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Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development

Towards a Theoretical Synthesis

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INSTRAW

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Foreword

INSTRAW

Conscious that environmental problems affect women in very specific ways, from as early as 1982 INSTRAW has been involved in programmes aimed at promoting the involvement of women in the solutions of problems related to water, sanitation and energy. Since their inception, these programmes were oriented towards promoting environmentally sound use of water and energy sources and at contributing to a new approach through the integration of women's needs as well as their participation in planning, technical operations and projects.

The sectoral focus of these programmes at the time of their development responded to the critical problems that developing countries faced in satisfying their water and energy needs. As the need to establish the link between these sectoral problems and other environmental issues became evident and as environmental issues became important items on national and international agendas, INSTRAW launched a new programme in 1990 on Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development. This programme is concerned with environmental problems related to water and energy, including such specific issues of immediate relevance to women as waste disposal, the effects of pesticide use, and nuclear testing, to name but a few.

The present study is one output of this programme. It was commissioned by INSTRAW with the purpose of compiling a state-of-the-art report on debates around the issue of women, the environment and sustainable development. Due to the complexity and intersecting nature of the topic, an interdisciplinary research team from the Women's Programme in the Humanities at the University of Utrecht, and the Women and Development Programme at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, was asked to carry out this project. The result is a highly comprehensive review of the issues and a challenging alternative framework which could hardly have been achieved by a single author.

The project began in late 1990 with a desk-top study. In mid-1991 an interim international workshop entitled 'Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Framework' was held in the Netherlands in which activists, researchers and development experts were invited to present their views. A first report presented the various perspectives, views and positions upheld by the major actors in the field of women, the environment and sustainable development. This report was revised and expanded for publication and as well as including a platform for the various positions, it also provides provocative insights for both reflection and action. A framework emerges emphasizing not only

8. Responses to the Crisis from Deep Ecology, Social Ecology and Ecofeminism

Common to these three fields is a questioning of the epistemological roots of the environmental crisis. The important dialogues and interchanges between them have proved mutually enriching. That is not to say that they do not have their shortcomings and contradictions: carrying over patterns of domination, reversal of hierarchies and reproductions of dualisms are some of the problems inherent in some of these positions, as in others.

Deep ecology

The concept of deep ecology was formulated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the early 1970s as a response to the limits of 'shallow ecology' (Naess 1973, 1988, 1989). His view was that in the long run environmental reforms of social and economic systems are not a viable solution to off-set the accelerating destruction of the environment. Warning that the ecological crisis threatens the survival of humanity, Arne Naess identified the deeper roots of the crisis in Western culture and in particular in the cultural values legitimizing the domination of nature.

Since Western culture has given rise to different worldviews, Naess put forward the proposal of deep ecology as an open platform of people coming from different epistemological backgrounds. The unifying factor was the acceptance of transformations in the relationship between humans and nature. Deep ecology has become a powerful counter-discourse to environmental reforms, as the latter tends to reflect the position of governments and business corporations. It has developed into an extensive and differentiated body of theory, with Arne Naess expanding his original proposal into the conceptualization of ecophilosophy. Bill Deval and George Sessions (1985), Michael Zimmerman (1990), Warwick Fox (1990), and Alain Drengson, the editor of *The Trumpeter*, all voices of the Canadian Ecophilosophy Network, are among those who have contributed to further developing the concept.

The common point of departure in deep ecology's critique of Western culture is anthropocentrism, that is, situating human beings in a superior position over nature within value hierarchies. From an anthropocentric view, nature must be dominated, conquered or managed to serve human needs. Assuming a dominating position alienates human beings from the environment on which their survival depends. When human beings ignore natural processes, their antagonistic attitude towards nature leads not only to the destruction of the environment but also to self-destruction.

Deep ecology's critique is targeted not only at anthropocentrism, but also at dualism, hierarchization and fragmentation inherent in Western culture, including the dominant terms for the production of scientific knowledge. Atomistic and hierarchical conceptions of the physical world, as developed in the formative period of modern science, have been extended into the social world and, among others, influenced the concepts of development.

