Alternatives for Sustainable Development and Gender Equality: A Case Study from Sierra Leone

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that women in developing countries live in a desperate economic situation. Yet there is little consensus as to what the problem is and therefore how it needs to be tackled.

In the light of the “booming industry” of development agencies, it is time to evaluate how efficient and effective their work has been especially with their gender policies, and above all to evaluate the sustainability of programmes when agencies “poll out”.

Alternatives for Sierra Leone can be looked at from a perspective of increasing gender participation in the economic, political and decision making spheres.

This paper will however focus on women’s roles within the framework of sustainable development in Sierra Leone, since women are

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the ones marginalized and thus those whose status needs to be improved to equate that of men. I will first address the key terms in the topic:

**GENDER**

People often use the word “gender” as a synonym for “sex.” Sex, however, refers to biological characteristics that make someone female or male. Gender has also been misused as a synonym for “women” or “female.” Development projects directed toward women’s needs, for example, may mistakenly refer to gender needs. Instead, gender refers to the socio-cultural construction of roles and relationships between men and women. In describing socio-cultural construction, gender analysis considers other social structures such as race, ethnicity and class.

Gender roles and relationships are the assigned activities and relative positions of men and women in society. These help to determine access to opportunities and resources based on local cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity. While gender roles and relationships impose expectations and certain limitations on both women and men, they can perpetuate forms of subordination.

More important about the term gender is describing it in a particular framework and hence the Sierra Leonean mentality. In Sierra Leone, gender is connotatively referred to as a set of educated women who are either by misfortune or otherwise not married and who will not want to be married simply because they do not want to be under the control of a man. The society looks at an ideal woman as one under the control of a man and as a devoted wife and mother, and deviants are referred to as gender activists who want others to be like them.
Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is often defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Although easily said, bringing these concepts to life requires a delicate balance between the planet’s social, economic, and ecological systems and a shared vision of the type of future we want for the world.

Sustainable development can come about only through sustained commitment and cooperation on the part of all the world’s people, in both rich and poor countries.

Gender Equality

The status of women has improved considerably in Sierra Leone in the past two decades. Yet in no part of the country do women enjoy equal legal, social, and economic rights. Women have fewer resources than men, and more limited economic opportunities and political participation. Because gender gaps are often largest and most costly among the poor, gender equality is a core development issue. Gender inequalities persist because they are supported by social norms and legal institutions, by the choices and behaviors of households, and by regulations and incentives that affect the way economies function.

At this point I would like to ask a question reflecting the reasons for our being here today. Why is gender inequality of importance to development? We all clearly have the answer. The obvious answer is that gender inequalities hinder development. In short, women have a profound and pervasive effect on the well-being of their families, communities, and local ecosystems. Therefore, inequities that are detrimental to them—be it to their physical and mental health, income-earning ability, education and/or decision-making power, to name a few—are detrimental to society at large and to the environment and economy as well.
Gender Inequality and Sustainable Development

Sustainable and equitable development gives overriding priority to meeting the basic needs of the world’s poor; and it emphasizes social equality between all peoples now, as well as a responsibility to future generations. Sustainable and equitable development suggests that national governments must not only work to alleviate poverty but also to address the great disparities in wealth and quality of life between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” And women are often among the most vulnerable “have-nots”. In Sierra Leone, women do not have the same opportunities as men. While the situation of women has improved, marked disparities exist almost everywhere in the country.

From all evidence the alternative to sustainable development in Sierra Leone is to enhance gender equality in all spheres of life. This should start with a reformulation of laws, especially family law.

Arguing on gender equality and economic development always reminds me of the egg and chicken situation. The problem is always to determine which one comes first; the “egg or the chicken”. Implicitly, it is assumed that gender equality will bring about economic development and economic development will bring about gender equality. I am a proponent of the first solution where gender equality leads to economic development as opposed to economic development leading to gender equality, because economic development is not the only factor affecting gender inequality. Norms, laws, attitudes, religion, practices, etc., all have their own share of the blame for gender inequality. Hence, it is unsafe to assume that economic development will lead to gender equality. But when all mentioned elements have been treated in order to allow gender equality, then economic development is ensured.
OVERVIEW ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE

There are many factors affecting a woman's status in Sierra Leone and what opportunities she has to control and influence her life-situation.

