



## Climate Change, Gender and Poverty – Academic Babble or Realpolitik?

by Fatma DENTON (\*)  
Gambia

### What Has Gender Got To Do With It?

There is little doubt that climate change and variability will have far-reaching effects on the lives of men and women. After all, **climate change has been defined as a key phenomenon of our times, a set of events which may alter the lives of humankind in general**

**Climate change is predicated to accentuate the gaps between the world's rich and poor.** Moreover, poverty is one of the most menacing contemporary social dynamics with outcomes potentially more devastating than those caused by war and civil strife.<sup>1</sup> In the developing world, it is an accepted view that women are amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged groups in society. 70% of the 1.3 billion people in the developing world living below the poverty threshold are women. The number of female-headed households in the developing world is rapidly increasing, thus increasing the responsibilities that women tend to shoulder. A number of variables are set to worsen the current scenario of environmental degradation and increase the build-up of GHG emissions in the atmosphere. These include energy intensity, increasing deforestation, burning of vegetation, population growth and, ultimately, economic growth. Women's contribution and participation can help or hinder in all of these variables. High dependency on agriculture, forest sectors and bio-fuels could increase vulnerability and heighten the risk of environmental depletion. Women's active involvement in agriculture, forestry and their dependency on biomass energy would necessitate effective environmental management. The involvement of women in the diversification of energy resources and facilitate the introduction of substitution fuels for household energy consumption could well constitute the essential part of adaptation strategies.

Hitherto, climate change policy and debate have had little relevance to grassroots populations. In Africa, the concept of global warming seems rather novel and is the preserve of civil servants and representatives of NGOs - discussed in conference rooms worldwide, excluding the participation of the critical masses. Yet climate change, or rather how we deal with its impacts, is surely part of environmental community management. Should we not therefore widen the debate? **Can we achieve environmental management without taking into consideration the full participation of those groups who are likely to bear the brunt of environmental degradation?**

(\*) *Dr. Fatma DENTON is currently working for Enda Tiers Monde – Energy Programme. She works essentially on climate change and issues relating to energy and the environment. Her recent project includes co-ordinating a case study book on gender and energy within an integrated development approach, which will bring together a number of experts from Africa to rethink gender strategies and find practical solutions to assist women in their fight against poverty.*  
[fatma@africaninformation.net](mailto:fatma@africaninformation.net)

An overall assessment of the climate change debate to date shows that women are patently absent in the decision-making process. **Their contribution in environmental policies is largely ignored. Decision-making and policy formulation at environmental levels such as conservation, protection and rehabilitation, and environmental management are predominantly male agendas.** The climate change debate is an indicator of how gender issues tend to be omitted, leaving room for complex market-driven notions equated in terms of emissions reductions, fungibility, and flexible mechanisms. Nevertheless, in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development reflected in Agenda 21; one notes the key role ascribed to women as principle actors in the management of natural resources and the development of sustainable and ecologically sound policies. Perhaps the fact that there are few trained women environmental specialists tends to accentuate

this gender deficit in environmental policy. Institutional weakness in women's organizations and underrepresentation in formal decision-making are factors that tend to swing the pendulum away from their oft-valuable input.

If action on climate change is partly about reducing vulnerability and building resilience then it is important that vulnerable groups do not suffer disproportionately from its adverse effects. Sadly, women figure among such vulnerable groups. One wonders, therefore, whether the architects of the Convention have given sufficient attention to the gender dimension in poverty reduction. It is obvious that poor men and women will be affected by climate change but women already figure disproportionately higher amongst these groups and their situation will worsen. In short, climate change will exacerbate existing inequalities. There is a need to conduct country specific market impacts to properly establish the degree of vulnerability of different groups. The poverty/livelihoods dimension is an important plank of sustainability and can impact on several different sectors. It is precisely this argument that is given scant attention in the climate debate. Here are some pointers for discussion:

Environmental stresses such as desertification, climate change, bio-diversity loss and their ramifications potentially worsen the lives of poor people in the developing world and increase their vulnerability. Concomitantly, women's resilience and capacity to react to environmental degradation and climate change would be further threatened. Although there is no scientific evidence that

<sup>1</sup> Almost one million people in Africa are living on less than US\$1 per day i.e. under the threshold of poverty. In Africa, two billion people do not have access to either modern fuels or electricity and hundred of millions of women and children are locked in the daily drudgery of wood collection.

natural catastrophes such as floods and storms are linked to climate change, they give a clear indication of the bigger picture i.e. infrastructural damage and population displacement as a result of climate change. Women may be unable to adapt to the vagaries of the weather and as such their vital remunerative activities could be severely disrupted.