Some deep ecology thinkers criticize the Judeo-Christian religious and cultural tradition for its role in the perpetuation of anthropocentric worldviews and their justification of the domination of nature. Others seek their roots and inspirations in marginalized traditions, for instance in the Franciscan tradition within the Catholic Church, in perennial philosophies which assume interdependence of nature and culture, or in mystic traditions which oppose dominant systems of thought. Eastern religions are an inspiration in the diversified body of deep ecological thinking (see for example Deval and Sessions 1985).

Seeking to overturn the epistemological foundations of Western culture, deep ecologists propose to replace anthropocentric hierarchies with biocentric egalitarianism. In this view 'humanity is no more, but also no less, important than all other things on Earth' (Zimmerman op. cit.).

Deep ecologists see richness and diversity of life as values in themselves and assume that human beings have no right to reduce these, except to satisfy their basic needs. They also stress the need for cultural diversity and diversity in social arrangements as necessary preconditions for the survival of the planet. An essential element in transformations towards an equitable relationship between human beings and nature is the replacement of dualisms (mind and body, nature and culture, subject and object, and so on) with conceptions of self and other formulated in terms of interdependencies and connectedness, which in turn, will stimulate an acceptance of difference. Deep ecologists assert that the transcendence of dualisms leads to the development of a new ecological rationality. Changes in the frameworks of thinking in accordance with an understanding of interdependencies would not only prevent the domination of nature but also domination within human societies. As the concluding part of this chapter shows, this foundational argument of deep ecology is questioned by (eco)feminists in their critique of androcentrism.

For deep ecologists the consequence of this argument is their emphasis on the role of individual human beings. Changes in thinking and lifestyles are emphasized as necessary steps towards ecological transformations of society. By changing their relationship with nature, individuals can attain self-realization and maturity. The emphasis on the role of individual human beings to off-set the ecological crisis has appealed to many people concerned with the degradation of the environment. Since deep ecology offers them an option to be personally involved in transformations, they are no longer disoriented and therefore powerless as to what they can do *vis-à-vis* the magnitude of the crisis. Among other environmental ideas, deep ecology is unique in its stress on changes within, individual responsibility of human beings, and harmonizing lives and beliefs.

During the last 20 years the deep ecology movement has spread across the Northern hemisphere and undergone an internal polarization of positions. The differentiating factors have been soft and radical biocentrism. The latter position has been represented for example by participants of the Earth First! movement in the USA, which postulated a subordination of human beings to nature. Some of them have accepted AIDS and famine as nature's justifiable defensive reaction to population pressure. Among their postulates was the redevelopment of America to the era of BC, where BC stood for Before Columbus. The violent nature of such projects is obvious and may be an outcome of an uncritical reversal of the old hierarchy: from humans over nature to nature over humans. The roots of the ecological crisis are seen in terms of anthropocentrism, which leads to a search for remedies in the reverse: an acceptance of the domination of nature over people. Recently, this radical biocentrist position has been moving to the margins of deep ecology thinking.

The increasingly popular soft biocentrism position within the deep ecology movement aims to abolish all hierarchies. To avoid the accusations of androcentrism, as voiced by some (eco)feminists, Warwick Fox (1989) proposed to replace the notion of biocentrism with that of ecocentrism. In this stream within deep ecology, recognition of the implications of individual human beings in the destruction of the earth remains an important insight, but is correlated with attention to social and political issues within human societies. The views of Michael E. Zimmerman (1990) or David M. Johns (1990) mark an evolution within deep ecology towards learning from and making connections with (eco)feminism as well as Southern alternative development and ecological movements.

One of the contributions of deep ecologists to the rethinking of development has been bioregionalism as, for instance, proposed by Peter Berg and the Planet Drum Foundation or the Bio-Regional Congress, a movement developing in the United States and Europe. Bioregionalism is about re-inhabiting (to borrow a term from Gary Snyder) the earth on new terms. In their critique of the dominant development model bioregionalists propose to reshape and harmonize the human/nature relationship; they see human communities as parts of larger viable planetary ecosystems.[1] The core of the bioregional idea of development is communitarianism, small-scale, self-sufficient development, and a definition of regional boundaries by natural features, such as watersheds, soil types, vegetation or climate. The organization of bioregional