

Gender Perspectives: Debunking Climate Policy Myths

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This article is discussing what it may mean to take a gender approach to climate policy. Going beyond merely adding gender language to existing policy formulations, women have begun questioning some widespread basic assumptions.

One of the main contentious issues in the international climate policy debate continues to be the divide between industrialised and developing countries. Yet today, it seems that this divide is not as clear any more as it was twenty years ago when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was being developed. Current per capita carbon emissions from energy, for example, are of the same magnitude or even higher in some countries such as Singapore as those in industrialised countries, such as the UK. However, when taking into consideration historical emissions of developed countries, which are responsible for the bulk of carbon that has already been released into the atmosphere in the last 100 years or so, the North-South divide is still obvious. For instance, cumulated per capita carbon emissions of the UK since 1950 are twice as high as of those of Singapore.

But this is not the only generalisation in the climate debate that is making it difficult to look effectively at questions of fairness in a future climate 'regime', and questions of climate justice. Within each country, the divide between privileged and underprivileged people is as large as the international divide between developed and least developed countries. The size of the carbon footprints of different strata of citizens ranges from very large to virtually zero. Some poor people, though few, in rich countries, produce virtually no carbon emissions at all, e.g. the homeless, while in developing countries, small elites of rich people are responsible for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that may well be higher than those of average citizen's emissions in industrialised countries.

Moreover, according to UNDP's 2007 Human Development Report¹, there is an inverse relationship between climate change risk and responsibility - at local as well as global levels. Vulnerability depends on the exposure to the negative effects of climate variability, and the capacity to avoid these effects or cope with them (resilience). Whether in high- or low-income countries, poor people with small carbon footprints are usually the most vulnerable. Slum dwellers, for example, often live in areas most exposed to climate hazards, such as landslides or flooding, and people depending on subsistence agriculture or informal jobs often have very limited options to cope with, or escape from climate related disasters.

As we know from a number of UNDP and World Bank reports, women constitute a disproportionately high percentage of the poor worldwide. Moreover, inequalities relevant to climate change are not only related to income and assets, but also to power relations between the genders, the distribution of labour, in particular care and family work mostly done by women, gaps in education, and mobility constraints. Therefore, even within poor populations, women have special vulnerabilities due to their traditional roles.

International climate policy that is primarily looking at nations and national or regional average values of per capita emissions or vulnerabilities, is not considering these social and gender aspects. For several years, women's groups and gender experts have been advocating the consideration of

¹ United Nations Development Programme, 2007. Human Development Report. United Nations, New York

these issues in the international climate negotiations and at national levels. A number of references to gender have now been included in the negotiating text on future commitments and actions². However, including “gender language” is not sufficient³. Merely stating the special vulnerabilities or referring to women’s special needs does not spur much action, nor is it well understood by most actors in the climate debate. Over and above such ‘gender mainstreaming language’, it is necessary to conduct a much more profound analysis of the underlying reasons for climate change, the shortcomings of current climate policies, and women’s preferences and visions for the future.

Let us look at some features of climate policies through a gender lens, and demonstrate that some assumptions underlying these policies are rather myth than reality:

One important assumption is that measuring the amount of greenhouse gases generated within the territory of a nation is the proper way to determine the nation’s share of responsibility for climate change, and thus its duty to do something about it. It is certainly the easiest way of attributing emissions, and it is meaningful, but only to a certain degree: It does not take into account the consumption of goods and commodities that are imported from other countries. Thus, for instance, the shift of energy intensive industries from developed to some developing countries with emerging economies leads to an apparent reduction of developed nations’ emissions, although they may actually consume a bulk of the products. In addition, analysis indicates that the carbon footprint of expenditures is lower in high-income countries than in poor countries, due to differences in industry’s energy efficiency.

In contrast to this methodology stipulated for national reports under the UNFCCC, the carbon footprint of nations can be calculated⁴ assessing the total emissions of products consumed in a country including the supply chain. If these carbon footprints are attributed to nations, there is a slightly different ranking in terms of their respective responsibilities for emissions. Even more importantly, this approach is more appropriate in order to identify where to place efforts for emission reduction. Analysing the carbon footprint of nations shows clearly that the bulk of emissions are related to household consumption, in particular construction, shelter, food, and mobility, as this is the ultimate purpose of most production and manufacturing.

What does this have to do with gender? From a number of surveys, we know that in terms of climate policy, women tend to put more emphasis on changing consumption patterns when thinking about appropriate measures for mitigating climate change⁵. More than men do they believe that the main solutions for the climate problem will be changes in lifestyle and behaviour, rather than changes in supply side technologies. Hence we believe that if more women were involved in climate policy-making, there would be more focus on changing consumption, reducing energy use, downsizing vehicles, and revising other behaviours related to high emissions.

Another widespread myth is the notion that technologies must constitute the main means to combat climate change. However, while technologies such as renewable energies and clean cars play an important role, they can only ever be part of the solution. Improved technologies can provide some more leeway, but cannot remove the limits of continued growth on a finite planet - i.e. the limits

² See www.unfccc.int for current negotiating documents (April 2011).

³ See: GenderCC - Women for Climate Justice (2009): ‘Gender Mainstreaming and Beyond - 5 Steps Towards Gender-sensitive Long-term Cooperation’, Submission to the AWG-LCA, <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/smsn/ngo/140.pdf>

⁴ Edgar G. Hertwich, Glen P. Peters: Carbon Footprint of Nations: A Global, Trade-Linked Analysis, Environ. Sci. Technol., 2009, 43 (16), pp 6414-6420

⁵ For more details see, e.g. Gotelind Alber: Gender, Cities and Climate Change, background paper prepared for UN-HABITAT’s Global Report on Human Settlements 2011, available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?typeid=19&catid=555&cid=9273>

that we have already exceeded. Cutting GHG emission as heavily as it is needed therefore must go beyond using more efficient technologies. It requires a transition to low- and zero carbon lifestyles, structures and systems. This includes behavioural changes towards sufficiency, and structural changes, including infrastructure, services, and governance.

