

ECE Biennial Session

Roundtable “Empowering women for sustainable development in the UNECE region”

Geneva, 30 March 2011, 14:00-15:00

Gender equality is an important objective of and condition for sustainable development. This should be fully reflected in the strategies, policies and programmes for economic and social development as well as for the protection and preservation of our natural environment and cultural diversity for future generations. In devising solutions to the sustainability challenges, we need to draw on the full pool of skills and knowledge that we have at our disposal. This means to involve both women and men fully and equitably in the process of decision-making as they can contribute different perspectives, skills, experiences and knowledge to sustainable development. Almost 20 years after the Earth Summit in Rio and 16 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, women still are under-represented in sustainable development processes and forums and a gender-sensitive perspective is not yet fully integrated.

The Roundtable will focus on the core question of how women can be empowered to fully participate in the process of identifying solutions, developing strategies and policy responses to achieve sustainable development.

It will cover the following issues looking at initiatives at global, regional and national level, and address the role of the international community, national governments and civil society:

1. Involving women at the global level

Women continue to be under-represented in decision-making. In the past 19 years, the Commission on Sustainable Development for example was chaired 18 times by a man and only once by a woman. At present women account for only between 12-15% of all Heads of Delegations at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and around 30% of all party delegates as reported by the Women’s Environment & Development Organization. What measures are necessary to increase women’s participation in decision-making for sustainable development? How gender-balanced participation in decision-making can make gender perspectives more central to all policy development? One recent global initiative is the Women’s Delegate Fund, which since 2009, funds women delegates to participate in climate change negotiations. What other measures could be envisaged to increase women’s involvement in decision-making at the global, regional, national and local level? Would gender quotas be a helpful and appropriate instrument?

2. Cooperating for women’s empowerment at the regional level

Regional cooperation in the development of strategies and policy measures for sustainable development is necessary to address regional challenges which extend across national borders: how can we ensure that women are fully involved in decision-making that targets gender

sensitive policies? One example at the regional level is the close involvement of Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) in activities supporting the implementation of the UNECE/WHO-EURO Protocol on Water and Health under the framework of the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. WECF are co-leading activities in the areas of small-scale water supplies and sanitation, and public awareness, access to information and public participation.

3. Taking a gender-sensitive approach at the national level

National Governments throughout the ECE region have made provisions for the integration of gender considerations in all areas and at all levels of policy making through the introduction of gender mainstreaming, which for example includes the establishment of gender focal points in environment ministries. However, only about one in five ministers in charge of the Environment in the UNECE region is a woman. What measures have been implemented to increase women's participation in environmental protection and to ensure that gender is taken into account in all policies and programmes? In Lithuania, for example, 82 gender equality trainings for environmental specialists at the Ministry of Environment have been offered between 2006 and 2009 under the National Programme of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men.

4. Civil society as a catalyst for change

Environmental and women's organizations, networks and alliances are playing an important role in identifying and addressing gender equality perspectives in environmental protection and sustainable development. How can the involvement of these gender-sensitive actors in decision-making processes be strengthened? Many UNECE member States are in dialogue with civil society organizations, which have the goal to integrate gender equality objectives with those of environmental protection and sustainable development. Dedicated awareness-raising on the interface between gender equality, environmental protection and sustainability can enhance the integration of gender perspectives in sustainable development debates and can contribute to ultimately increase women's participation in decision-making. Examples of networks and alliances active in this area include the Women's Environmental Network (genanet), Women for Climate Justice (GenderCC), the Gender and Energy Network (Energia) and the Gender and Water Alliance (GWA).

Speakers from the United Nations system, regional organizations, UNECE member States and civil society will be encouraged to share initiatives and policies designed to empower women to actively participate in advancing sustainable development in the UNECE region.