

Africa/ South Africa

Aren't We Missing Something?

In Cape Town, an Anglophone Africa Sub-Regional Workshop was held in August 2007 to discuss the Programme of Work on Protected Areas under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The workshop, however, completely ignored gender concerns

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Langebaan Lagoon on the west coast of South Africa has been recognized as a uniquely important site for the protection of marine biodiversity. The Lagoon is also a declared RAMSAR site and the surrounding West Coast National Park forms an integral part of South Africa's Marine Protected Area system.

The lagoon has played a unique and historically important role in the livelihoods of the local fisher community. For over a century this community has depended on net fish catches of 'harders' to sustain their families. Says Solene Smith, a local fisherwoman activist: "Catching fish is in our blood. Our daughters and our women have always been part of fishing and so we know how to protect marine life and resources."

Traditionally, men and women worked together: men catching the fish, women preparing the nets; cleaning, processing and cooking the fish, and children assisting with fish drying. Several households depended on one fishing permit for their livelihood and the net fish provided for most of the local community.

After the area was declared a National Park in 1982, the number of permits issued has dwindled from 27 to only 7. At the same time, community access to the lagoon waters has been steadily restricted through the declaration of 'no take' zones. The negative impact of these developments on local food security and poverty levels is evident. Women, in particular, are forced to bear the brunt. High levels of alcoholism, drug abuse, gender violence and crime are reported.

At no stage, in either the declaration of the Park or in the establishment of restricted zones, were



consultations held with the local fisher community. While a new tourism project in the Park uses the labour of local women, no effort has been made to ensure that the women employed are drawn from the fisher families most affected by the loss of traditional livelihoods.

This year, from 13 to 16 August, not far from this site of callous neglect, the city of Cape Town played host to a workshop on biological diversity. The continent-wide Anglophone African government meeting was organized by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and facilitated by leading international non-governmental organizations.

It is hard to imagine, in the current context of heightened activism and awareness of the role of women in environmental protection, that such a high-level workshop might fail to address the role of women in protecting and promoting biodiversity or to ignore the gendered nature of governance, participation, equity and benefit sharing in protected area management. The failure of the workshop to address these questions is even more worrisome given that the Ad hoc Working Group meeting in Paris held prior to the workshop, emphasized the need to ensure that national biodiversity strategies included gender as a key component. At the Paris meeting, Martha Chouchena-Rojas, Head of IUCN Global Policy Unit, said: "Gender is vital for the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources, but this issue has not yet received sufficient attention in the work of the Convention."

In keeping with this troubling tradition, during the four-day Cape Town workshop, not one speaker touched upon the gender question. Discussions that followed various presentations on ecological gap analysis, management effectiveness and sustainable financing, all ignored the gendered nature of these processes. The final recommendations from the workshop, to be tabled at the next Protected Areas meeting, included no reference to women's participation. The only reference that came was at the end of the workshop, in the Indigenous People and Local Communities representatives' statement which called upon their "respective countries, in consultation with indigenous peoples, local communities, traditional fisher folk and other stakeholders, to develop guidelines that ensure real and effective engagement and participation, which also take into account the marginalized groups in society, such as women and the youth." (Statement by Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities and Fisher Folk, Cape Town, 2007)

Perhaps this gender blindness is a result of a more intrinsic problem. The text of the 1992 Convention contains only a single, brief reference to women, not in the body of the text, but in its preamble, as follows: "Recognizing also the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policymaking and implementation for biological diversity conservation..."

Since the CBD came into being, a number of international instruments have highlighted the central importance of women's participation in interventions for environmental sustainability as well as for securing women's human rights. Parties to the CBD have subsequently recognized this, as reflected in Decision VI/10 on Article 8(j) and related provisions: "emphasizing the need for dialogue with representatives of indigenous and local communities, particularly women, for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity within the framework of the Convention". Prior to the Convention of Parties meeting in Curitiba, Brazil, in 2006, a Women's Focal Point was also established.

However, key stakeholders like Solene Smith continue to be left out of the decision-making. Says Solene:

"We had never heard of this Convention. We did not know that we had the right to participate in these decisions that have affected our whole community. We are now ready to meet with the Parks Board to discuss this..."

To ensure that the commitment to make gender a key component in protected areas management is taken seriously, it is critical that representatives from indigenous groups, local fisher and coastal communities, as well as other civil society organizations working with such communities, who participate in the Convention, are vigilant in monitoring the content of its programme of work and decisions taken. The challenge lies in ensuring that women like Solene Smith are aware of the Convention and their rights in this regard.

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