

A REVIEW OF GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This paper argues that sustainable development can only be meaningful if people are offered a genuine chance to reorganize themselves and articulate their own gender relations paradigm. Such a paradigm must consider the people's interests and wishes in the context of their history and culture. Planners must recognise that poor people are not responsible for their own poverty, nor ultimately for the environmental damage that poverty causes. In most instances the people have been denied the use of good land and forced into marginal areas such as Zimbabwe's regions III, IV and V where average annual rainfall is less than 800mm. Imbalances in resource distribution is a major factor in the continued degradation of critical resources such as forest, soil, air, water, fauna and flora.

Introduction

Zimbabwe's economy is primarily dependent on agriculture to achieve sustainable development. Agricultural development entails altering the natural environment in order to grow food for an increasing population. Since whatever farmers do, leaves a mark on the face of the land, and since the involvement of women in agriculture is substantial, we shall review the links between gender and environment in the context of sustainable population development.

In Zimbabwe, due to historical inequalities in land distribution, the communal areas, where over 70% of the population resides, face high population pressures that lead to environmental degradation. Some regions are communal and there is too little rain or seasonal droughts such that intensive farming is impossible. The average annual rainfall for region IV, for instance, ranges from 450 to 650mm and region V average annual is under 450mm. It is on this land that the majority of the rural people reside and where most of the environmental problems have arisen. In these areas the position of women has been worsened due to the periodic dry spells during the rainy season and land degradation. They have had to find alternative means of survival. Given this, the position of gender in the development process to achieve sustainable development is vital.

The major environmental problems Zimbabwe is experiencing include deforestation, soil degradation, water deficiencies, poverty and land tenure (peasants were forced to settle in marginal areas where environmental problems have arisen). The intensity and frequency of cultivation and the current unsustainable farming systems have, to some extent, added to the country's erosion.

According to Whitlow (1988), communal areas are for example: 148 persons/km² in Ngorima Communal area (Manicaland). When all forms of erosion are considered, 83,3% of the 1.8 million hectares are located in communal areas, while only 15.1% are in commercial areas and 1.6% located in non-arable or state lands (GOZ, 1992). Land degradation results in the increase of hours of work for women as they work harder to compensate for severe erosion and low soil fertility. Women bear the brunt of environmental degradation. This paper addresses the role that they can play in development to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

Gender, Population and Environment

The presence of women in sustainable environmental development has been largely overlooked until of late when the government and development organizations have recognised the roles of women in the process of rural development. There is no intention to discount stress on the male counterpart.

Generally women alone cannot work towards a sustainable environment, though they are directly affected by the decrease in the availability of natural resources.

Women's primary responsibilities such as food preparation, water and fuelwood gathering, agricultural production and child rearing, make them suffer most from loss of natural resources. Firewood is scarce and women bear the burden of long distance travel to fetch firewood. This calls for the need to facilitate the participation of women in natural resource conservation. If women are the most affected people, they should be given the power to enforce resource conservation laws.

The capacity of land to support agricultural activities such as crop production, grazing and fodder for household livestock has declined especially in areas of sporadic rainfall (Zimbabwe's region IV and V). Access to and control over water for household use remain problematic in the communal areas of Zimbabwe. Water is a scarce resource in Sengwe and women travel long distances to water points. The drying up of boreholes as indicated by 15% of the respondents and the congestion at water points (21%) signify the extent of water problems in the area. This calls for better governance of water management. Since women are responsible for fetching water for household use, they should be fully integrated into planning and implementation of water management projects. There is need to recognise the rights of both men and women to own and manage their own resources to ensure that the remaining resources are preserved and alternative sources are identified so that future growth is not limited. The loss of forest habitat that supplied supplementary foods, fibres, medicines and other products, has adversely affected the rural household subsistence requirements with a direct bearing on women.

People make wide use of plant wildlife for food, construction, fuelwood, and medicine. Although at times the use of natural resources is gender biased, it is interwoven in such a way that it has to address the needs of both men and

women simultaneously. The division of labour in Zimbabwe is gender specific. Both parties, therefore, have a role to play to ensure future availability of the required natural resources. In as far as marketing is concerned, once an activity becomes commoditised women are excluded (GOZ, 1992). Although most of the work is carried out by women, decision-making is often carried out by men. Given the greater participation of women in household subsistence, gender relations has a role to play in shaping environmental sustainability.

