

# Consultation and Representation in Sustainable Development Arenas

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*La contribution des femmes dans les politiques nationales et internationales est cruciale pour l'égalité des sexes dans la sphère politique. Cet article examine le rôle essentiel des organisations locales et mondiales des femmes pour l'implantation des programmes de développement durable.*

Consultation and representation in public policy making arenas are key issues in developing the sustainability agenda, yet women's influence in these remains limited. *Agenda 21*<sup>1</sup> (UN) provided part of the basis for a study that I carried out participating in and observing the Gender 21 Network.<sup>2</sup> It set out to (a) review the extent to which women's organizations had been involved in developing local and national strategies for sustainable development in the UK, and (b) offer suggestions as to how to improve women's representation in consultative processes associated with these. It was facilitated by the Environment and Development Committee of the United Nations Association (UNED-UK), at the United Nations Association. It examined the potential for women to influence the sustainability agenda as laid out in *Agenda 21*.

## International Documents as Vehicles for Consultation and Representation

There are difficulties associated with using international documents as political leverage points. For example: awareness must be raised in the relevant arenas of their content and use; attempting to influence national policy on the basis of a non-binding document such as *Agenda 21* is never easy. In addition, representation of interests in international arenas is questionable as is accountability (Bischel). However, much has been achieved by women in international arenas linked with the development of the sustainability agenda. Evidence exists that complex local and national organization lies behind these efforts, and that national and local agendas are affected by them. (Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hausler, and Wieringa; WEDO; Evans; Keck and Sikkink).

*Agenda 21* called on signatories to ensure that women were consulted and had major group status. It said:

Any policies, definition or rules affecting access to and participation by non-governmental organizations in the work of the United Nations institutions or agencies associated with the implementation of *Agenda 21*

must apply equally to all major groups. (UN 219)

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social groups ... is ... critical to the effective implementation of the objectives, policies and mechanisms agreed to by Governments in all programme areas of *Agenda 21* ..." (UN 219). It called for socially inclusive consultations and it stated that a significant cause of unsustainable practices could be found in the exclusion of significant groups whose interests, experiences, and expertise were not reflected in and/or represented by development institutions. What counted as a development institution was not clarified, but I argue that this would include all formal democratic and economic institutions as well as informal ones that structure social and economic organization, including environmental ones. Among the key recommendations of *Agenda 21* were that governments should include women's perspectives in public policy, that women's representation in policy-making arenas should be facilitated, and that their numbers among decision-makers should be increased (UN 27-31).

Among the world's poor and socially excluded women are disproportionately represented. It is this factor that the UK women highlighted, linking it to the need for better representation of women's agendas in policy-making arenas. To strengthen and develop women's representation they pointed to *Agenda 21* which argues that women should contribute to strategy, play key roles as decision makers, and provide a focus for research, especially research that helps to identify "structural linkages between gender, environment, and development" (UN 222). Both *Our Common Future* (WCED) a report by an intergovernmental commission for the United Nations to inform the agenda of the Earth Summit and *Agenda 21* placed a priority on meeting the needs of the world's poor and on the alleviation of poverty to be underwritten by a general

redistribution of wealth. Both implicitly argue for a redistribution of power in favour of the poor. *Agenda 21* acknowledges that women should be empowered to participate in decision-making and that the evaluation of programs and activities (including anti-poverty programs) "... should be gender specific, since women are a particularly disadvantaged group" (UN 28-29).

### **The Gender 21 Network**

Women's networks entered a debate about the nature of sustainable development which until the early 1990s, was carried out without reference to gender inequality (Braidotti

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et al.; WEDO). The Gender 21 Network, linked to the Round Table on Women and Sustainable Development, had its roots in the international arena and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

With the help of UNED-UK, the Gender 21 Network and the Round Table on Women and Sustainable Development formed working groups to analyze consultative opportunities and how these were being utilized in the UK. They pin-pointed key issues, already on the agenda of women's and environmental groups that required a firmer footing within policy-making arenas. UNED-UK also offered educational mentoring about how to lobby the United Nations General Assembly Special Session that took place in New York in 1996, to assess progress in implementing *Agenda 21*.

There were six Round Table meetings between July 1996 and May 1997. The women's Round Table interacted with and exchanged views with others on poverty, education and health. All made their reports based on multi-sector input available to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) the UK government and non-governmental audiences. Many of the network participants were representatives of organizations that were membership-based, and which had good international links with women's groups in other parts of the world. Some were advocates, some worked in local government and were involved in Local Agenda 21 (LA21). LA21 can best be understood as a set of consultative processes that were to involve stakeholders in developing local sustainability plans, based on *Agenda 21*. Some were involved directly in LA21 consultations, and some were academics. Within their own organizations, campaigns

were mounted to raise awareness of sustainable development issues and of opportunities that existed to influence the implementation of *Agenda 21*. Through the consultative processes set up by UNED-UK, the Gender 21 Network argued that there were fundamental shortcomings in the implementation of *Agenda 21* that were linked to three issues: the need to develop better networking strategies; more effective opportunities for participation in policy-making arenas; and policies to tackle social and economic disadvantage (UNED-UK).

