



The concept of a 'green economy', gender equality and intergenerational solidarity

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The concept of a green economy is gaining ground in political debates at all levels. A gender-equality perspective is still missing from the mainstream understanding of the concept, which is based on a traditional interpretation of the economy, focusing on growth while ignoring the value of care work.

Gender equality as a touchstone for a sustainable, green economy

Sustainability and the green economy are notions that have become prominent in the context of the global economic and environmental crises. For the United Nations and European Union these concepts are

a high priority: the green economy will be one of the central themes of the UN Rio +20 conference on sustainable development in June 2012, while the Europe 2020 Strategy, the EU's long-term economic strategy, has set 'sustainable growth' as an objective with the aim of building a green and resource-efficient economy.

A green economy is also one of the priority issues for the National Council of German Women's Organizations (NCGWO). The NCGWO stresses that "an economy based solely on a credo of growth will destroy the earth, the atmosphere and the basis of life for billions of people worldwide. The assumption underlying economic policies – that growth automatically brings prosperity, or for that matter, greater justice – has proven to be false. Scientists, politicians and many people active in NGOs have therefore been searching for new economic strategies. Common to all of these strategies are the goals of sustainability, environmental protection and energy efficiency".¹

There are many different concepts of sustainable development and green economy. Some of them call for ecological and social change; some focus on a new relationship between North and South, and poor and rich; others call for the regulation of the financial markets. A gender equality perspective is missing from most of these concepts (Roehr 2011). The NCGWO stresses that green economy concepts will not be successful unless far-reaching changes are made in order to bring about truly equal opportunities for women and men to participate in all societal, economic and political areas. Gender equality is a crucial touchstone for sustainability in a green economy. The green economy also has the potential to be a conceptual starting point for making women's contributions to society and the economy visible, and revaluing them. For this potential to emerge, however, the concept must be rethought from a gender perspective.

A green economy with a 'care ethic'

The concept of a green economy focuses primarily on the intersection between environment and economy. It calls for new economic models which are not focused solely on growth, as the current indicators for growth (such as the gross national / domestic product) do not take into account either the value and cost of the natural environment, or of unpaid care work (for example, the societal cost of the loss of biodiversity and clean air, or increasing poverty, in particular the poverty of women and children).

Nevertheless, there are reasons to fear that the concept of a green economy is being used to 'green wash' unsustainable economic practices which are leading to inequalities and infringing on the rights of certain groups of people now, as well as those of future generations. This is because the notion of a green economy does not fundamentally and adequately challenge and transform the current economic paradigm.

The current mainstream understanding of economic development is problematic from a gender perspective, because it connotes values traditionally seen as male. It implies a dual structure where only the activities taking place in the market are considered productive and valuable: on the one hand, there is the 'productive', gainful economy, on the other the 'unproductive' economy oriented towards individuals and services (paid or unpaid). The latter is accepted as a basis for an economy, but is not acknowledged as being a vital part of it. Thus care work and nature are both overlooked and, at the same time, used and exploited.

This economic paradigm has been questioned by feminist economists. Building on the views of women from the global South, many feminist takes on the economy are based on the idea that women should not be forced to adapt to a *homo economicus* oriented towards gain and money, but that people should stop thinking in terms of markets, growth and the accumulation of wealth.² A sustainable life can only be attained through a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation of society and through *de facto* societal equity in terms of wealth and gender.

To make up for the shortcomings of current definitions, the NCGWO is calling for a green economy with a new 'care ethic', a social philosophy of fair, shared care. This requires a new social definition of work, which needs to be shared fairly between the genders and the different generations. New models for ensuring a decent livelihood must be developed and introduced to enable people to make socially responsible decisions.

The NCGWO is part of a project called Green Economy Gender_Just, which stresses that our economic model still implies that socially essential care work has to be provided in the private sphere. In many cases, unpaid care work remains unperformed because of time

pressure, and as gainful employment, care is usually underpaid. Well-educated working women in the global West increasingly free themselves from care responsibilities and delegate care work to the market alternatives. This means that a new, global division of labour between women is emerging, leading to new forms of social inequality.³

The concept of a sustainable economy

The limitations of the concept of a green economy have led to proposals not to use the term "green economy", but to speak instead about a "sustainable, equitable economy".⁴

The guiding principles of a sustainable economy were defined by the World Commission for Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It is based on two key concepts. The first is that of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given. The second is the idea of the limitations that technology and social organisation impose on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