Resource Profile and Environmental Issues in Zimbabwe

The highlighted environmental problems Zimbabwe is experiencing, emanate not only from pressure resulting from demographic growth, but also from the spatial distribution of human population in relation to physical natural resources. Population/environment policies have tended to focus on population growth with the underlying assumption that environmental degradation is a demographic problem (Jackson C, 1994). Morvaridi B, (1994), viewed the "Growth-degradation" perception as over simplistic and viewed the relationship between demographic change, poverty and environmental decline as complex.

This paper does not seek to substantiate the arguments put forward but to question whether linkages exist between poverty and population growth and establish the role gender relations can play in shaping the links to ensure sustainable development; Does a linkage between poverty and population growth exist? What is the role of gender relations in shaping these links? Population growth is determined by three primary factors: fertility, mortality and migration. The level of fertility in Zimbabwe is declining and it varies with the place of residence (higher in rural areas than in urban areas) and with the level of education of the mother.

Zimbabwe is among the very few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that have registered significant declines in the light of efforts to provide more primary health care for a larger proportion of the population. The improvements in nutrition and provision of relief to areas affected by famine due to drought also contributed to the decline in infant mortality (GOZ, 1992). Women are viewed as a means to a demographic end. The majority of Zimbabwean women do not decide when to have a child and do not determine the number of children within the household.

Since they do not choose to have children and do not determine the number of children to have, the population issues and environmental concerns should be combined within a holistic view of development. The primary goals of environment and development should then include the alleviation of poverty, secure livelihoods, good health, quality of life, improvement of the status and income of women and their access to schooling and professional training. This would then be a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development ensuring the fulfilment of personal (both men and women) aspirations and empowerment of individuals in communities.

In an article written by Swantz (1988, Vol 2/3) it was pointed out that women are frequently quoted as being the poorest of the poor. In Tanzania they are seen as representatives of the "targeted" poor. If women are the poor, Jodha (1986) states that the poor are often blamed for resource depletion/degradation. Jodha argues that poverty drives rural people to exploit the environment and in this case women are said to be the perpetrators of environmental degradation.

Poverty is said to have a direct bearing on environmental degradation. If, for example, impoverished peasant women in particular, were persuaded or coerced to limit family size on the premise that their poverty is a result of high fertility, independent of other possible factors such as skewed land-holding patterns, commercialisation processes or unequal access to development resources, then it is questionable whether smaller families would make them less poor.

Environmental strategies that enhance livelihoods and fulfil needs can probably help lay the basis for reduced rates of mortality and fertility. It is important to put in place strategies for reproductive health that cater for health and social development. Women's contribution to development process in any given society should be recognised. A recognition of this in Zimbabwe will achieve sustainable environmental development.

Quite a number of population actors (debating on population issues and sustainable development), exist to-date but according to feminist critics of population policy, population control cannot be the issue that many poor women face (Sen G, 1994). Feminist critics believe that reducing population growth is not a sufficient condition for raising livelihoods or meeting household basic needs. Population is, therefore, not just an issue of numbers

but of complex social relationships which govern birth, death and migration (Sen G, 1994).

Migrants, for example Mozambican refugees, though estimates of the numbers are difficult to obtain, have a direct impact on the environment, adding to land pressure in fragile areas, further worsening the position of women. The internal population migration taking place in Zimbabwe include inter-province, inter-district, inter-urban and even inter-rural movements. The most predominant type of internal migration is the oscillatory movement of workers from the communal areas to the cities, mines and small urban centres. These movements have important ramifications on agricultural productivity and sustainability.

Zimbabwe's major hindrance to achieving sustainable development is its skewed distribution of resources. Communal areas of Zimbabwe make up 42% of the total land mass and support over 70% of the population, while commercial areas make up some 36.2% (HIFAB, 1989). The majority of the people, who reside in the communal areas, share limited resources on fragile land, while a relatively small proportion of the population have exclusive rights to the bulk of the country's resources. To redress the skewed distribution of resources, the government adopted the policy of "Growth With Equity", but successes and failures are not catered for in this paper.