### **National Strategies**

There is no evidence to suggest that women's organizations had any impact on the first national strategy published in the UK by the Department of the Environment (DoE). It put forward an environmental agenda to be accommodated within the classical "cost-benefit" economic paradigm. Most of the action it recommended to promote sustainable development was to be taken through market mechanisms and/or through voluntary action involving behavioural change. Consultations and the wider participation of the public in setting and delivering sustainability via LA21 were welcome (DoE 201) but, on the issues of representation and the necessity for a redistribution of wealth and power to enable socially-excluded groups to play an equal part, it was mute. That poverty exists in the UK, or that it is necessary to address as a relative concept, was not acknowledged. Women were mentioned in the strategy, but only in relation to their being aided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in southern countries particularly as participants in or beneficiaries of poverty-alleviating projects (DoE 195).<sup>3</sup> Thus poverty was acknowledged as affecting women in southern countries, but not in northern ones. A continuing debate about the role that the economy plays in shaping poverty was never mentioned. However, these issues were considered in the second strategy (DETR).

The second UK strategy addressed the need for key forms of redistribution to redress the balance of power between women and men, between the better-off and the less well-off, and between economic costs and benefits, and social and environmental ones. It laid out possible ways that the numbers of women in government and in senior positions could be increased (DETR 30). However, the issue of effective representation was not tackled. The Women's Unit, as part of the government's Cabinet Office was to support the sustainability agenda, but no hard and fast criteria were stated as to how.

### **LA21 and Local Strategies**

The LA21 initiative in the UK brought many NGOs and members of the public into discussions and events designed to inform local strategies. Academic interest in LA21 drew attention to the various styles of consultation

utilized in developing local action plans. Many looked at the extent to which there had been community participation in developing LA21 but failed to make a detailed analysis of how “community” had been defined for the purpose, or the extent to which major groups or sociologically “hard to reach” groups had been brought into the process. Very few studies focused on women’s involvement in LA21, and my own literature search carried out in 1997 showed only one (see Buckingham–Hatfield 1994, 1995). Some other studies mentioned the specific involvement of women, but perhaps because of the nature of ongoing research, told us no more than that they were involved, or commented that they ought to be (Freeman, Littlewood and Whitney; Agyeman and Evans).

It was within this context that the Gender 21 Network operated. The Local Government Management Board played a central and strategic role in raising awareness about LA21 among local authorities.<sup>4</sup> Along with the Department of the Environment, it supported an influential national, multi-sector, steering group, the LA21 Steering Group, which in turn advised local authorities on progress and strategy (Voisey and O’Riordan).

A key message of the LA21 Steering Group was that local authorities should take up the challenge of helping to stimulate and orchestrate local strategies and activities. A crucial aspect of this process was to facilitate participatory consultations. Surveys were carried out to assess progress (LGMB 1996, 1997; Tuxworth and Carpenter; Tuxworth and Thomas; Tuxworth). To local actors, new to the sustainability agenda as most local authorities and community participants were, the survey questions acted as “sign-posts” as to how to move LA21 forward. Two questions were particularly noteworthy: 1) Whether LA21 campaigns explicitly involved women, older people, ethnic minorities, or people with disabilities; and 2) Whether formal partnerships existed between local authorities, business, academia, and/or NGOs (charities, community groups).

The question about women’s involvement was asked for the first time in November 1996. It was not asked in earlier surveys carried out by the Local Government Management Board in 1994 and 1995. Bearing in mind the fact that local strategies were to have been completed at the end of 1996 (UN 233), this can only be seen as an afterthought.<sup>5</sup> Of the 475 local authorities surveyed in November 1996, 297 responded (LGMB 1997). Sixty-seven authorities, equivalent to 22.6 per cent of respondents, reported they had explicitly involved women (LGMB 1997: 8).

The question about formal partnerships is also interesting. It did not ask about the nature of the partnerships nor draw attention to the requirement to involve all major groups in LA21 processes as set out in *Agenda 21*. Formal partnership is not defined, although much of the literature from political sociology and planning tells us that in the UK, these do not imply equal partners (Greed; May;

Jewson and MacGregor; Moore). By 1996, 86 local authorities reported that they had developed partnerships with business, 70 with academia, and 99 with non-governmental organizations.