GOVERNANCE

The basic document of a country's legislation is its Constitution. The Constitution of Sierra Leone states that it is not allowed to discriminate against any citizen on the basis of sex and that all citizens of Sierra Leone have equal rights to vote.

The problem for Sierra Leonean women is not their legal rights. Women in Sierra Leone are protected by the laws, but the problem is that the laws are not followed in the society. Most women are not fully aware of their rights and opportunities and they are not encouraged to learn about their rights, hence the political awareness is often low. A woman's fulfillment and identity come from marriage and motherhood. These are also her roles in life. Women are discouraged to participate in decision-making. Their situation is even worse in rural areas where they have been relegated to the kitchen. Women do not even come close to constituting one fourth of the national legislature of Sierra Leone.

What is of importance for Sierra Leonean women in relation to the law is that investigations have revealed that large masses of women in Sierra Leone have remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

Women experience differences in everyday life, and local governance is very much engendered. Traditional gender roles corner women into juggling with multiple responsibilities at home, at the workplace and in the community. The demands on women leave them with less time than men for political involvement, and with
no voice in the decision-making processes that impact on their lives and environment.

**EDUCATION**

Although the overall literacy level is progressing, there still persists a difference in literacy among women in rural and urban areas. Women make up nearly two-thirds of the over 80% of the total illiterate population. There are more boys than girls in schools at all levels. Dropping out from school occurs when the children (girls) have to stay at home to take care of younger siblings or engage in petty trading to help their parents with the income, or in case of teenage pregnancy in urban areas. Dropouts are mostly girls.

I see education as the key to sustainable development for women. Even with the greatest share of the billions of dollar micro-credit schemes, a lower education, especially on how to manage resources, will always be an obstacle to equality. The old saying “when you educate a man, you educate an individual and when you educate a woman you educate a family” is a justification for policies that enhance female education.

**UNEMPLOYMENT**

Many people who move to big cities come from rural areas and have been working in the agricultural sector. They often have to switch to another occupation, if they find work at all. Finding a job is difficult as many of them can hardly read and do not have any special skills. The Census reports show higher unemployment rates among women than among men. Women have less than one third of the jobs on the market and less than 10% of administrative and managerial positions in the country.

Women’s work often do not appear in economic official reports as the work they perform at home or in the informal sector is not taken into account in the country’s GNP. Most women in the infor-
mal sector are still engaged in agricultural activities. The informal sector is predominantly composed of small scale businesses financed by small amounts of local capital, indigenous and often based on the family and kinship network. Technology is limited and the enterprise is likely to be labor-intensive. Earnings in this sector are on or below the minimum for subsistence and the majority of women engaged in this sector are marginalized.

In Sierra Leone a majority of the women who earn money are working in the informal sector and have not made any major gains in terms of employment. Statistics show a decrease in employment opportunities for women who used to work in the public sector as a result of privatization. This is one of the inevitable negative effects of globalization on women in developing countries. This increase in unemployment has not been accompanied by a parallel increase in employment opportunities in the private sector. The prices of food have gone up significantly while women's wages have declined in real terms.

**Health**

The need for reproductive health services is particularly great among adolescents, who account for the majority of births and abortion each year.

