

55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women
Emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women
or equality between women and men

Interactive expert panel
“Gender equality and sustainable development”

1 March 2011, 10 am - 1 pm

ISSUES PAPER

I. Introduction

In accordance with ECOSOC resolution 2006/9, the Commission on the Status of Women identifies an emerging issue requiring increased attention for consideration at each annual session, taking into account developments at the global and regional levels as well as planned activities within the United Nations. At its 55th session the Commission will consider “Gender equality and sustainable development” as the emerging issue through an interactive expert panel. A moderator’s summary will serve as the Commission’s input to the preparatory process of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), Rio+20.

II. Background

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (The ‘Earth Summit’), held in Rio de Janeiro, emphasized the synergies between economic development, social development and environmental protection. One of the key messages of the Summit was to ensure a healthy planet, which would require drastic changes in attitudes and behaviours. Agenda 21, adopted at the Conference, devoted a chapter to “Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development” and recognized women as one of nine major and critical groups for the formulation and implementation of policies for sustainable development.¹ The World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) placed a focus on the social pillar and emphasized that while economic progress often fostered social progress, the link was not automatic and that, ultimately, economic development was a means to improving human well-being.

Twenty years after Rio, it is evident that the changes needed to ensure sustainable development continue to present major challenges for global environmental and development governance. Progress towards sustainable development requires concerted efforts by all stakeholders. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, scheduled to take place in Brazil in May 2012, seeks to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assess the progress made and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development, and address new and emerging challenges. The focus will be on two themes: (a) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and (b) the institutional framework for sustainable development.² The concept of green economy in the context of

¹ A/CONF.151/26 Vol.III, Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, see chapter 24 of Agenda 21 on “Global Action For Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development” at www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/res_agenda21_00.shtml

² See Conference website: www.uncsd2012.org

sustainable development and poverty eradication can be seen as a lens for focusing on and seizing opportunities to advance economic and environmental goals simultaneously, and represents a potential accelerator towards sustainable development and poverty eradication.³

The relevance of gender equality to sustainable development has been long established. In addition to the Rio Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, gender equality is a key element of sustainable development.

sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics could promote informed policy-making for sustainable development and poverty eradication; and gender-responsive budgeting and gender-responsive green stimulus packages could ensure more effective and equitable resource allocations. Overall, efforts need to be made to ensure that women become active agents of change in the expanding green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

The following are some areas for consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women in relation to the two themes of UNCSD:

Women in decision-making and as agents of change: Women can be a powerful source of knowledge and skills. For centuries, women have passed on their skills on how to manage water, forests, and biodiversity; use and preserve medicinal plants; adapt and cope when faced with environmental hazards and a changing climate; and manage waste and sanitation. Harnessing women's local knowledge and skills is critical for protecting, sustaining and managing the environment and its resources. Women occupy key positions at the household, local and community levels. These roles should be expanded into women's effective participation, decision-making and management of sustainable development processes and governance at local, national and international levels. Women can play a central role in influencing sustainable consumption and production patterns, in safeguarding the natural environment, and in adequate and sustainable resource allocation within the household and community. Fulfilling this potential would require improvements in women's economic, social, political, legal and cultural status; women's improved access to environment-related resources (e.g. land, safe water, affordable energy resources and technologies); and increased provision of education and training of women and girls, including in environmental science and technology.

Women's contributions to innovation, science and technology for sustainable development: Innovation and the development, deployment and transfer of green technologies are critical to sustainable development. Equal access to education has led to a surge in educational attainment by women and girls but in many cases women remain under-represented in the sciences, research and related policy fora. Targeted public support can ensure that girls and women have equal opportunities in education and training in these fields, so they can play a stronger role in research and development (R&D) on environmentally sound technologies. Participatory processes that involve end-users of technology—men and women at the household and community levels—in all stages of R&D can help ensure that their specific needs are addressed, and that technologies are developed that contribute to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, sustainable development and poverty eradication. For example, locally-adapted solar panels could have a transformational impact on women's lives: their installation and maintenance can provide employment opportunities, and their use in homes and local businesses can enhance women's business activities, and facilitate women's access to information and communication technologies in rural and remote areas.

Women's unpaid care work: The world's poorest women and men depend on their natural

energy) and fuel-efficient and labour-saving technologies (e.g. fuel efficient cooking stoves, efficient pumping and purification of drinking water) can contribute to the restoration, maintenance and enhancement of the stock of natural capital. Such investments can also substantially reduce the time women and girls spend on these time-consuming chores and enhance their options for gainful work and mobility. For example, more than three billion people rely on open fires and traditional cooking stoves (e.g. wood, crop waste and charcoal). Smoke from such fires in poorly ventilated homes kills 1.6 million people annually, 85 per cent of them women and children under five. This makes indoor air pollution the fourth largest killer in the developing world. It has also been estimated that *one* improved stove—requiring 50 percent less biomass fuel—can reduce *one ton* of greenhouse gas per year, and reduce emissions by 80 percent.⁷ Investments in fuel-efficient and labour-saving technologies can therefore have substantial multiplier effects (e.g. reducing emissions, improving health, reducing women’s unpaid care work, freeing time for income-generating activities, creating jobs for both women and men, and reducing poverty), and contribute to promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Women’s participation in a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication: Governments play a critical role in creating a supportive policy environment for green investments, and can stimulate such investments through the use of ecological taxes, ‘green’ procurement processes and other incentive systems. With such policy instruments, sustainable practices are rewarded and harmful activities

will serve as the Commission's input to the preparatory process of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20.

V. Issues for consideration in the discussion

The following questions serve as a non-exhaustive discussion guide:

- What approaches have resulted in the effective integration of gender perspectives into sustainable development policy, budget and other decision-making processes at local and national levels, and how have those be monitored? What factors have contributed to successful outcomes, and how have obstacles been overcome? How could these approaches be scaled-up and replicated in other settings?
- How have women been able to contribute to green innovation and research and development at the country and community levels and what has been the impact on sustainable development and poverty reduction?
- What public and private investments in sustainable infrastructure have effectively reduced women's unpaid care work, created local employment, reduced poverty and improved the sustainable use of natural resources? How can such investments be expanded?
- What policies and incentives have encouraged women's businesses to grow in the green economy?
- What efforts have been made to ensure that women engage in public procurement processes for environmentally and socially friendly products and services?
- How can women's full participation in all areas and at all levels of decision-making for sustainable development be achieved? What steps are needed to ensure systematic attention to gender equality and women's empowerment in the institutional architecture for sustainable development? What support could the UN system provide to better support these efforts?