

Antigua and Barbuda

Ruth Spencer: In your case, and as a civil society expert, we would like to suggest that you elaborate on the main contributions that women in all their diversity can make to public policies focused on disaster risk reduction, as well as the challenges they face. What actions do you propose so that gender equality is incorporated into policies and initiatives related to disaster reduction?

I am a woman with strong values and convictions that makes me who I am and which gives me the energy to advocate and take actions. My work is about empowering people and community groups so I champion processes taking on different roles and responsibilities to ensure that policies and programs lead to “people centered development”, I have to keep my eyes and ears on the ground, I must be proactive, alert and sound the alarm when information comes to me from various sources that tells me all is not well-when policies and projects are being planned and implemented not going through the legal required processes for community inclusion and participation, lacking the essential local consultancy processes. The greatest threat to DRR is from development that seeks to undermine our laws and required processes and located in “Sensitive and Protected Areas”. , Just as the prophets in the olden days were commanded by God to do, so the alarms must be sounded in our churches, in our communities, in our groups and across every organization. DRR policies speak to being proactive, seek to prevent harm so we women must sound the alarm become a part of the all of society approach fulfilling the purpose where people centered development is a part of our mandate and purpose.

I see trends that are being developed that are not in line with DRR processes and the Sendai Framework which calls for us to be proactive., preventable and stop harm. Our resilience to natural disasters living in our small islands is heavily dependent on protecting, restoring, building and strengthening our natural ecosystems. We have many vulnerabilities and if our people, our women are really our biggest assets, their local knowledge and voices must become a part of the policy making processes. When the local people are left out, the entire nation – our people, our assets and natural ecosystems become vulnerable and at risk when the very policies to build collective capabilities for resilience-exclude them, this says their local knowledge is not significant and not valued denying our human rights and the community’s involvement in decision making. All such irregularities lead to and signals-ill-informed, ill-conceived and ill-advised development which will exacerbates our vulnerabilities and negatively impact our people especially families living in poverty situations.

Our policy processes must prioritize and take account of the multiple risks faced by communities living in the most vulnerable situations. It must be planned through their perspective; preparing these communities for future risks since we face increasing frequencies and intensities from future hazards, natural disasters, hurricanes and storms. Our policies must facilitate proactive measures to mitigate risks and to build their resilience. Our planning processes must involve multiple stakeholders with multiple objectives and seeks coherence and collaboration for sustainable development. Planning with communities most at risk- should be rights based, asset-based, risk-informed and be done through inclusive and participatory processes. It requires mobilizing resources-human, financial, technical and material) and we should always work with the plan and implement agreed actions with communities most at risk. In SIDS where our vulnerabilities are many, we must think of people. How is this done-the people need knowledge of the laws and legislation-we have to follow the due processes to make the complaint to the appropriate authorities, by documenting the grievances, destructions, the broken laws and conventions and the negligence. This is the start of environmental governance and social accountability process sharing such information with the public and starting a movement to Risk informed development. DRR requires having in place contingency planning processes to plan and to prepare for responding to an emergency or crisis and its impacts, in the event they are unavoidable.

Antigua like many countries is to be moving towards the UN CBD -Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)” The vision for people living in harmony with nature* which seeks to ensure the full and effective participation of all of society. We have women leading this transformational change. Regardless of our size, we must become a part of the all of society approach fulfilling the purpose where people centered development is a part of our mandate and purpose.

We have entered the Decade for Ecosystem Restoration which supports the mandate given to us when God created the earth. yes, we have rights to defend and protect our environment which God has created to feed us and protect and sustain us humans and our other species of animals, birds, insect fish are based in scripture. So yes, indeed our work for environmental conservation and protection is a righteous cause and should inspire and motivate us. Genesis 2:15 says “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (2) We recognize that all created things belong to God (3) and that we are accountable to Him as stewards of the creation.

