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Climate

Durban, Climate & COP17: Women as last priority

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Thousands of lobbyists from multinationals swarming the UN, and the oil companies that are part of negotiation delegations to COP without any intention to cut back on their emissions have, so far, more power than a few phrases about women's rights and a woman chairperson to the COP.

That climate change affects men and women differently and that men are bigger emitters than women are old news. It is, therefore, disappointing to note that civil society in its mobilisations against COP17 did not spend more time on issues like gender, gender roles and gender equality. At the same time several organisations report that the official COP17 worked hard on mainstreaming gender issues in discussions and position papers.

"Gender has been one of the buzzwords here at COP17," reports the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) from Durban. Over 30 side-events on gender issues have been held and December 5 was declared the Gender Day by the UNFCCC. There is still a long way left, but more and more organisations are making efforts to make gender a central part of agreements and the framework for discussions, according to WEDO.

Many meetings were held on high levels before COP17 to make sure that gender issues makes it into all documents and policy papers to be presented, according to GenderLinks - necessary since references to gender and women were absent from important documents such as SADC's (the Southern African Development Community) suggestion for a Framework on Climate Change. GenderLinks has also been part of training journalists from southern and eastern Africa in news reporting with a gender perspective.

Women held prominent positions at the official COP17 - president was Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, former minister of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa, and Christiana Figueres, who has been part of Costa Rica's delegation to COP for many years, is the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC.

From an elite perspective this has been presented as a real possibility for women in the most vulnerable positions to - drastically but not unrealistically written - survive. But at the same time there was never any doubt that COP17 would close with a deal much less powerful than the Kyoto Protocol - which itself places much too weak demands on the cutting on emissions for the world to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

And it is the poorest women in the world that will be hardest hit by the obvious lack of political will to spend resources on changes in industries and agriculture, public transport and consumption patterns to save the climate. The thousands of lobbyists from multinationals swarming the UN, and the oil companies that are part of negotiation delegations to COP without any intention to cut back on their emissions have, so far, more power than a few phrases about women's rights and a woman chairperson to the COP.

Next to COP17 there was C17, a space for activists where trade unions, environmental organisations, NGOs and social movements gathered during the two weeks of COP17 in order to build alliances, acquire more knowledge and find alternatives to the market-based solutions that were being debated at the governmental level.

But besides the energetic Rural Women's Assembly - consisting of over 700 women from the rural areas of southern Africa - there were few opportunities to highlight the effects climate change has on women or women's solutions to the crisis. Remarkable, considering the fact that the event was held in Africa, where the threat to the continent's food production is so closely linked to women's roles as producers of food.

A woman journalist explained how she had discussed with her editor the invisibility of women's issues amongst the activists. Nyathi Esther, who works with gender issues in the mine workers' union NUM, had after a few days not heard anything about women in the seminars where she had participated. The international trade union federation ITUC held 23 seminars - not one of them had women's issues as a priority. A meeting on eco-socialism was criticised because three out of four speakers (all three men) completely missed to reflect over the strong influence patriarchal structures have in terms of exploitation of humans and environment, and for simply reducing this to "a single sentence mentioning women".

Agnes Nygren from the Africa Groups of Sweden comments: "No, unfortunately there has not been a lot about women's issues. In private discussions with activists it is obvious they are very conscious of how climate affects women and women's role in finding solutions to climate change. But this has not been picked up by organisers of seminars and meetings."

When the biggest trade union federation of South Africa, COSATU with about 1,8 million members, introduced their climate policy the gender perspective was all but present.

"There is a parallel gender process taking place in COSATU about how climate change affect women, and we appreciate how it has affected women at the level of employment.

But it is correct, the policy has no gender perspective and that makes it weaker in that aspect", comments the president of COSATU, Sidumo Dlamini.

Terisa E Turner, associate professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph in Canada, presented eco-feminist and class-based perspectives to the climate crisis. She says that a gendered class analysis has been largely absent amongst the climate activists and in the seminars she has participated he gender perspective has been "almost zero".

Asked if the lack of a gendered class perspective can lead to failure on our part, she said: "Yes! Women with a gendered class perspective are not very prominent here - and we have to work to bring it here."

But, she further says: "The thousand women from the rural areas that are here, they are the most powerful group at this meeting - they are the producers of food and they raise the children. And we will see more of them in the future".

And fact of the matter is that these women to a large extent hold the key to the solutions. Their visions of production patterns and reproduction possibilities, without discrimination, based on human needs as opposed to profit accumulation, are a realistic and inevitable alternative to the agreements emanating from the COP processes. Perhaps it is about time that the diverse international climate movement starts taking them seriously and realise that their experiences are central to the possibility of creating a sustainable and equal society.

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