

Is this the future we want?

Despite calls for accountability and action by women's groups, the Rio+20 Conference fell far short of expectations

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This year, the Rio+20 conference, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, saw heads of State and representatives of civil society meet to discuss the critical issue of sustainable development. Twenty years ago, the historic Rio Conference of 1992 had led to policy outcomes that shaped the work of governments and civil society for the next two decades. These included the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Agenda21 and the Rio Declaration. The Rio Conference gave an impetus to implementation of Principle 10 (of the Rio Declaration) related to public participation, access to information and justice; agreements related to the issues of equity and equality between men and women; and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Perhaps most importantly, it showcased the will expressed by the developed world to finance and support proposals to achieve, globally, the goal of sustainable development.

At this year's Rio+20 conference two broad discussion themes were put forward: the 'green economy', particularly in the context of sustainable development and poverty

eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development. Women from all over the world actively participated in preparing for the conference, seeking clear recognition of their potential to help achieve the goal of sustainable development. Noting that women's rights lie at the heart of this goal, a statement by women of the Latin American and the Caribbean region declared:

"The world must recognize that we women are a group with diverse opinions and cultures, representing 50 per cent of humanity, but we coincide in our quest for equity, equality, social and environmental justice as these are fundamental pillars for achieving sustainable development. We share the concern of other major groups on the use of the 'green economy' concept. We are clear that a vision oriented towards sustainable development cannot only focus on an economic agenda, but must necessarily deepen agendas addressing the social, cultural, environmental and political agendas that have not been implemented since our last meeting in Rio. We want to take a clear stand against the 'dollarization' of life; we wish to take up the challenge of making real changes that go beyond 'greening' and the use of other makeup colours, and to get to grips with the real issues that will change the development paradigm of our planet. The agenda must incorporate what has been agreed and said in so many global, sectoral and women's forums, including Rio, Barbados, Cairo, Beijing, Monterrey and Manaus. We want the issues of women's health and nutrition, and the role that culture plays in a full life, to be analyzed; and the rights, roles, needs and vulnerabilities of women from indigenous communities and women of Afro-descent to be addressed in a holistic and concrete manner." (Adapted from the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Statement on Rio+20, PrepCom, Chile, 2011.)

The statement was clear. Women's human rights are rarely recognized and respected. These include women's sexual and reproductive rights, their right to live a life free from violence and femicide, and their right to sustainable development.

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From a women's perspective, sustainable development is a holistic concept that values, equally, the social, economic and environmental aspects of life, as well as equity and equality of opportunities, and access to justice, information and public participation. Sustainable development is central to the idea of human well-being, and, therefore, to achieve it, a fundamental precondition is the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

However, for many, the Rio+20 was a disappointment. Despite efforts made by women to call for accountability, action, financial commitments, and the recognition of a binding framework of human rights incorporating social, environmental and economic development, the conference outcomes fell short of expectations.

The Rio+20 outcome document, titled *The Future We Want*, can be accessed at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/thefuturewewant.html>. It incorporates, on the one hand, a strong social accent, recognizing that the "greatest challenge" for humanity is the total eradication of poverty, and that sustainable development must go hand in hand with equity. On the other, it sets no ambitious targets for the future and makes no commitments to finance actions to promote sustainable development. It takes a laissez-faire approach to the idea of a 'green economy', stating that different paths, perspectives, models and tools are available to enable each country "in line with its circumstances and national priorities, to achieve sustainable development". It advises governments to pursue green economies and to minimize the effects of climate change but sets no real objectives or time frames for this purpose. Its recommendations include the transfer of technology to developing countries via the United Nations, donors and international organizations; the setting up of a high-level political forum to provide political leadership, orientation and recommendations for sustainable development and the establishment of a working group to propose concrete

action-oriented sustainable development goals (SDGs). Further, it calls for discussions around the term 'green economy' and to identify broader measures of progress to complement the gross domestic product (GDP) measure.

What, however, did women expect from this process? The Major Group of Women (MGW) in 2011 called for, first, an evaluation of the implementation of the Rio principles and Agenda21, this time using clear indicators that bring to light gender differences and equity in general, based on several key questions: What has, and what has not, been achieved, and why? What is the role of financial institutions and private banks? Why has it been so difficult to finance and implement a process of sustainable development that includes women?

Second, the MGW called for women's access to land and sea; for control over natural resources; for education, information and access to environmental justice; for social security, and for financial support to integrate the needs of women into a world more balanced with nature.

Third, the MGW called for the recognition and valorization of traditional knowledge as practised by indigenous women to address issues of adaptation, mitigation and conservation of biodiversity and to promote the well-being of indigenous communities.

Fourth, it called for a clear and binding recognition that women's human rights, including their reproductive and sexual rights, are a fundamental part of the vision and practice of sustainable development.

While falling far short of expectations, Rio+20 did, however, give women a space to celebrate their diversity and to showcase local and regional examples of work related to sustainable development. It also reflected the strength and struggles of thousands of indigenous women and women fishworkers battling the powerful lobbies of mining, oil extraction and nuclear energy all over the world. ■

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