

Investing in Women in Agriculture Instrumentalization vs. Transformation

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Rio+20, which marks the 20th anniversary of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, is supposed to renew political commitment to sustainable development, assess the progress and implementation gaps in meeting already agreed commitments, and address new and emerging challenges such as the multiple crises that define our landscape today. Unfortunately, it falls short of these goals, particularly with regard to food and agriculture and women's rights.

Of major concern is its narrow agenda and emphasis on a green economy characterized by the private sector, market-based mechanisms and voluntary guidelines for investment, all of which steer us away from what is most needed: accountable, comprehensive, less intensive solutions for development including initiatives to support resilient, local and indigenous food production. Existing human rights commitments are marginalized as are social issues relating to the environment.

Also of concern is the fact that Rio+20 lacks political weight. Though it addresses big themes like the green economy and governance, the real decisions among leaders relating to investment and trade in food and culture (including decisions relating to climate, land, water and energy that directly affect women and girls) have already been taken or are being decided elsewhere by the G20, the private sector, the World Bank and even by other processes within the UN. In other words, major action is happening – just not at Rio+20. And much of what is happening elsewhere is targeting resources for new markets. For example, in 2011, the G20 Ministers released their action plan on food prices and agriculture,¹ which will be furthered at the next G20 Leaders Summit in Mexico² – directly prior to the Rio+20. A G(irls)20 Summit was also organized with a focus on global food security and high-level government and private sector support for investing in women and girls' leadership.³

The World Economic Forum, which includes the most powerful transnationals, has already unveiled its vision for expanding global private agricultural investment⁴ and also launched its Women Leaders and Gender Parity Programme⁵ to close the gender gap among leaders within the Forum. And, then there is the new Alliance for Food Security

and Nutrition,⁶ which was announced in May, 2012 by the private sector with the support of the G8 to pour ten billion dollars into agriculture in Africa over the next ten years. Women and girls are at the top of investors' agenda, and why wouldn't they be? They represent a new market!

Until recently, leaders' pledges to support women in agriculture hadn't really materialized. For example, "the international community contributed 7.5 billion dollars in official development assistance (ODA) to rural development during 2008-2009, but only three percent of that amount was earmarked for programs where gender equality was the primary object."⁷ Today, there is growing political momentum to invest in women in agriculture, and this is a positive development. However, we should be cautious about "cutting and pasting" women and girls into a growth model for agriculture that has already been proven to increase inequality, poverty and hunger. As a result of this model, close to a billion people, one fifth of world, remain undernourished. The most vulnerable groups, who are women and children, disproportionately experience acute food insecurity and under-nutrition.⁸

The argument goes: if we invest in women in agriculture by providing them with more inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides or more credit, the world's productivity will increase by 20-30 percent.⁹ And, if we produce more food, the world's growing demand will be met. Yet, this ignores the systemic problems relating to the global food economy, which are characterized by unfair trade and investment rules, volatile markets, and climate change, all of which have worsened the odds for poor women, their families and their communities. Simply targeting women and girls to produce more food or to provide them with more safety nets does not address the structural problems that are also affecting access and distribution.

The fact is that the current political model of development continues a pattern of targeting and *instrumentalizing* women to expand intensive models of growth rather than promoting a rights-based development agenda. In this neoliberal development model, *poor women are policy takers, not policymakers*. They are given an incomplete deck of cards and informed of the game they will play. They do not choose the game. They do not set the rules. Most will not achieve the status of 'winners.'

Arguably, Rio+20 should be *the* space for dealing with all aspects relating to sustainable development, especially for linking macro and micro-level policies to improve how food is grown, processed and distributed from an environmental, social and human rights lens. But it isn't. The multiple crises relating to food, water, land and markets should be leading governments to recognize that more intensive production and macro-economic policies that undermine governments' responsibility to meet the needs of their people cannot be the solution. But it hasn't happened yet.

Twenty years ago during the first Earth Summit, women organized a Women's Action Agenda for a Healthy Planet. As their motto, they proclaimed: "*Women do not want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream: We want the stream to be clean, clear and healthy.*"

Twenty years later, we should update our motto with regard to agriculture: *'Women do not want to be mainstreamed into a model of agricultural growth that is both polluted and pitted against the rural and urban poor. Whether we are talking about a green economy, a blue economy, a yellow economy or a purple economy, our growth is based on human rights, fairness and equality, a sustainable environment, accessible, nutritious food, and thriving families and communities.'*

References

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- 2 More information on the G20 Summit in Mexico can be found at <http://www.g20.org/en>
- 3 <http://www.girls20summit.com/the-summit/agenda/>
- 4 http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_CO_AFB_IndustryProjectOverview.pdf
- 5 <http://www.weforum.org/women-leaders-and-gender-parity>
- 6 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/18/fact-sheet-g-8-action-food-security-and-nutrition>
- 7 Deen, Thalif. "Gender Empowerment Still Lags Far Behind in the Global Village." IPS News. March 13, 2012.
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- 8 The Millennium Development Goals Report. 2011. United Nations. http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/11_MDG%20Report_EN.pdf
- 9 Report on State of Food and Agriculture. 2011. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. March, 2011. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e00.htm>

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