Sustainability is an equality concept in a dual sense. It requires the present generation to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy the same conditions (intergenerational equity). It also means ensuring that everyone in the present generation can at least fulfill their needs (intragenerational equity). Gender equality is a vital element in both these concepts.⁵

The concept of sustainability recognises the need to care for others and take their needs and rights into account – be it for current or for future generations. This principle questions short-term economic reasoning, which recognises only the accumulation of

1 National Council of German Women's Organizations – NCGWO (2011).

2 Wichterich (2001).

3 Discussion paper on Green Economy: Gender_Just! 2011, Prepared by Genanet – Focal Point on Gender, Environment, Sustainability, National Council of German Women's Organizations, Women's Political Council, State of Brandenburg and Association of German Women Entrepreneurs.

4 Women's Major Group Submission, UNCSO Rio+20.

5 Biesecker (2011).

marketable values.⁶ It takes into account global relations and the underlying inequalities between North and South and between the genders, and calls for a new distribution of work between the genders and the generations, and for a new gender order.

The definition of a green economy in the context of the forthcoming United Nations Rio +20 conference addresses both inter-generational and intragenerational equity. In addition, this definition stresses the importance of democratic decision-making processes at all levels.

Intergenerational links and global solidarity

In order to achieve a sustainable, equitable economy, it is crucial to develop participatory models that accommodate different interests and facilitate real change, and to create the conditions for their effective functioning. We need public debates on how to shape a sustainable future, and to this end we must make use of existing civil society bodies.⁷ This means ensuring civil society participation at all levels of global decision-making, and strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations. In particular, global women's movements must be strengthened.

6 Since 1992, the caring economy network has brought together German-speaking economists, social scientists, horticulturalists, architects, natural scientists, politicians, etc. to think about caring economies. See: www.vorsorgendewirtschaft.de

7 NCGWO (2001).

The NCGWO calls on women to unite in the awareness that we cannot continue pursuing material growth at the expense of the well-being of current or future generations. We must support women around the world in their struggles to put a sustainable, equitable economy on the political agenda at national and international levels. Ahead of the Rio 20+ conference we must support women's vision of an equitable, sustainable world which encompasses equality between women and men in all spheres of life, respect for human rights and social justice, concern for the environment and the protection of human health. We should also contribute to building the institutional framework for sustainable development, for instance through strengthening and adequately financing UN Women. The NCGWO addressed these issues at the briefing of German-speaking NGOs which took place during the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in February/March 2012.

“A green economy with a new ‘care ethic’ requires a new social definition of work, which needs to be shared fairly between the genders and the different generations.”

At EU level, the NCGWO calls for a critical evaluation of EU gender-equality policy and the EU 2020 strategy with its sustainable growth objective. This is very important, as EU policies are based on a narrow ‘male-stream’ concept of economic growth. In terms of gender equality, they focus generally on the labour market and on how women can be integrated into it, rather than on how to value informal work according to its societal importance. It is symptomatic of the pervasiveness of this narrow concept of economy that even in a public hearing on the role of women in a green economy, organised by the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) at the European Parliament, one could hear that women work mostly in the informal sector and have to be brought into the “real economy”: as if the informal economy were not a vital part of the “real” economy.

Further reading

Biesecker, Adelheid, 2011, Von der Maßlosigkeit zur Fürsorglichkeit, Thesen für ein zukunftsfähiges Wirtschaften aus feministischer Perspektive, in: *FrauenRat, Green Economy. Gerechtigkeit oder Begrünung des Kapitalismus?*, 2/2011, p. 8 - 11

Genanet – Focal Point on Gender, Environment, Sustainability, National Council of German Women's Organizations, Women's Political Council, State of Brandenburg and Association of German Women Entrepreneurs, 2011, Discussion Paper on Green Economy: Gender_Just, unpublished paper

National Council of Women's Organizations (NCGWO), 2011, Cornerstones of the NCGWO Position on Green Economy, unpublished paper

Roehr, Ulrike, 2011, Green Economy: Die Wirtschaft soll grüner werden – aber wird sie damit auch gerechter? in: *FrauenRat, Green Economy. Gerechtigkeit oder Begrünung des Kapitalismus?*, 2/2011, p.2 - 4

Wichterich, Christa, 2011, Kapitalismus mit Wärmedämmung. Feministische Kritik und Gegenentwürfe zur Green Economy, in: *FrauenRat, Green Economy. Gerechtigkeit oder Begrünung des Kapitalismus?*, 2/2011, p. 5 - 7

Women's Major Group Submission, UNCSD Rio+20