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# A Feminist Agenda For a Sustainable Future

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**S**ustainable development is a complex concept that is not defined in simple terms to anyone's satisfaction. Economists evaluate development that is environmentally sound and sustainable in terms of growth and efficiency. Others use social criteria of employment, empowerment and participation, social mobility, social cohesion and cultural identity, and institutional development. Ecologists value primarily ecosystem integrity, carrying capacity, biodiversity, and are concerned with issues such as global climate.<sup>1</sup>

The World Commission on Environment and Development with Gro Harlem Brundtland as chair, offered a definition of sustainable development: to ensure that humanity meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Brundtland Report (1987) elaborates on sustainable development in terms of technology and economic growth. Though well-researched, valuable, and thought-provoking, the Report's reliance upon technology and economic growth in a Western style of development to achieve sustainability has been heavily criticized. The debate on how to meaningfully achieve development in a sustainable environment continues.<sup>2</sup>

The complexity of sustainable development and the lack of global, or even national and local, structures enabling development in a sustainable environment have led to the increasingly important role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots organizations (GRO). These organizations often challenge government policies and attempt to change the status

quo. The growth of such organizations in recent years, especially in the South, demonstrates the dramatic increase in concerns of women regarding development.<sup>3</sup> Women, having been left out of the decisionmaking structures and yet responsible for the care of their families in terms of basic necessities, challenge the development strategies that have failed in the last decades.

Women have disproportionately borne the burden of structural adjustment policies, unpaid labor, and deteriorating standards of living worldwide, especially in countries of the South and in marginalized groups in industrialized nations. The Human Development Report of 1995 states that "poverty has a woman's face" with women comprising 70 percent of the 1.3 billion of the world's poor. Though life expectancy in developing countries has increased and the literacy rate is 81 percent that

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of the North, two-thirds of the illiterate are women, 80 percent of pregnant women suffer from anemia, and there are six HIV infected women to every four infected men.<sup>4</sup>

The message that women and development organizations promote is that there will not be any sustainable development without the full involvement of women in the areas of decisionmaking, environmental protection, and improvement of agriculture, health, and education.<sup>5</sup> In Third World countries, women, most often at the base of the economic structure, interact directly with nature to procure water, food, and fuel for their families and communities. They are keenly aware of both deteriorating ecosystems and failing environmental health and resources.

Two of the means by which NGOs, especially feminist NGOs and GROs, challenge prevailing economic, social and political thought, and the policies of governments with regard to development and sustainability are: 1) a call for an alternative economic framework that is centered on human beings rather than on the market; and 2) a redefinition of national security that moves away from the military priorities of an arms culture to a culture of peace.

In pursuing these concerns, women's NGOs and GROs and partner organizations work for constructive solutions to the dismal future that lies ahead if we do not attain a degree of compatibility living with each other and with Earth's natural systems. Though some organizations existed far in advance of the publicity and awareness that the 1987 release of the Brundtland Report and the ensuing 1992 Earth Summit gave to sustainable development, the work of these organizations is a persistent thread through recent global conferences and declarations.

At the first United Nations Conference on Women in Mexico City in

1975, eighty NGOs participated. Following the intervening decade on Women, 9,000 individuals participated in the 1985 Nairobi Conference; 171 governments adopted the Forward Looking Strategies on Equality, Development and Peace to be implemented by the year 2000. In Beijing in 1995, 30,000 women and men representing thousands of NGOs participated in the NGO Forum that paralleled the Fourth World Conference on Women, where representatives of 181 governments agreed by consensus to the Beijing Declaration and The Platform for Action.

In preparation for the Earth Summit in Rio, a coalition—the Women Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)—emerged. WEDO facilitated the interaction of women scientists, leaders, and grassroots and feminist organizations from all over the world, proposing the goal “to make women more visible as participants, experts and leaders in policy-making on international affairs and in formulating alternative peaceful solutions to world problems.”<sup>6</sup> In the confusion of the plethora of NGOs, WEDO has offered some structure and an agenda in working at major conferences.

Organizations such as Development Alternatives With Women for a New Era (DAWN), formed within the Third World feminist network, are able to work with WEDO to challenge the current market-profit oriented economic model in calling for a new, human-centered development paradigm.<sup>7</sup>

The most violent and unsustainable expression of production and profit, no matter what the social or ecological cost, is in the military culture and arms industry. The debilitating drive of societies to resolve differences by war or threat of war has been an issue cautiously avoided by negotiators at recent conferences such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, the World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul in 1996. The inability to confront the issue of national spending priorities directed at military research, production, and deployment, cripples any chance of success in offering realistic financial mechanisms for funding proposed global agendas of sustainable development.<sup>8</sup>

A non-governmental organization with more than eighty years of experience in integrating goals of sustainable development and national security is the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). It was founded in 1915, when women from warring and neutral countries defied travel restrictions and the front lines, and met in the Hague to find a peaceful negotiated solution to the war in Europe. Though they were not rooted in modern ecological understandings, the women were motivated by the realization that human advancement and development were impossible in a world at war and constantly arming for war. They intended to work to make future war impossible by striving to abolish the political, social, economic, and psycho-

logical causes of war.<sup>9</sup> The League now has members on every continent and in more than forty countries.