Almost 60 percent of the people of Sierra Leone depend on unimproved water supplies to meet their daily needs. Urban populations are better served than rural populations, but even piped water from municipal supplies may be contaminated by disease-bearing organisms and pollutants. Women are the most affected by this problem of clean water as they do all the cooking, laundry, and cleaning. Thus in case of an outbreak of any waterborne disease, women are the first victims.
Environment

Sustainable development depends on the environment providing a variety of goods and services – now and in the future. But the connections between environmental conditions and human welfare are complex. Environmental changes can worsen poverty by compromising health, livelihoods, and protection from natural disasters. And economic growth can create new stresses on the environment as the demand for environmental resources rises and the damaging by-products of economic activity accumulate. But environmental resources are needed to promote economic growth and reduce poverty, and growth itself creates the means and the demand for an improved environment. Though there are laws to preserve the environment in Sierra Leone, they are poorly enforced. Moreover there is limited or almost no monitoring system for conservation.

Most household energy in Sierra Leone is still generated by burning wood and other biomass, most of it gathered by women and children. Women use forest products to make household items such as bowls, mats, and baskets which may also be sold to generate income. Women are disproportionately affected by these bad environmental conditions because they are the caretakers of families. They are particularly vulnerable to shocks from environmental change and natural catastrophes.

Women also bear the worst consequences of environmental policies that ignore the principles of sustainability such as overfishing and industrial logging, which has now become a great environmental factor in Sierra Leone. When large tracts of forests are destroyed, or when technology displaces workers, women have to cope with the increased difficulties of the day-to-day survival of their families.
Land and Agriculture

Access to farmland in Sierra Leone plays an important role in the economic well-being of the rural population. Land ownership in Sierra Leone can broadly be divided into three categories: customary ownership, state ownership and a partnership between the state and customary owners. The fundamental principle upon which ownership of land is based in Sierra Leonean communities is collective ownership by a community or group. Customary ownership occurs where the right to use or to dispose of use-rights over land rest on the fact that they are recognized as legitimate by the community. The rules governing the acquisition and transmission of these rights are usually explicitly and generally known, though not normally recorded in writing. Such ownership occurs mainly through discovery and long uninterrupted settlement or gift from another land-owning group or traditional overlord.

In Sierra Leone the land rights of women are insecure in rural areas. Women's access to agricultural land is only guaranteed through the husband or a male member of the family. This in itself is considered unfair. Women's contribution to agriculture is significant as farming in Sierra Leone is largely unmechanized.

Two very important aspects of gender equality in Sierra Leone are worth mentioning when we talk about women and economic development: the Gender-Related Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Measure.

Gender-Related Development Index (GDI)

This measures differences in achievements between men and women for the four following indices:
- life expectancy at birth
- educational attainment
- share of total population
- share of economically active population
The GDI for Sierra Leone in 2001 according to the UNDP Human Development Report is 0.3573. This shows that Sierra Leonean women suffer from greater deprivation and lower achievement levels than men. Except for LEB and share of total population, women lag behind in all other aspects, especially education—female literacy of 19.1% is half of that of male which is 38.7% (Government of Sierra Leone, 2001)—and economic activities. In the light of other factors (socio-economic, political, etc.) the war has only aggravated the situation.

Gender Empowerment Measure

This captures gender inequality in major areas of the economy. These include economic, political participation and decision making. It focuses on women's opportunities rather than their capabilities.

- Like the GDI the GEM calculated for Sierra Leone in 2001 is 0.3293 showing a big difference in women and men's opportunities in Sierra Leone.
- The low GEM in Sierra Leone is a course for concern.

MOVING TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND TOWARDS GENDER EQUITY IN SIERRA LEONE

The issues discussed above highlight a serious equity problem in Sierra Leone. This calls for support for gender equality objectives because a failure to do so is a vital injustice. Positive measures must be taken to rectify disparities as an inherent part of the national development agenda. Equity implies creating and maintaining a balanced situation where disparities are acknowledged, understood, and addressed. Equitable development will remain elusive unless a concern for equity is present in all aspects of the development process, in the production, distribution, consumption and property rights. Gender analysis could be useful to shed light on these processes from the point of view of the gender relationships.
Through gender analysis, governments and non-governmental organizations can become aware of the hidden processes that support and perpetuate disparities, and then be able to design and implement policies that either directly correct or, at least, seek not to exacerbate these imbalances. To address such disparities the following factors may serve as alternatives for sustainable development and gender equality.