For instance, spatial and urban planning and design are crucial areas of working towards energy efficient buildings and living environments, and to minimising the demand for transport. In addition, planning for, investing in, and maintaining infrastructure and services in order to offer public transport, efficient ways of heating and cooling buildings, and options for recycling and reuse of products are required. Policies at international and national levels are not sufficient to achieve deep cuts of greenhouse gas emissions. Local and regional authorities, and private entities and consumers also have to play significant roles. Multi-level approaches and arrangements, providing guidance and incentives to local and regional actors and enabling them to contribute to mitigation in a measurable, reportable and verifiable way are an essential element of effective climate policy. Multi-level approaches will, in addition, open up chances to improve the involvement of women in climate policy-making, as women's access to participatory processes and decision-making positions tends to be better at the local level.⁶

Such considerations are not only valid as regards mitigating climate change, but also in terms of adaptation, which is only to a minor extent depending on technologies, while the bulk of interventions needs to focus on infrastructure and services such as water supply and sanitation. More importantly, however, adaptation strategies that really build community resilience must address the underlying causes of vulnerability such as poverty, discrimination, and exclusion. This, again, cannot be achieved with technologies, but rather with social change towards empowerment, equity and justice.

Another myth of climate policy revolves around offsetting emissions by means of the carbon market. The underlying assumption is that it is irrelevant in which location on the planet GHG emission cuts actually take place, as the only relevant factor is the overall GHG concentration in the global atmosphere. Therefore, the objective of the market based mechanisms is to exploit the most cost effective potentials for GHG emission reduction in terms of investments per avoided ton of emissions.

However, again, offsetting is not a valid option to achieve the profound and longer-term changes we need. For the atmosphere, it is indeed not important *where* we cut emissions. But for societies and their future development it is essential where these actions are taken, at both macro and micro scales. If industrialised countries continue with business as usual, only introducing marginal structural changes, they will never achieve sustainable lifestyles and per capita emissions. Yet some day - the earlier, the better! - per capita emissions need to be brought to a sustainable level (and even below, if historical responsibilities are taken into consideration).

The structural, systemic changes mentioned above will only come about in due time if we initiate them now, as, for example, reshaping existing urban structures to facilitate low-carbon lifestyles will take considerable amounts of time. However, such efforts are not rewarded by the carbon market, because it is hard to quantify their impacts in terms of emissions reductions, or these reductions will only occur in the future. Because they do not receive carbon credits, such activities are often neglected, although they would not only reduce carbon emissions in the long run, but

⁶ Of course, we see this as an entry point, not as an argument to confine women to local level decision-making.

would also deliver co-benefits in terms of cleaner air, improved health of citizens, reduced accidents and noise.

Moreover, the lack of environmental integrity of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) which has been substantiated by a number of studies is not only due to institutional and procedural shortcomings that can be overcome through improvements in rules and provisions. It is rather an inherent problem of the CDM: If activities to cut emissions are solely driven by profit interests, they will always tend towards the least-cost option, trying to discover and exploit quick fixes and loopholes, rather than sustainable options which, in many cases, are either more expensive, or have longer lead-up times, or yield fewer emission credits.

The breakdown of Certified Emission Reductions (CERs) already issued under the CDM can illustrate this: 48 per cent of CERs accrued from cheap hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) projects which do not have any additional benefits⁷. By contrast, the number of issued CERs from projects to improve energy efficiency at household level is zero, and less than 1 per cent total CERs if projects in the pipeline are considered. This is because projects in this area are small scale and scattered, and they are labour intensive, thus involving high transaction costs. Therefore, though essential for citizens and in particular women in order to save costs and get access to clean energy, they cannot compete with large scale and industrial projects in the carbon market.

Obviously, women are particularly disadvantaged if climate policy-makers pin their hopes on the carbon market. Not only that their benefit from the projects' impacts is marginal, they also are usually not involved in project development nor profits from projects, as their access to land, property and financial markets is highly limited. Therefore, policies and measures to combat climate change need to be effective packages of various instruments, including non-market based options such as standards, planning and regulation, in order to avoid discrimination against the financially less well off.

Another shortcoming of the carbon market, in particular the CDM, is the underlying one-dimensional perspective focussing solely on greenhouse gas emissions. The assumption that this narrow view can deliver combating climate change is neglecting everything that we have learnt about people and the environment since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. In truth, climate policy must be a multidimensional approach, taking greenhouse gas emissions into account, but also aspects of social and gender equity, community resilience, environmental issues such as reducing pollution and preserving biodiversity - in other words sustainable development and all its three pillars of economic well-being, social justice and environmental protection, plus a fourth pillar, as many argue: that of good governance. Universal participation of all, based on equal rights and opportunities, may seem like a lofty goal - far away, and taking too long, particularly in this era of urgency of combating climate change.

Yet there is no alternative.

Or should we really seek to rescue the climate without the people?

⁷ CERs are the units to measure carbon credits issued from projects under the CDM. HFCs are industrial gases, and some of the are unwanted byproducts from industrial processes. Their destruction is cheap, but has nevertheless received CDM credits in countries lacking regulation stipulating to avoid them.