It would appear that where *Agenda 21* conflicted with existing political and planning processes the latter were not experimented with as far as major group involvement and the need to empower women was concerned.

### **Building Better Involvement and Representation of Women in Decision-Making Arenas**

Processes of involving women have evolved and changed

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in the UK and internationally between the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and the Johannesburg Summit in 2002. The Gender 21 Network was an early attempt to tap into women’s organizations to discover what potential existed for these to participate more fully in international, national, and local policy decision-making. It found that many women welcomed the opportunity for more representative and accountable contact in consultative processes but that there were few resources to support them. The Network collapsed in 1999 as funding proved impossible to secure and the constituent parts of the network settled into their more usual domestic agendas. Between 2000 and 2002, UNED–UK again raised awareness among the non-governmental community and made an online facility available to those who wished to participate in major group consultations. Multi-sector dialogue was also promoted (Hemmati and Seliger).

My study (Barber) showed that women’s networks were eager to participate in multi-sector dialogue, however, structuring group representation is not easy, as other studies have also shown (Young). Women can be seen as a major group with many shared interests, however they are not a homogenous one. Many consider themselves as belonging to more than one group. Women are disproportionately represented in socially-disadvantaged groups and are numerous among the poor, pensioners, those who lack time to participate in public affairs, and among carers. I argued that it would be necessary for policy-makers to develop outreach and capacity-building programs designed to encourage “hard to reach” and disadvantaged groups to participate. My study built on previous ones that showed where women were absent from consultation as well as from planning and evaluative arenas, their issues

were always marginalized (Greed; May). Feminist analysis of policy and planning has also pinpointed how planning and evaluative arenas overlook women's issues where a specific gender focus is not part of everyday analysis (May). Women need to be 50 per cent of those consulted and ideally they should be representative of different socio-economic interest groups.

Some of the consultation methods used locally could have done much more to identify important issues for the agenda. They could have also fostered support for ending women's oppression and promoted economic and social welfare as necessary goals for sustainability, as well as crucial underpinning for citizenship and effective participation in decision-making.

My reflections on the processes that worked, and those that did not, in the wake of the Earth Summit, led me to explore possible links between associative democracy, action research, user involvement, feminism, and representative government, in which the capacity of disadvantaged groups is developed so as to strengthen their position in policy-making. Action research starts from the premise that those who are socially disadvantaged can be empowered to articulate their own agendas and to put their issues into the political arena (Chambers; Reason). User involvement in policy development and evaluation has been experimented with in the UK in recent years but it has been criticized for not being representative or accountable enough (Barnes). Nevertheless, I believe it has potential to fit into an action research structure and to become more representative and accountable. I see participatory user group representation operating within associative democracy, and alongside representative democracy, as providing a legitimate and fruitful way forward (see, also, Achterberg; Hirst). And, there is much to experiment with and to learn from political sociologists, who encourage us to consider the power dynamics within partnerships (Jewson and MacGregor).

International networks have the potential to represent large numbers of women in arenas where small numbers of individuals working together can wield a particular kind of power. Face-to-face debate and consultation offers opportunities that are not available to those working in communities and at the local level. On the other hand, local arenas have the potential to capture the views and help promote behavioural change necessary to implementing the sustainability agenda. Many of these are capable of helping to deliver ideas agreed on the international stage. It is here, among these dynamics, that more attention could be focussed on developing better representation. Women's organizations should maximize their input to policy-linked fora at the international, national, and local levels but face considerable obstacles to achieving representation for their many viewpoints, and taking in the plethora of issues that *Agenda 21* addressed. To do this they require an iron will, resources, and networked "know-how" to support and develop their

own capacity to represent their constituents, and pragmatism and energy to link their networks with policy-making and evaluative fora.

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<sup>1</sup>*Agenda 21* is a program of action for sustainable development established in 1992 during the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>2</sup>My research was based on participant observation of the Women and Sustainable Development Roundtable, which was facilitated by UNED-UK. It also included documentary analysis of *Agenda 21* and two UK government national strategies (DoE; DETR).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of this, and a comparison to the national process in relation to women in Australia see Buckingham-Hatfield and Matthews.

<sup>4</sup>The Local Government Management Board (later renamed the Improvement and Development Agency), represented the interests of local authorities. It supported the LA21 Steering Group. Its focus was on management and resource issues and its mission included helping local authorities to be more effective in their work, deliver better services, and provide democratic leadership in their communities (Levett).

<sup>5</sup>The date was extended to 2000, by the new Labour government in 1998, (SOLACE, LGMB, LGA).

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