New Approaches to Sustainable Development

by Bonnie Kettel

Les femmes et la recherche environnementale ainsi que les analyses politiques depuis la période précédant la conférence de Nations unies sur l'Environnement et le développement de juin 1992 (CNUED) font l'objet de cet article. L'auteure évalue la pertinence de l'écoféminisme comme analyse des sexes et de l'environnement.

Introduction

Vandana Shiva suggests that "maldevelopment" is an inevitable outcome of the "masculine" view of nature that emerged along with the "patriarchal project" of modern science (14-15). My argument draws on the work of John Livingston, who argues that maldevelopment in the South—and overconsumption in the North—are the inevitable outcome of a view of nature that he refers to as "resourcismo. " The phrase is apt: "resourcismo" refers to an outlook on the natural world that places profits, technology, and men's interests at the centre of development (Kettel; Stamp, 1989).

Implicit in this view is the assumption that the significance of nature rests in its exploitation, and that the environment, the life space surrounding us, consists of a multiplicity of resources destined for use in a world-wide quest for economic growth. Evernden points out that "resources are...human categories, indices of utility to industrial society." Yet, the predominance of resourcism tempts us to adopt its language and thereby to "enslave" nature and to treat people as "what the bureaucrat unashamedly calls a 'human resource'." Evernden challenges us to critique the assumption that "only utility to industrial society can justify the existence of anything" (10-11).

Women, nature and development

The World Conference on Environment and Development's (WCED) report, *Our Common Future*, was published in 1987. As a basis for a women, environment, and development research and policy analysis, the approach to sustainable development put forward in the report is a subterfuge. The view that nature—and women— can be "managed" with greater efficiency is central to its sustainable development agenda. The primary goal of *Our Common Future* is a "new era of economic growth, one...based on policies to sustain...the environmental resource base" (WCED, 1). The measure of sustainable economic growth is improved "per capita income growth" which has two essential elements: more efficient economic growth and lower population growth. However, the imperatives for sustainable development set forward in *Our Common Future* are different for the North and the South. The message for the North is to develop "greater efficiency in using materials and energy" (WCED, 50-51). The message for the South, for Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where "population growth is now concentrated," is to have fewer children (WCED, 99).

With the publication of *Our Common Future,* women and the environment became an urgent topic for development policy analysis. In response, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) set up a Senior Women's Advisory Group on Sustainable Development (SWAG or SWAGSD).[1]At the same time, donor institutions such as the World Bank (Stone and Molnar, 1986), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Canadian International Development Agency (Thompson) began to develop women and environment perspectives and programmes.

These policy initiatives often reflect the influence of the WCED approach to sustainable development and donor approaches to women and the environment. Indeed, Stone and Molnar speak of "women and resource management." For these authors, the solution to women and the environment issues is increased participation of women in existing programme and project initiatives. Policy initiatives conceptualized through the WCED approach, however, tend to "manage" women as a "human resource" for "sustainable development." One of the African success stories presented at the Global Assembly of Women and Environment, offers an example.

> With the assistance of village leaders, the project was organized...with mostly young people and women participating.... The project involved the collection of stones to fill the gullies, and the planting of trees and grass to prevent erosion.... The projects are accomplished in a very orderly fashion. The Chief beats the gong to inform citizens about the prevailing problem.... Decisions made are channeled through unit leaders....Unit leaders inform their people of the days set for communal labour.... Deviant citizens are fined. The most beneficial aspects of this project are that it prevents buildings from collapsing and helps maintain the fertility of the soil...(UNEP and Worldwide).

This is an apparently successful environmental rehabilitation project, one that makes efficient use of women's labour. But what does it contribute to their personal benefit, or their authority as environmental decision-makers? My view is that, without explicit support for women and their legitimate environmental interests, no initiative or activity should be funded or recognized as a "women and environment" project.

The Global Assembly provided visible recognition of the leadership role that women from the South play in challenging maldevelopment.

In the past decade, women and environment has become an important focus for broader feminist participation in policy formulation and political action. The WorldWIDE Network, which was founded in 1982, is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) made up of women "concerned about environmental management and protection," and the education of "the public and its policy makers about the vital linkages between women, natural resources and sustainable development" (WorldWIDE, 1991a: 7, 8). Together with SWAG, WorldWIDE organized four regional assemblies in Harare, Tunis, Bangkok, and Quito on women and the environment.

