

Looking Through A Gender Lens: Water in the Green Economy

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Every crisis can be an opportunity for addressing the root causes. Yet all too often the responses tend to be transactional in nature; rarely integrated or transformational. Such small adjustments seldom help us move towards solving the crisis itself. So far the Rio+20 negotiations on Sustainable Development talks have ignored the root causes and instead have focused on small changes.¹

The breakthroughs achieved at the first UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 —articulated in Agenda 21² —were informed amongst others, by Women’s Action Agenda 21³ which stated in 1991 that, “We, women of many nations, cultures and creeds, of different colors and classes, have come together to voice our concern for the health of our living planet and all its interdependent life forms..... As long as Nature and women are abused by a so-called *free market* ideology and wrong concepts of *economic growth*, there can be no environmental security.” Nor poverty alleviation or “hope for long-term survival or peace among peoples”, it goes on to add.⁴

Women’s Action Agenda 21 reflected the lived experiences of women and girls around the world, including those spending long hours carrying water. Much progress has been made since then in raising the awareness around gender issues in water as well as developing a rights based normative framework, including the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁵ or the General Assembly Resolution on the Right to Water⁶, as well as the Human Right Council Resolutions⁷ on Right to Food and Right to Water. At a practical level, the number of women who have access to resources is higher than ever. In 2000, the number of people without access to drinking water was 1.1 billion. Today it is estimated to be 894 million,⁸ despite the population increase to 7 billion in the intervening years. The improved access to drinking water supply and sanitation closer to their dwellings and schools benefits all, but it reduces the work load of women and girls in particular.

Despite these advances, twenty years after the Rio Earth Summit, the planet is in a deeper environmental, energy and financial crisis. The period has also seen increasing political and social crisis in many regions, due to a large extent to increasing economic inequalities. Thus the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development faces even more severe challenges. Several leaders have recognized that business as usual is

not an option.⁹ I couldn't agree more.

A focus on women and water could provide inspiration for broader changes. Currently, it is at the intersection of poverty and water that gender issues have become most visible to those concerned with development. In calling for the recognition of gender roles and gendered (water-stewardship related) knowledge of women, and in advocating for capacity development to enhance their ability to perform their roles better, women's organizations have helped bring visibility to the central role women play in the survival of marginal societies. Yet, we must realize that it is just the starting point. There seems to be little recognition that the current crisis is precipitated by the continuation of the "so-called *free market* ideology and wrong concepts of *economic growth*," that is based on the use and abuse of both women and nature: women as providers of free or cheap labor and nature as provider of free or cheap raw materials to help develop sectors that drive the forms of *economic growth* that Women's Agenda 21 warned about.

In this approach focused on economic growth, investing in women's development (e.g., girls' education) or their access to basic needs (access to drinking water) make sense only if they can be translated into economic objectives, such as educated workers (through literate mothers) or healthy workforce (by reducing hours lost to ill health). A right based approach to development, paid for through public finance, doesn't fit with free market ideology or market mechanisms.

Despite the growing recognition of human rights, the expansion of free market policies and ideologies around the world has contributed to the violation of various rights, including the right to water. A case in point is the experience of Bolivia,¹⁰ where an attempt to privatize water resulted in gross human rights violations; the resistance movement later led to the election of the first indigenous President of the country.

Subsequently, the state of Bolivia has been one of the leading voices calling for the recognition of the Rights of Mother Earth.¹¹ Its representatives have expressed doubts whether current proposals, such as that on the green economy that is being discussed at inter-governmental meetings leading up to UNCSD, will lead to a transformative change that will address the multiple crises we face, in an inclusive and just manner.

As Women's Agenda 21 pointed out, our current global economic system abuses nature. Moreover, it is based on a gendered division of labor and women's free labor in caring for the family. In such a situation, simply recognizing gender roles and investing in capacity building to enable them perform their responsibilities more efficiently only results in a greater burden on women. Thus, investing in women becomes meaningful only if we avoid instrumentalisation of gender roles and responsibilities. In this context, when we call for addressing gender issues in the negotiations around sustainable water governance at Rio+20, it must go beyond recognizing and supporting differentiated gender roles and responsibilities; but must rather call for a transformative economic agenda that results in gender equity and women's autonomy.

Sustainable governance of water (including ensuring continuation of ecosystem functions necessary for maintaining its supply) is central to the green economy too, be it in the area of food production or energy generation globally. However, the current proposals in the Rio + 20 process envisage the use of market mechanisms and economic instruments as the sole means of achieving this. Simply put, in this context the green economy is an approach where investing in nature (protection of forests) or water (protection of watersheds) makes sense only if it could be translated into economic terms such as provision of carbon sinks (for which a market value has been created) or clean water (the economic value of which is calculated by estimating the purification costs). A right based approach that protects the nature, its forests and its waters, paid for through public finance, would provide an alternative to this.

Rio+20 is a historic opportunity to shape our future. Let us use this opportunity to pave a different path to address the root causes of the marginalization of women, increasing inequities and degradation of our environment, by calling for a paradigm shift based on rights of women, peasant farmers, indigenous groups and recognition of the commons.

References

- 1 Reflections on Rio + 20 by Third World Network can be found at: <http://www.twinside.org.sg/uncsd2012.htm>
- 2 The Agenda 21 document can be found at: <http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/>
- 3 The Women's Action Agenda 21 can be found at: <http://www.iisd.org/women/action21.htm>
- 4 Women's Action Agenda 21 Accessed on May 20 2012
- 5 UN CEDAW can be found at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>
- 6 The General Assembly Resolution on the Right to Water can be found at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/ga10967.doc.htm>
- 7 The Human Rights Council resolutions on the right to water and the right to food be found at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/Documents.aspx>
- 8 UN water statistics can be found at: http://www.unwater.org/statistics_san.html
- 9 World Economic and Social Survey 2011: The Great Green Technological Survey. 2011. UN Department on Economic and Social Affairs. http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_current/2011wess.pdf
- 10 Shultz, Jim. "Economic Globalization vs. Human Rights: Lessons from the Bolivian Water Revolt." 2003. The Democracy Center. <http://www.indiaresource.org/issues/water/2003/lessonsfrombolivia.html>
- 11 Language on the Rights of Mother Earth can be found at: <http://motherearthrights.org/>

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