

Women and the social dimension of sustainable development

By Dr. Ahmad Bin Ali Bin Muhammad Al-Makhani
(Sultanate of Oman)

This paper aims to address certain aspects of the issues of relationship between women and sustainable development from the angle of the social dimension of development processes. It emphasizes the centrality of that dimension in the formulation of development policies and the need to attach due importance to it especially as it has not received its fair share of research, scrutiny and application to real life. Indeed, developmental policies often overlook the social dimension of development and related issues such as social peace etc.

Although the purpose of the paper is not to do a statistical review of women's relationship with sustainable development from a social aspect, the paper points out, in places, the failure of international and Arab statistic rules to produce indicators that highlight the social dimension of development in terms of its relationship with women.

The paper revolves around a basic assumption that one of the major obstacles to development in the Arab and Islamic countries generally lies in the marginalization of women and their role in the development process. This problem goes beyond women themselves to become a fundamental social issue, central to the processes of growth and development. The paper considers that the importance of addressing the social dimension of sustainable development stems from an articular point in the development process, namely that man does not live on bread alone, and that economic and political dimensions impact (and are impacted upon), in a strong mutual relationship (sometimes positive and sometimes negative) on the enjoyment, by people, especially women, of their political, social, cultural and economic rights.

In this context, the paper deals with the social dimension of sustainable development from the perspective of women (not from a feminine perspective) which means from the perspective of women's relationship with, and participation in, the developmental and traditional process through which societies go during the development operations in all their different phases.

In dealing with the social dimension of sustainable development, the paper seeks to go beyond the automatic statistical observation of some forms of exclusion, marginalization and other social problems that Arab women are experiencing today, to try and crystallize innovative and creative scientific and practical formulations for meeting the condition of sustainability in the interaction of the different social parties with such phenomena and taking into consideration the particularity of the presence of women as a social category and a factor within those social phenomena and problems. Attention is focused, in particular, on the condition of rural women as they are among the marginalized categories and because they are the lurking place of societal changes and, at the same time, the safety valve against the negative effects of such changes, notably the economic ones. There is no doubt that women are the influencing factor in the basic operations of agricultural economics, and that food security, which constitutes a major developmental obsession in the Arab World, is linked to agricultural economics, as agriculture represents the prime source of food and rural women continue to be one of its mainstays.

Poverty and the imbalance in the standards of justice and equity, particularly in rural areas, where more than a billion people in the world live – three-quarters of whom are suffering from poverty and most of these are women - remain among the formidable challenges facing the social sustainability of development. It may become imperative for society to fully understand its social purposes and goals, to incorporate them into preventive strategies against marginalization and poverty on the one hand, and into strategies that promote the values of justice and equity on the other, and to make every effort to implement both strategies so that all people may enjoy their rights and satisfy their needs.

After all, the country with both its national and its wider regional, dimensions, is the responsibility of everyone. Those were some of the points this research paper set out to highlight in order to re-emphasize the need for participation and integration of all target people and the principal beneficiaries among them – without any exception or discrimination – in formulating the purposes and goals of development policies and in understanding these in light of present and future requirements.

In addition, it is very important to understand these aspects and to make every effort to establish them culturally and to propagate the spirit of joint responsibility before rushing into forming political structures on social foundations considering that the existing social structures embody a fundamental existential bias against specific categories such as women. For this reason, societal development (i.e. the development of societal structures to meet the expectations of endangered categories and future generations and their dreams) is the first safety valve of true sustainable development. Societal development can be achieved through many factors including, in particular, the following three: i.e. the propagation of education, culture, research and knowledge with

all its horizons without limitation or restriction, the guarantee of freedom of expression for all, and the facility in establishing independent civil society institutions.

By and large, it may be said that ensuring the sustainability of the social dimension of development is dependent upon two basic factors: the first one is monitoring periodically and continually the social changes that result from economic development or from changes in the administrative structures. The second factor is taking legislative and administrative measures to deal with the social impact of development, with a view to minimizing social changes that often impact on women in the first place.

It is certain that no real progress or quantum leap may be achieved without treatment of the strategic approaches that allow us to address the structural causes of inequality and injustice between men and women as well as the marginalized status of women in society.