The policy dilemmas inherent in a resourcist approach to women and the environment were apparent at the African Women's Assembly in Harare. The impetus and organization for the event stemmed ultimately from UNEP and SWAG, with the assistance of WorldWIDE, and personnel from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The event was also supported by the Zimbabwe Ministry of Natural Resources, which was at that time led by Minister Victoria Chitepo, a prominent member of SWAG. Each of the agencies participating at the Assembly had its own agenda for the meeting, which overlapped only partially with those of the other organizers. This ambiguous, top-down approach had the goal of empowering African women, especially rural women, in the quest for sustainable development.

Not surprisingly, given its UNEP-SWAG origins, the Assembly's deliberations were organized by a resourcist view of the sustainable development agenda. Workshops, which included members of SWAG, representatives of various donor institutions, women and environment consultants and advocates, and a number of village women from rural Zimbabwe, were based on resource zones or sectors: Forests and Woodlands, Deserts and Arid Lands, Rivers and Lake Basins, and Seas (Loudiyi *et al*). As a result, issues arising from women's involvements with the natural environment were marginalized and distorted. The overall result was confusion and contradiction in the structure of the Assembly, the discussions at the workshops, and the initial outcome of the workshop deliberations.

The four regional assemblies led to the "Global Assembly of Women and the Environment," held in Miami in 1991. The Global Assembly, which was jointly sponsored by UNEP and WorldWIDE, was part of the official background deliberations for UNCED. It focused on 218 success stories of women's grassroots involvements with regard to four key environmental concerns: water, waste, energy, and environmentally-friendly technology. These assemblies were crucial in the emergence of feminist environmentalism at a global level. They brought women together, regionally and internationally, and provided a forum for discussion of women's environmental dilemmas and insights. They also provided visible recognition of the leadership role that women from the South, including women from rural communities, have to play in challenging the maldevelopment of the present and reformulating policy for the future. Stressing that women's full participation is essential for achieving sustainable development, the Global Assembly recommended that "the needs and views of women must be incorporated in the establishment of priorities in the management of human and natural resources" and that "women should also be involved in setting priorities..." (WorldWIDE, 1991b: 5-6).

The Global Assembly was immediately followed by the "World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet." The Congress, which included 1,500 participants from around the world, drew attention to the politics of policy formulation with regard to women and the environment through the "Women's Action Agenda 21." The Action Agenda pledges the participants to "the empowerment of women, the central and powerful force in the search of equity between and among the peoples of the Earth and for a balance between them and the lifesupport systems that sustain us all" (WEDO, 16).

The "Women's Action Agenda 21" is a call for feminist collaboration in environmental action. It goes far beyond the scope of the women and environment agenda established within the institutional policy framework for sustainable development put forward by WCED or, more recently, by UNCED. At the Global Forum, an international gathering of environmental activists and NGO's, the official UNCED position on sustainable development was roundly criticized. Several alternative NGO treaties and points of view were proposed, but "the most striking area of common ground" was "the strong criticism of the existing models and practices of development" and "the broad agreement that current strategies of development were unjust, inequitable and unsustainable" (ING, 2).

The official UNCED position on women and environment is contained in Chapter 24 of "Agenda 21," the global action plan adopted in Rio de Janeiro (WorldWIDE, 1992: 5-7). Chapter 24 is a great leap forward for the institutionalization of women and environment policy internationally, and nationally on the part of signatory governments. Nevertheless, it is limited by the resourcism of the WCED approach to sustainable development, and also by the structural inertia of official policy formulation. Thus, one of the objectives proposed for national governments is

"to consider developing and issuing by the year 2000 a strategy of changes necessary to eliminate constitutional, legal, administrative, cultural, behavioral, social and economic obstacles to women's full participation in sustainable development and in public life" (WorldWIDE, 1992: 5). Without local and international organization and collaboration, how many signatory governments will move forward with *this* objective?

In this context, the significance of the "Women's Action Agenda 21" is the potential it represents for collaborative support, within nations and globally, not only for the implementation of Chapter 24, but also for a vibrant new feminist environmentalism. The Action Agenda is the manifesto for an emerging political alliance among feminist environmentalists at a variety of institutional levels: political activists, NGO workers, scholars and policy analysts, and women from nations and local communities across the planet. Within this new alliance, there is one immediate task: the elaboration of a conceptual framework that will facilitate well-informed policy and programme support for the goals of the "Women's Action Agenda 21."