**Education**

Sustainable empowerment of women is an ongoing process of individual and collective struggle to challenge the unequal power relations between men and women. There is an intimate connection between education and development. The concept of education is the process that enables women to come together to seek the knowledge and information, which can empower them to control and direct their own lives. As women become more aware of the complex web of factors that have deprived and marginalized them, they begin to identify the ability to read and write as a skill that can foster sustainable development and thus empowerment. Today, education for women is considered as an important tool for achieving equality between the sexes. Policy-makers in Sierra Leone have come to accept that sustainable development can come out of the education of women as a way to empower them. Several radio and television campaigns have been launched on the theme “send your girl child to school” while adult literacy programs are concurrently run.

**Employment through Micro Credit**

Women in the informal sector usually set up a business of their own to earn money and become self-employed. To be able to start a small business these women are in great need of credit. The government has created group loans to poor people at low interest rates but these loans have mainly been accessible to group leaders, predominantly men.
Micro-finance programs targeting women have become a major plank of the government's poverty alleviation strategies since the late 1990s. Consonant with the concern for financial sustainability, accumulating evidence of women's higher repayment rates has led many programs to target women. Increasing women's access to micro-finance provides economic empowerment, increased well-being for women and their families and wider social and political empowerment.

Conditions for micro-finance delivery affect women's ability to use micro-finance to increase and control incomes. For sustainable development purposes, though interest rates must cover cost of loan and delivery, they must be kept low, easily accessible, and the loan strategy must provide for graduation to larger loans; “multiple choice” options based on participatory consultation, including loans for new activities, health, education and housing should be encouraged.

**Health Services**

Reproductive health services provide men and women with the knowledge they need to protect their health and the health of their families. This includes family planning, methods to prevent and treat sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and discourage harmful practices against women.

**Environment**

Sustainable development programs must foster an ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially just development. It must focus on blending gender issues into the global environmental movement by: strengthening national networking between women's and environmental groups; mobilizing women's involvement in environmental and sustainable development decision-making; and advocating for gender mainstreaming in national forums. Where the national environment and biodiversity are to be preserved,
women should play the lead, for most of their economic activities entail tapping the natural resources.

TRAINING

Women are key actors in the food system at all stages, from production to processing to utilization. Training activities must reflect this reality. Extensive training for women is needed in the areas of agricultural production, post-production processing, small enterprise development and food preparation, as these are the economic activities women engage in; they are illiterate and do not qualify for jobs requiring some educational qualification. Trade (petty trading) has become a crucial step in the food system especially for the urban women who in most cases are single mothers catering for their families. Basic training in record keeping and business management will help empowering women.

GOVERNANCE

Good governance, the art of efficient public leadership, is the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources; and the capacity of governments to design, formulate, and implement policies and discharge functions.

Where good governance has been lacking, (be it economic, social or ecological) as was the case in Sierra Leone in late 1970s to early 1990s, no progress was made. On the contrary it resulted in stagnation at an already low level, or even in economic reversals.

Poor governance generates a social environment detrimental to development. In such cases even external aid, whatever the amount or intention, has little effect. Indeed, it even becomes harmful, like in Sierra Leone where it contributed to prolonging an undesirable situation.
Good governance places people at the center of development. Where people grow, profits grow. Where there is long-term investment in people's health and education, where both men and women, regardless of their social status, have access to the necessary means of production, extension and credits, they can take their fate in their own hands and use opportunities to improve their quality of life.

The responsibility for sustainable development at national level, involving the complexities of economic, social, political, cultural and ecological components that must be put together under a specific set of conditions, lies first and foremost in the political regime's hands.

THE WAY FORWARD:
HOW CAN THE GENDER INEQUALITY GAP BE CLOSED IN SIERRA LEONE

Four main approaches are discernible:

1. Tackling Poverty

- Research has shown that women are poorer than men and even among the poor in developing countries women predominate. There is therefore a very strong need for aid agencies to provide women with resources to help them cope with their poverty.