Natural Resources vs Gender, Population and Environment

Land

Only 50.9% of the large scale commercial ranch land falls within regions III and IV and the farmers rely on irrigation or they practise livestock or game ranching. Communal lands are the most densely populated areas outside urban centres. Communal areas are settled by farmers who do not have sufficient material resources for efficient management of resources, hence environmental problems have arisen in these areas. Land is used mainly for rainfed agriculture and for grazing. Not only are communal farmers confined to the poorest land (Regions IV and V), but also the size of land available to individual household is less than 2.5 hectares. This puts great pressure on soil resources given that most peasant farmers cannot afford fertilizer or other chemical inputs to maintain soil fertility.

The Zimbabwean population is primarily dependent on the environment for survival and population pressure has led to the prevalence of deforestation, soil erosion, over-grazing and land degradation. These problems exacerbate poverty and general under-development and this has a direct impact on women. Food production is one of the family-centred roles of women yet women continue to depend on males economically and socially and be expected to provide all the food for their family consumption (Swantz, 1988).

Zimbabwean women, like their counterparts in the rest of Africa, work in the fields four to eight hours with a single hoe to provide their families with basic food. It is a well known fact that the women in parts of East Africa work 16 hours a day, doing house work, caring for children, preparing food and raising between 60 -80% of the food for the family. The work hours of women are worsened in the farming season, when their day would begin at half past four in the morning and end around nine o'clock in the evening, with about a one-and-a-half-hour break. Women in rural Zimbabwe can be said to be feeders of their families. It is therefore suggested that women as co-partners with men should be involved in all development management projects that are geared towards sustainable development.

Soil Erosion

Land tenure has a bearing on the severity and distribution of erosion as indicated by the 14.7% (absence of erosion) in commercial areas as compared to 7.2% in communal areas. The potential productivity of the country's soils is declining each year.

According to Stocking (1988), soil erosion is fundamentally a mismanagement problem related to ploughing and insufficient application of organic materials. Soil erosion will remain a menace until policies become responsible to the whole set of environmental issues related to land use. Soil erosion must be tackled from the perspective of the communal farmer and research into soil erosion must move from commercial lands to communal lands. Hence both women and men should be involved in land and soil conservation projects at the same time ensuring that women are given the necessary support by their male counterparts in the process of sustainable environmental development. This support can be in the form of assisting women to attend short courses or workshops on environmental management and conservation.

Water

The availability of water, the ways in which it is managed, conserved and used has a direct impact on a country's development. Most of Zimbabwe's river systems dry up a few months after the rainy season due to evaporation and run-off (water not soaking into the ground but running straight into the streams and to the sea). Run-off is accelerated by deforestation, especially when it occurs in the river's catchment areas. Siltation is a serious problem affecting rivers and dams, and about half of the country's dams are more than 50% silted. It is no longer economical to construct large water storage works on some rivers because of the volume of silt they carry. The economic and environmental implications of water losses are very serious and call for careful management of the country's river systems and their catchment areas.

Since water deficiencies affect the country's economic growth and in the process worsens the position of women, it would be proper to involve women in the main water harvesting and management strategies and ensure that they are given back-up services by their co-partners to achieve sustainable development.

Deforestation

Vegetation plays an important role in both the environment and economic development of any country. From the environmental perspective, vegetation helps to maintain hydrological cycles, which protect soils and regulate the climate. The proper management of standing biomass is, therefore, critical in sustaining the physical environment and reducing erosion of surface soils by water and wind. Zimbabwe's woodland cover is being denuded at the rate of 1.5% per annum (GOZ, 1992). By 1980, about 20% of the country's communal areas were experiencing wood shortages. About 37.5% of communal areas now experience extreme shortage of woody biomass resources, while only 32.7% still have sufficient supply (Whitlow, 1990).

Basically, it can be pointed out that women play a significant role in production and reproduction though their role in production is determined by men. This is because women are restricted in their access to essential and strategic resources since certain social structures prevent women from having

access equal to that of men for example, land, labour, money, education and extension services. These structures are termed patriarchal, because they allocate privileges to men and most often have their roots in their tradition.

All the environmental issues highlighted above impose additional burdens upon rural women, the traditional producers of food, collectors of firewood, with negative implications for their other tasks in house-keeping and child rearing. Fuel scarcity leads to reduced energy use, with negative social effects, including malnutrition. In addition to the immediate effects of soil erosion, overgrazing and deforestation, there is the huge cost associated with environmental degradation with its long-term impacts on agricultural production and food security. Hence women should not be seen as targets and objects but should be expected to be creative or contribute substantially to leadership and basic thinking in the development processes.