Rethinking ecofeminism

There is an established framework of ecofeminist analysis which offers some background for the gender and environment paradigm. There are several divergent streams of ecofeminist thought, mirroring some of the dichotomies in contemporary feminist analysis. These include, in particular, radical and socialist ecofeminism, labels that reveal the dominance of a northern outlook, particularly in early ecofeminist writing (Daly; Griffin).

For radical ecofeminists, female biology and women's reproductive capacities are an important, indeed, *the* source of environmental activism. This activism is based in the radical ecofeminist assertion that women and nature have been linked and simultaneously devalued in western culture, and that both can be liberated from repressive male domination through women-centred politics, activities, and spiritual expression (Merchant, 101). The assertion that women are biologically more inclined towards the "nurturing" of nature than men, however, is simplistic, ethnocentric, and dangerous for women's well-being and their participation in environmental decision-making (rather than the mere hard labour of environmental restoration). As King suggests, "the problem is that history, power, women and nature are all a lot more complicated than that" (111).

Nevertheless, radical ecofeminism has important insights to offer, particularly its insights into the simultaneous association and devaluation of women and nature in western culture. This joint cultural devaluation underwrites the resourcism of the WCED approach to sustainable development. The radical ecofeminist insistence on cultural and spiritual expression, and its attention to women's lives, including women's lives as mothers, are also, in my view, very positive contributions. Our task is to move beyond the ethnocentrism of this approach, while retaining its positive elements in a more broadly insightful conceptual framework.

Socialist feminism emphasizes the social construction of gender and locates women's work and use of nature in gender-based relations of production and reproduction. For socialist feminists, nonhuman nature is the necessary background to these gender relations as the material source of human sustenance. Socialist feminist analysis also highlights the impact of "statism, capitalism and racism" on women *and* the natural environment (Biehl, 53; Robertson and Berger).

However, socialist feminism has a crucial weakness as a basis for ecofeminist analysis: its failure to problematize and to ask critical questions about the links between people, gender, and nature as the necessary background to capitalist patriarchy. Several scholars have begun to address the limits of the socialist feminist framework as a basis for ecofeminist analysis. Merchant argues that "the potential exists for a socialist ecofeminism that would push for an ecological, economic and social revolution that would simultaneously liberate women, working-class people and nature." Merchant's analysis centres on the assertion that both "nature and nonhuman nature...(are) historically and socially constructed" (103). However, she offers us little guidance on the elaboration of this assertion into a conceptual framework for research on women's perceptions and protection of the natural environment cross-culturally or for new policy approaches in support of women, environment, and development.

"The most striking area of common ground was the broad agreement that current strategies of development were unjust, inequitable and unsustainable."

Conclusion

The WCED approach to sustainable development is centred in a view of nature that is implicitly culture-bound and male-biased. Although *Our Common Future* and the UNCED Agenda 21 do represent an important opening for policy initiatives addressing secure livelihoods and the protection of biodiversity, these documents, and the policy approaches that stem from them, fail to challenge our view of nature as a "resource" to be "managed" for the pursuit of profit in global development.

A central task for women and environment research, I suggest, is to document women's landscapes and the challenges to women's images of the natural environment and styles of environmental decision-making that are implicit in externally-imposed agendas, even in the guise of sustainable development.

It is in this context of practical environmental interests that women mobilize their styles of environmental decision-making and develop particular strategies for environmental use and protection. As for issues, the coordinators who met in Amsterdam agreed to focus their future collaborative efforts on alterna-

tive economics, the protection of biodiversity, climate change, and global trade as key policy arenas for women, environment, and development in the lead-up to the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing. As the Canadian Coordinator of one of the twelve women, environment, and development networks who met in Amsterdam, I add a final note: there is no hope in subterfuge.

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[1]SWAG includes members from Kenya (Margaret Kenyatta and Wangari Maathai), Somalia (Hawa Aden), Zimbabwe (Victoria Chitepo), France (Simone Veil), Finland (Aira Kalela), Hungary (Eva Szilagyi), U.K. (Fiona McConnell), Colombia (Margarita Marina deBotero), Ecuador (Yolanda Kakabadse), Egypt (Shafika Nasser), Jordan (Eideh Mustapha Mutlag Qanah), Tunisia (Hedia Baccar), India (Sheila Dikshit), Indonesia (Soepardjo Roestam), Phillipines (Veronica Villavicencio), and Thailand (Khunying Ambhorn Meesook). Joan Martin-Brown of UNEP is an ex-officio member of SWAG.

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