

Women's Empowerment and its Link to Sustainable Development: A Cross-Cutting and Integrated Approach

Introduction:

For the empowerment of women and girls to be realised through sustainable development, there needs to be more than a commitment to these goals. There must be concerted action across all countries and communities - dedicated resources should be provisioned to empower women of all ages and girls as part of the SDGs. Approaching gender equality as a crosscutting issue in the SDGs requires that gender is included at all stages of policy development, means of implementation, monitoring and accountability.

The need for a cross-cutting, inclusive and gender-sensitive approach is clear: without this approach the global transformation envisaged by the SDGs will not be achieved. Women and girls are crucial contributors, implementers and beneficiaries of sustainable development. Their empowerment is fundamental to the achievement of the 2030 Development Agenda. The stand-alone SDG on gender equality (Goal 5) should be celebrated, as it outlines targets for every country to make gender equality a reality. However, Goal 5 does not stand in isolation and will not achieve gender equality alone. A gender-sensitive approach must be implemented across the entire agenda for the 2030 development agenda to be successful.

Women and Girls as Agents of Change:

Women and girls comprise the majority of people living in poverty, and experience multidimensional inequalities. Previously, efforts were only made to include women and girls in 'women's issues' in development which failed to recognise the multidimensional nature of gender in development. Additionally, persistent and chronic underinvestment in gender equality and women's empowerment has exacerbated development limitations. These mistakes must not be repeated. Therefore, sustainable development initiatives must reinforce the consideration that women and girls are at a higher risk of being left behind. The voices and perspectives of women and girls must be included in policy development, implementation and monitoring on all issues and not only Goal 5. This would promote the inclusion of women and girls as leaders and decision makers, as well as relevant stakeholders and partners in sustainable development.

How resources are mobilised and how programmes are implemented has clear implications for women's empowerment and the achievement of gender equality. Gender equality is not only an aspect of implementation but a critical means of implementation, and an essential policy measure for countries to achieve their full development potential.

To mainstream the involvement of women and girls in sustainable development demands a change in attitudes and behaviour towards women and girls across all levels. For women and girls to be agents of change their input must be considered important; they should not only be thought of as 'beneficiaries' or 'vulnerable', they must be considered as equal partners and valuable contributors to sustainable development. With this attitude change it would be unnecessary to repeatedly call for women's and girls' inclusion because they would be included automatically. Women and girls can increase community capacity at the grassroots level, by leading effective community-based sustainable development actions that contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. These actions

reveal grassroots expertise that women and girls have on what actions are needed to better their lives.

Accountability and Monitoring:

Global initiatives designed to benefit the daily lives of people everywhere risk not being implemented appropriately, if at all, unless they are monitored and accountable. To know whether women and girls benefit from sustainable development efforts, it is critical to have accurate and reliable information through qualitative and quantitative indicators, citizen generated data, and data from governments, development agencies and other stakeholders involved in SDG implementation, including the private sector.

Global, regional and national accountability mechanisms need to actively facilitate the submission of information provided by women and girls on their experiences of the SDGs and their implementation. Quantitative indicators alone do not accurately reflect the experiences of women and girls. This was clearly seen with Millennium Development Goal 2 'Achieve Universal Primary Education'. Although girls were being enrolled in school to achieve this goal they were often unable to attend in practice for a variety of reasons including unsafe routes to school, lack of sanitation and household responsibilities, or received low-quality education as class numbers increased without appropriate additional resourcing. Therefore, even if government-agreed indicators suggest that a target has been achieved, it should only be considered achieved with the confirmation of women's and girls' experiences. The information that women and girls can provide will highlight the factors that are most likely to lead to transformative change and the realisation of gender equality and is critical to the success and relevance of any monitoring process.

Additionally, for knowledge about the status of women and girls to be accurate, it is important that gender-differentiated statistics and indicators are collected nationally, regionally and globally in order to measure gender gaps and adjust development programmes to rectify inequalities. At a minimum, data should be disaggregated on the basis of age, sex, geography, income, disability, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities (including multiple inequalities experienced by women and girls). Although some indicators are measured by household (not by individual) it is still important that the data collected for those indicators is disaggregated – it is important to know how the household is comprised. Without this information it will be difficult to properly and fully identify the gaps and challenges facing women and girls' empowerment as part of sustainable development.

