spend an average of 134 minutes a day collecting water for their households (Rosen and Vincent, 1999). This increases the rate of school dropouts for young women as they take on extra workloads, reducing the opportunities for women to participate in nontraditional activities that would empower them. The cost of water even for urban women will increase, denying accessibility.

According to a study, fetching water for domestic consumption in a Zimbabwean family showed that women contributed 91% to this task with men spending 1 hour of the total household time on this chore and women 9.3 hours. (*Mehretu & Mutambira (1992) in Gender & Energy tool kit, UNDP/ENERGIA (2004)*)

communal areas are headed by women) manage forest resource and development projects through woodlot ownership, tree planting and nursery development.

To address the scarcity of fuel wood and poverty of rural women, Mama Watoto's group was formed in Kenya. This scarcity had forced women to collect wood from food reserves thereby exposing them to legal penalties. In response the women formed "women made forests" in sections in their farms. The afforestation programme improved soil fertility, reduced illegal harvesting and increased the vegetation cover in the kambiri region that could sequester carbon (FAO, 1994).

Recommendations

All UN processes are mandated to embody the principles of gender equality .To build a future climate regime that is effective ,sustainable and just gender sensitive mitigation and adaptation policies and measures should be designed and necessary resources provided for this.

To ensure gender and climate justice, there is a need for governments, international agencies and all stakeholders need to:

- Recognize the vital urgency of gender equality in the growing crises of climate change issues and demonstrate leadership through top –level support for gender mainstreaming.

- Ensure that women participate in all decisions related to climate change at all levels, in order to build a truly global and effective alliance for climate protection and gender justice.

expertise, their perspectives, their political support and their engagement as key agents of change.

Women should be targeted for educational programmes concerning climate change, for them to be able to be in position to contribute to findings and implementation of climate change solutions that are most likely to be successful within a community.

It is also important to recognize the diversity of women –young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural and so on-the importance of gender expertise; one token woman at the table won't do it.

References

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