In its analysis of sustainable development, the Brundtland Report concluded that the greatest threats to our future and to development are the danger of intentional or accidental nuclear disaster, and war involving weapons of mass destruction.<sup>10</sup> Even in the absence of war, the research, production, storage, trade, and transport of nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional arms place in peril both human life and the environment. We are finding in

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the 1990's—as destruction of nuclear and chemical weapon stockpiles is slowly and painstakingly being negotiated, and the dissolution of the former Soviet Union leaves unprotected dangerous weapons and weapon ingredients—that even the necessary dismantling of weapons is costly beyond imagination. Resources are diverted from urgent human needs to the endless chasm of the arms culture.<sup>11</sup>

As part of its work in the recent major global conferences, organizations such as WILPF have tried to make a constructive contribution to discussions by offering solutions. Women do not want to be seen only as victims, but as offering positive steps to be taken toward building a secure and sustainable society. How can technological advances be used to alleviate toil without destroying the natural environment? What kind of structures are needed to ensure the full participation of all citizens at all levels, while at the same time being aware that responsibilities have to be delegated at certain levels? What mechanisms of accountability are needed to prevent bureaucracies from taking over? To achieve a truly multicultural society, what kind of social organizations, protective laws and rules are needed to ensure the full cultural expression and identity of all peoples?<sup>12</sup>

The growing economic imbalance, the urgent need to develop an infrastructure that enables development to be sustainable, and the need to move away from military solutions to human security require collaborative work among organizations and government. As examples, we cite two challenges facing the many plans and projects attempting to offer solutions.

- *Research and study in the area of military conversion to a civilian economy.* One such center is the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC). BICC offers a clearinghouse and provides documentation,


research, consulting services, and facilities for governments, non-governmental organizations, companies, and individuals. Its work constitutes a holistic approach to conversion, including programs for demobilization of personnel, alternative uses for facilities, analysis of reallocating financial resources, and reorientation of military research and development facilities and creativity for non-military purposes.<sup>13</sup>

- *Developing the elements of a culture of peace.* At an NGO workshop conducted by WILPF in Copenhagen during the Social Summit, March 1982, a woman from Armenia said, "In my culture if your son kills my son, then my second son must kill your son. How can I teach my sons that even if your son kills my son, my son will not kill your son?" A project of WILPF is to work for reconstruction in our violence-prone societies and in war-torn areas so that the cycle of violence does not continue. This is a long-term project, to be sure. There are GROs and NGOs indigenous to all regions who already work on this reconciliation and reconstruction.

It was hoped by many non-governmental organizations that the global conferences of the 1990s would produce stronger elements and agreements regarding the profound effect military activities have on ecosystems and human development. The questions, however, are avoided and are said to be addressed in the appropriate political negotiations. It seems out of the realm of reason to discuss the issue of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from tanks and bombers that can within seconds destroy the infrastructure of a society and all its development programs. An obvious example is Lebanon, whose civil society was laboriously reconstructed after previous wars—water systems repaired, fields cleared of debris and undischarged weapons, services of education and hospitals renewed. The resumed destruction sets them back by decades.

True, since the Earth Summit in Rio there have been changes. More than 300 million people have been added to the earth, an unknown number of species have been irrevocably lost, and irreplaceable resources have been used or made unusable. Military spending is down a bit and there is talk within the United States military establishment of environmental stewardship and the use of military technology to protect the environment.

We all are dependent—no matter how urban—on the soil, good seed, and well-timed rainfall. We abhor—most of us—killing, violence, and the abuse of life and all of nature. The ideals of peace are intimately linked to how we relate to natural systems, linked to how we use metal, soil, water, air, and the diverse genetic resources upon which we depend for life. The ideals of peace and our very survival are dependent also on how we use intellectual,

psychological, and spiritual resources struggling to do away with violence to nature, to ourselves, and to each other. 

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Summarized by Iftokhar Ahmhedin *Beyond Rio: The Environmental Crisis and Sustainable Livelihoods in the Third World*, eds. Iftikhar Ahmed and Jacobus A. Doelman, A Study prepared for the International Labor Office (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> World Commission Office on Environment and Development, *The Brundtland Report, Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Julie Fisher, *The Road From Rio: Sustainable Development and the Nongovernment Movement in the Third World* (Praeger: Westport, Connecticut, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Human Development Report 1995, United Nations Development Program (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Fisher, 1993, 100-103.

<sup>6</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organization

<sup>7</sup> Peggy Antrobus—Coordinator, DAWN, Pinelands, University of the West Indies, Pinelands, St. Michael, Barbados.

<sup>8</sup> Thijs De La Court, *Beyond Brundtland: Green Development in the 1990's* (New Horizon Press: New York); also, by Zed Brooks Ltd., London: 1990. Translated from the Dutch (1988) by Ed Bayers and Nigel Harde.

<sup>9</sup> Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

<sup>10</sup> Brundtland Report, Chapter 11, "Peace, Security, Development, and the Environment."

<sup>11</sup> An extensive body of literature on the topic of the impact of military activities on the environment and on development exists. See, for example:

Arthur Westing reports published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), (Taylor and Francis LTD: London, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1991).

Michael Renner, *State of the World 1994, Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress to a Sustainable Society* (W.W. Norton, 1994).

Seth Schulman, *The Threat at Home: Confronting the Toxic Legacy of the US Military* (Beacon Press, 1992).

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Amy Smithson, "Chemical Destruction: The Work Begins," Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, April 1993, 38 ff.

The Defense Monitor, Center for Defense Information, Washington, D.C.

<sup>12</sup> In 1990, WILPF inaugurated an organization-wide study through its sections in forty countries on "Achieving a Secure and Sustainable Future."

<sup>13</sup> Bonn International Center for Conversion