Why is this right to protect and conserve our lands and territories seemingly out of line-outside of our reach and grasp as countries move toward” economic development? Some forms of economic development are major threats to our natural ecosystem which God has blessed us with and they are being destroyed to achieve this “so called development-which makes our islands less resilient. Why must our women and people seeking to defend our environment be killed, be called names, be threatened. We are tasked to live as one people with all of his creation. To be just stewards. This is spiritual as much as it is practical. Our very survival depends on sustainability.

Antigua and Barbuda is one of twelve nations in the Caribbean and Latin American communities that have signed on to and ratified the Escazu Agreement. This regional agreement focuses on Access to Information, public participation and access to justice. It gives special consideration for vulnerable and marginalized groups and protections for environmental defenders. Our women

in Antigua and Barbuda are building capacities through cooperation and developing partnerships and alliances with countries like St Lucia.

Our enabling environment must be one of outreach, advocacy and action which will lead to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and we must clearly see and outline the actions and practices for moving towards Good environmental governance

The talk will not suffice any more-it calls for bold advocacy that will inspire and build relationships, building alliance that bring people together for actions. The days of sitting back is gone-we must arise and build relationships that bring about the change that is need. No longer must our laws be breached, overridden and poorly enforced. We must hold our leaders accountable.

We women want to have a say in how development should proceed in our country and the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) gives us that right. But, we the people with all of our traditional knowledge of our environment and our communities have been left out. We have been left out of this process which is an enquiry to guide development and who better than the local communities with their traditional knowledge about environmental calamities they have previously faced and wish to avoid is best for this task? The terms of reference have to include us and not just the developer. This is our country and the country in which we have lived for years. No community development project should be approved without the knowledge and input from the people in the local communities. That is outright disrespect--Public consultation in these matters is of utmost importance. Some mistakes cannot be fixed so they must be avoided and environmental genocide will take place if we as CSO and public citizens sit back and do nothing, while our vital ecosystems and their services are destroyed and our accesses and rights taken away from us.

We are calling for "Risk Informed Development" that is long term and holistic vision where we share the stories and evidence down through intergenerational transfer of knowledge and do not repeat the past environmental errors and mistakes some of which cannot be remedied and the end result is constant flooding with recommendations for families to be relocated providing access to justice but this has not ever happened so our past should force us to always to engage in inclusive and participatory consultative processes.

We have seen and experienced many injustices in the name of conservation so human rights-based approaches must go beyond lip service. We cannot put profits over people and we want the voices of our people to share their perspectives, aspirations to be agents of change. Respecting the education -observation, learning from families who livelihoods is based in nature and learning by doing apart from formal education. We must encourage the shift to people centered and rights-based conservation approaches

Going forward we as women leaders are bringing groups of people from various occupations and walks of life to build Alliance to focus on Biodiversity Protection which will have and provide multiple benefits for us as a people and for our country. Our Alliances should educate, empower, advocate and spur our residents to action

In Antigua and Barbuda and the other LAC IPLC develop and sustainably maintain socio-economic activities that are aligned with natural processes, bearing in mind, among other things,

the impacts of climate change, DRR and desertification. By managing and using biological resources sustainably and thus maintaining and nurturing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, all of god's creation-birds, bees, animals and us humans will enjoy a stable supply of various ecosystem services well into the future. We have to defend life and Biodiversity is life. We also want to remind the governments that we have rights to a clean and healthy environment and we will speak out against any development that takes this away from us and future generation.

Are we building back better'? Two years on, and the evidence on the ground is mixed, big gaps between the climate science and our economic policy and plans as evidenced by this the ill-informed and ill-conceived so-called development process where the regulations are breeched, the laws are overridden, and the result is poor enforcement. People must be at the heart of the development and we have the power to enable the changes right here in our countries starting from where we are and using what we have at our disposal- our knowledge and our voices. We demand "Informed consent" hence a demand for meaningful public consultations. We bring new voices into decision making that will strengthen residence of our natural resources for DRR.

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