The agriculture and fishery sectors will be affected due to rising sea levels. This would ultimately lead to food insecurity, loss of revenue malnutrition and environmental displacement. Higher temperature will inevitably mean less rainfall. The existing constraint of cultivating on arid land would be bigger and agricultural produce will fall sharply. Women, because of their intense involvement in this sector will become poorer. Equally, climate change will mean the reduction of fish species and even the disappearance of some seasonal fish. Changes in fish resources may trigger dwindling resources for women active participant in the fishery and food chain industry.

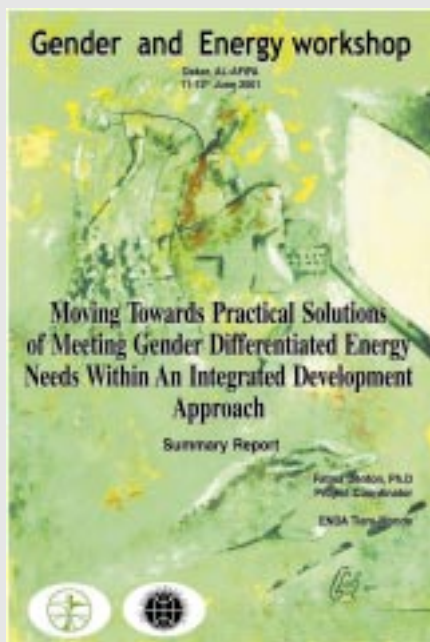
A sharp decrease in rainfall could well reduce the area which can support plantations, thus affecting the growth rate of the trees. This could mean loss of livelihoods for women active in the commercialization of forestry products.

Health problems such as cardiovascular and other respiratory diseases are likely increase from higher atmospheric temperatures. Environmental pollution and climate-related incidents will impair the health of men and women and who are already at the receiving end of indoor pollution, increasing the healthcare bill. Their low-income status means that women invariably have to take short cuts and are thus unable to cater for the family's nutritional needs.

If climate mitigation and policy is about sustainable development, why is it that such development is not given a greater social premise? To what extent are the Convention and the Protocol equipped to reduce inequalities? Likewise the whole theory and principle of equity is proving to be a nebulous concept interpreted according to the convenience of the different protagonists. Whose equity are we talking about? Is it about ensuring that a country such as Nigeria with a fossil fuel-dependent economy receives adequate compensation to justify huge job losses and for gradually steering away from this national economic trait or is it about ensuring that poor men and women are not displaced from their homes in search of food and shelter due to the vagaries and potential impacts of climate change? How do we establish the boundaries of responsibility and who foots the ever-escalating "human" bill? Should the focus be on trade or should we shift our attention to survival?

The Convention and Protocol on Climate Change has, to a large extent, magnified the North/South cleavage and exposed cracks in the South/South alliance. The potential impacts of climate change should not accentuate the contours of the developed/developing world divide neither should it plunge poor people into an ever-deeper poverty and dependency abyss. While the North and South quibble over responsibility for climate change, a whole range of physical, social, economic and cultural impacts of global warming endanger human security. Sustainable development and climate mitigation require collective input. The involvement of women in areas of environmental management and governance should not be perceived as an afterthought. Women's roles are of considerable importance in the promotion of environmental ethics. Their efforts in waste management through recycling and re-use of resources are an indication of the extent of their significant input to community development. Women in rural areas, due to their daily contact with the natural habitat for the provision of food, fodder and wood, tend to have sound ecological knowledge that could be useful in environmental planning and governance. Already, climate variability is causing unpredicted damage and increasing the vulnerability of poor communities.

Discussion on action to alleviate the impacts of climate change is not simply a scientific debate; it is about questioning the ability of countries and their peoples to anticipate and respond effectively to the adverse human and physical effects of climate change. From a livelihood perspective, poor communities are potentially the big losers in the "scramble" for markets within the overall emissions trading and climate policy debates. Thus, efforts must be devoted to creating a situation in which all stakeholders can derive some benefit. Measures should include the demystification of climate change issues in order to generate popular consensus and ensure that the effects of climate change do not It is about creating opportunities that the poor could benefit from; giving them greater responsibility in environmental management, creating environmentally friendly technologies that would generate revenue and jobs. It is also about exploiting existing indigenous environmental knowledge, fostering an environment where community development becomes paramount, improving the quality of life of poor people, building resilience and crafting sound policies to counter environmental hazards. In relation to gender, it is about recognising the potentialities, especially in decision-making, of women, who already account for a significant proportion of survival strategies in poor communities. Environmental stewardship is about recognising the participation of different socio-economic groups and ensuring that each group has the capacity to adapt to the potential impacts of climate change and guarantee the safety of the planet. ■



**Disponible à :**

**Enda Energie**

BP : 3370

54, rue Carnot

Tél. : (221) 822.59.83 / 822.24.96

Télécopie : (221) 821.75.95 / 823.51.57

Courrier électronique : [energy2@enda.sn](mailto:energy2@enda.sn)

<http://www.enda.sn/energie/rabede/rabede.htm>

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