The spread of erosion and desertification makes women's tasks more difficult and time consuming. Women's hours of work are increasing and they are gradually becoming more and more marginalized. Subsistence agriculture has been displaced to marginal lands and women walk longer distances to their field and on arrival must work harder to compensate for severe erosion and low soil fertility. Women seek alternative means for survival where their plots become unproductive and the transition to cash crops in Zimbabwe has worsened the position of women through the erosion of household economic resources. This makes the provision of food for the family even more difficult to accomplish.

The rural women in Zimbabwe are still living in conditions of absolute poverty and continue to suffer disproportionately from hunger and malnutrition. How can rural women of Zimbabwe be rescued from deprivation? The issue of gender, population and environment in achieving sustainable development becomes vital in alleviating absolute poverty among women and placing them in the mainstream of environmental development. The importance of women in environmental management to achieve sustainable development can only be realised if women are given a chance to prove their worth in the development process. Strategies for sustainable development need to acknowledge and support women as managers and protectors of the environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In Zimbabwe there is the need to empower women to actively participate in planning and implementing environmental development projects. Environmental development is to a great extent, incomplete if it fails to comprehend the contribution of women to development. Basically, any environmental development policy, plan or project has an impact on women and, generally, it cannot succeed without the participation of women. In Zimbabwe it is generally recognised that women's participation is essential for the success of forestry projects. For example, it was noted that one woman in Mutasa District (Manicaland) had planted 600 Eucalyptus trees since 1985 (GOZ, 1992). Therefore, it is obvious that environmental development with justice calls urgently for measures that will give women access to education, training and better jobs. This would diminish the arduous tasks that hundreds of women face in their domestic and agricultural occupations. The result would be a fairer distribution between the sexes of opportunities for creative work and economic advancements that would not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

This will heighten community awareness and participation at all levels in the formulation and implementation of programmes and projects based on the priorities and needs expressed by the women and men involved.

This paper suggests that environmental projects and programmes should be designed to promote the social and economic development of women and alleviate them from living in grinding poverty. This does not discount stress on the male counterpart, because the improvement in the socio-economic status of women benefits the men as well.

There is also the need to promote income generating, welfare and self-reliance projects that would involve women in the mainstream of development. There are a number of projects in Africa, including Zimbabwe, in which women have played a vital role, for example: Harambe Projects (Kenya), brick-making at Chitepo Agricultural Centre (Zimbabwe), housing projects by Kikuyu women (Kenya), corn mill societies (Cameroon), the Senegalese groundnut basin, cereals projects II (Senegal) and the Swaziland project of the UN Voluntary Fund (Swaziland). All these projects were aimed at reducing the heavy work-load of women and improving their socio-economic status. This means that women are an integral part of development if given the

chance to prove their worth with the help of their male counterparts in terms of back-up support.

If women become aware of the facts of the "situation" and assess their desired changes, then they can perform to close the gap between the two sexes and also participate fully in environmental development at the community, national, regional and international levels. They would then overcome their historical inequality as "invisible" or "inferiors" to men. They would be free from being socially, economically and politically dependent on males. This can only be realised in Zimbabwe if men recognise that women and men complement each other in the achievement of sustainable environmental development. Policies and programmes must provide for the role women play as users of the environment and must seek to remove the constraints that hinder women's participation in the development process.

Environmental strategies that enhance livelihoods and fulfil needs can probably help lay the basis for reduced rates of mortality and fertility. This will ensure reproductive strategies that cater for health and social development.

There is a strong need for initiatives focusing on group meetings, community participation, publicity awareness on environmental issues and environmental education campaigns. Lobbying for change of community attitudes towards women participation in the development process at the local, national and regional level is vital to ensure balances in the relationship between gender, population and natural resources to attain sustainable development. As such an environmental development policy, plan or project has a positive or negative impact on women. Failure to comprehend the contribution of women means that the development will be incomplete.

Environmental development projects and programmes should, therefore, seek to empower women and improve women's rights and access to assets, human and civil rights, labour-saving measures, job opportunities and participation in decision making. To achieve environmental sustainability, Zimbabwean society should not attach a masculine tag to environmental issues. Women and men complement each other in society. It is clear that the road to gender sensitivity in environmental issues is long and winding, full of cultural humps and gender stereotype potholes. This paper calls for co-responsibility to ensure that no-one loses his/her way on this road.

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