- Research has also shown that women give far greater proportion of whatever they earn to their children and families. Thus, channeling resources through them is arguably a very cost effective way of channelling resources indirectly to the family, children, older persons and to others in the community.
2. Redressing neglect

- It is now widely recognized that women have largely been neglected by aid programmes and development planners. The vast majority of aid that goes to people is directed to the family which implies to men since they are the heads of the families.

- The assumption is that they will distribute benefit according to need. But considering that men and women have different needs, different concerns and different perceptions of life goals, and as men use a large proportion of family resources for their own purposes and tend to group that of the women with their children’s, they have derived disproportionate advantage of the modern education, training, land, credit they have received and reached positions of power. In contrast women have been left in a much weaker position than formerly.

- With this background, I think that it is necessary, for reasons of social justice and practicality, to give women direct support so as to redress the balance.

3. Attitudinal change

- One contributing element to women’s lagging behind in Sierra Leone is the fact that many women lack self-esteem in a male-dominated society and perceive themselves as unable to perform certain tasks or are discriminated against in hiring. Even educated women face this situation and consequently end up as nurses, secretaries and housewives.

- Gender inequality itself is greatly perpetuated by women themselves. It is mothers who over-feed sons and underfeed girls. It is mothers who take the girls out of school to ensure that boys remain there. In other words the question of how to change both women and men’s attitudes has to be addressed so that women and girls get a fair share of social and familial resources.
4. Empowerment

- In most communities in Sierra Leone women are the main agents of change. Implicit in their strategy is an acceptance of change seen in a positive light. But Sierra Leone has been experiencing negative change, and women are often the first to protest against the destruction of communities, environment and lifestyles.

- Seeing women as central to the process of change overturns a common assumption that women are innately conservative and opposed to change. I would rather say that this approach assumes that women only resist change when they are not involved in planning or implementing it, have no control over any of the processes involved and are unlikely to benefit from it.

- Taken further, that unless women themselves are empowered and feel they can influence the direction of change, and given structures through which they can be involved in the implementation and control of the process, they will not be enthusiastic change agents.

- However, once involved, the direction, modalities and pace of change will be more sustainable as both men and women support them. Implicit in this is the assumption that giving small power to individual or groups of women will not lead to a long term, sustainable change.

- What we need is a more strategic approach that includes working closely with women's groups as partners, providing them with information and contacts with other groups, facilitating networking between women's groups, identifying organizational needs, providing training and other support.
CONCLUSION

STRIVE FOR FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- Develop credit programs for poor women with effective, informal lending practices including small, short-term loans increasing gradually in size;

- Quick, simple application; and management of nonpayment risk with group guarantee, savings and possibility of repeat loans.

SERVICES

- Provide services for women in their communities and in the economic activities they know – but improve productivity, profitability and working conditions.

- Improve women's status by organizing women's support groups outside the home.

- Help women fit their economic activities flexibly into roles of parenting and other household responsibilities.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

- Integrate financial services with other benefits such as literacy, health, education, sanitation and environmental conservation, etc.

- In talking about women's situation in the light of economic development in Sierra Leone, it is very important to note that the country has gone through or is going through years of civil war. This is undisputably a very important factor for women's economic status. It is obvious that whatever the natural endowment of a country, a real human development cannot take place where bloody civil wars and desperate brawls over the allocation
of scarce resources are raging and where despots bleed their countries dry to enrich themselves and arm their subordinates.

- It is impossible for an economy to flourish where the “power of the gun” rather than free and fair elections decides who shall rule. A government that shoulders responsibility for sustainable development and ensures its people enjoys security, solidarity, order and continuity, creates an environment in which citizens can exercise their productive, political and cultural abilities. The 10 years of civil conflict have put Sierra Leonean infrastructures and human development levels to the lowest in the world as noted in the Human Development Index. Regardless of that position, as peace returns, there is nothing better than a search for sustainable development alternatives with a gender face.