Without mandated and obligatory follow-up and review processes there is a risk that the voices of women and girls will go unheard. That SDG follow-up and review processes "will be voluntary and country-led" provides countries with the option not to follow-up or review the implementation of the SDGs at all. Actions undertaken by the private sector contributing to the SDGs must also be accountable. As the private sector has its own interests that do not prioritise the needs of vulnerable and marginalised people, the unregulated and unaccountable outsourcing of sustainable development would not contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in reality.

The "voluntary and country-led" get-out clause creates a significant barrier to ensuring that programmes and projects designed to further the SDGs are accountable and secure the empowerment of women and girls as a globally agreed sustainable development objective. Therefore, not only are thorough and transparent gender-differentiated statistics and indicators a

vital accountability methodology, they are also fundamental as a means to develop appropriate implementation strategies, and for the fulfilment of gender equality commitments.

Human Rights, the SDGs and Women's Empowerment:

That the SDGs are 'aspirational global targets' and can be adjusted for 'national circumstances', is of concern. Although it is important for sustainable development policies to be contextualised, there is the potential for national agendas to dilute the strength and purpose of the SDGs to the disadvantage of all. It is a risk to allow countries to define development according to their own priorities in their national plans, as numerous countries systematically disadvantage and legally disempower key development stakeholders, including women and girls. Human rights frameworks and mechanisms are crucial to ensuring that 'national circumstances' are not used as a justification for diluting the implementation of the SDGs.

Human rights mechanisms like CEDAW and UPR can provide a valuable contribution to monitoring, accountability, and promoting a human rights-based implementation approach of the SDGs that would legally protect and ensure the empowerment of women and girls. Human rights standards facilitate the empowerment of all people, including women and girls. That the political declaration accompanying the SDGs acknowledges the role that human rights have in sustainable development is significant in achieving human rights for all. Human rights must be seen as part of development and as a mechanism for achieving the SDGs.

Empowering Women through NGOs and Civil Society:

Civil society organisations, including women's and grassroots organisations are critical to facilitating the inclusion and empowerment of women and girls in sustainable development. These organisations increase capacity through their networks and roll out sustainable development programmes effectively. As accountable organisations that represent the views of traditionally disempowered groups, including women and girls, NGOs can provide support and legitimacy to sustainable development programmes that other development agents cannot. Empowering civil society is also critical to the empowerment of women and girls.

Since the SDG negotiation process started, hundreds of laws and regulations across the world have been agreed that limit civil society space. This encroachment upon civil society, and the limitations being placed on NGOs, will only further disempower women and girls and will work against efforts to implement the SDGs. Without the support of NGOs and CSOs women and girls will not be able to access essential services that empower them, including legal representation, education and healthcare. If women and girls are to be empowered through the effective implementation of sustainable development principles then CSOs including women's organisations, must be included as well. Through CSOs and NGOs, women and girls will be listened to as partners and not merely co-opted into a development agenda that does not reflect their needs.

Conclusion:

The achievement of Goal 5 alone will not create a gender-equal world. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls must be used as a method of implementation across the SDGs to ensure their success.

All countries hold the same responsibility to ensure the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development within their own borders, and to support other countries in achieving the SDGs which includes reaffirming and contributing to the fulfilment of gender equality. Gender equality is a cross-cutting development issue, and unless addressed in a multidimensional way gender equality will not become a reality. Not one of the SDGs will be achieved without including women and girls as equal partners. Including women and girls in sustainable development would complement and support state responsibilities.

The challenge now is establishing what sustainable development means in practice: how the SDGs, development policies and means of implementation, will empower women and girls at every level. Women and girls must be equal partners in sustainable development.

Together the four undersigned organisations represent the views of over 160 000 women worldwide. They unite around the principle of empowering women locally, nationally and internationally up to the highest level. The four organisations work with women in communities to achieve gender equality through programmes and education.

