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**POLICY DIALOGUE AND  
GENDERED DEVELOPMENT  
INSTITUTIONAL AND  
IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS**

by Yusuf Bangura

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**United Nations Research Institute  
for Social Development  
Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland**

**☎ (41.22) 798.84.00/798.58.50  
Fax (41.22) 740.07.91**

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## ◆ Preface

The concept of policy dialogue has gained increasing currency in recent years as a mechanism for promoting equitable, violence-free and sustainable development. Yet despite its wide usage — by international agencies and governments — the concept of policy dialogue has escaped sustained analytical scrutiny. This paper makes a systematic attempt to unpack the basic elements of the concept and to analyse the conditions under which it is likely to be successfully applied as a framework for development that is gender equitable.

The first part of the paper discusses the basic elements of a dialogue process that are likely to determine its outcomes. Several issues are identified as important in this context: the nature of group participation, which has implications for definitions of policy agendas; the relations between group leaders (who participate) and their followers; the patterns of power distribution in dialogue settings; the nature of the dominant discourse; the number of themes that are sanctioned to be taken up in dialogue; and the nature and amount of resources that are needed to develop and sustain the dialogue. These characteristics form the basis for the discussion of models of policy dialogue that follows.

Five models of policy dialogue — corporatism, technocracy, power sharing, entryism, and global sustainable pluralism — are analysed in the second part of the paper. For each model the paper considers its strengths and weaknesses; the kinds of outcomes that can be associated with it; and how gender issues have fared or are likely to fare in each type. The paper highlights the gains that women made under the corporatist/welfare model — in terms of employment, incomes, participation in public institutions and social welfare — which owed more to the dynamics and potentially gender-friendly discourse of this model, than to feminist activism per se. In other words, women make gains when labour unions are strong and when the macro-economic discourse for bargaining is sensitive to equity issues, even though they are not explicitly targeted as the main beneficiaries of the policy contract. By contrast, the technocratic neo-liberal model, which gained prominence in the 1980s, has on balance produced uneven outcomes for women. With the erosion of welfare programmes in many countries, women have largely been the ones who pick up the burdens of social provisioning. Where women have made gains in employment, this has not been translated into reasonable rates of remuneration, job security and social support. The paper also highlights the view that although gender issues figure prominently in the model that is currently popular in the development discourse — global sustainable pluralism (or sustainable human development) — progress here is likely to be slow, less purposeful, and dependent upon large infusions of resources and external leverage. The absence of political leverage in this model should be seen as a serious limitation, and one which underlines the need to seek out additional strategies for gendered policy dialogues if progress is to be made in using this model.

The paper then discusses four main constraints to the institutionalization of policy dialogue for gendered development, with a special emphasis on developing countries. These constraints relate to the hegemony of the neo-liberal discourse on development, which, despite some marginal areas of convergence with feminist discourses (human capital development), remains fundamentally hostile to initiatives for gender equity; the effects of globalization on the balance of power

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among key institutions in international, national and local settings, which have, on balance, empowered less gender-sensitive institutions; the rigidities of national bureaucratic cultures and practices, which make them resistant to new issues; and the unequal pattern of development and contradictions between gender constituencies themselves.

The paper concludes with a set of policy suggestions for overcoming these four constraints.

This paper was prepared for the UNRISD/Centre for Policy Dialogue workshop, Working Towards a More Gender Equitable Macro-Economic Agenda (Rajendrapur, Bangladesh, 26-28 November 1996), carried out with financial support from the Directorate General of International Co-operation (the Netherlands), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The workshop took place within the UNRISD/UNDP research programme on **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives**, co-ordinated at UNRISD by Shahra Razavi.

June 1997

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The concept of policy dialogue has gained much currency in recent years as a mechanism for promoting focused, equitable, violence-free and sustainable development. Yet, for all its use in numerous pronouncements by international agencies and governments, there has been no systematic attempt to unpack the basic elements of the concept, and to analyse the conditions under which it is likely to be successfully applied as a framework for development. Historical experience suggests that there are, in fact, a variety of models of policy dialogue with varying degrees of effectiveness and implications for gendered development; and that it is not always clear which model social activists and policy makers have in mind when they invoke the need for dialogue. There are also a formidable array of structural and ideological constraints that need to be taken into account if efforts to institutionalize the concept under changing global conditions are to yield lasting results. These constraints seem to affect the prospects for gendered policy-making much more seriously than other types of policy initiatives that have been adopted for solving social problems.

This paper aims to contribute to current efforts to clarify the concept of policy dialogue as it applies to issues of gender equity and participation. It first discusses the basic elements of the concept, including the multiple outcomes that can be associated with each element on the basis of the model of dialogue under scrutiny. The second part explores five models of policy dialogue — corporatism, technocracy, power sharing, entryism, and global sustainable pluralism; their different strengths and weaknesses; the kinds of outcomes (potential or real) that can be associated with each model; and how gender issues have fared or are likely to fare in each type. It highlights the view that although the model that is currently popular in the development discourse for mainstreaming gender into policy-making is that of global sustainable pluralism (or sustainable human development), progress here is likely to be slow, less purposeful, and dependent upon large infusions of resources and external leverage than in the hitherto successful corporatist model, which did not explicitly target women as the main beneficiaries of the policy contract.

Part three discusses four major constraints to the institutionalization of policy dialogue for gendered development, with a special, but not exclusive, focus on developing countries. These constraints relate to the hegemony of the neo-liberal discourse on development; the effects of globalization on the balance of power among key institutions in international, national and local settings; the rigidities of national bureaucratic cultures; and the unequal patterns of development and contradictions within gender constituencies.

Part four concludes with a set of policy suggestions for overcoming the constraints. It makes a case for flexible gendered theories or ideologies for promoting economic reforms and development; supporting secular movements whose progress is intimately linked to the pursuit of universal goals of equity; adopting focused, long-term perspectives and well-funded strategies to institutionalize gender in national bureaucracies; improving upon the density and social reach of gender social movements; and ensuring that issues of balanced representation and accountability are taken into account when policy dialogue teams are established in global and national settings.

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## 2. UNPACKING THE CONCEPT OF POLICY DIALOGUE

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Policy dialogue is defined as organized deliberation between two or more actors on the allocation of values that is likely to result in new policies or modification of existing ones. Implicit in the concept of policy dialogue is a clarification of the issues and an understanding of the interests and concerns of contending parties. A policy dialogue also presupposes readiness on the part of actors to accept a minimum level of compromise and accommodation, as well as some degree of relative autonomy for all actors. By seeking to avoid confrontations and unilaterally defined outcomes, policy dialogues can be very time consuming and may produce results that may not fully satisfy the wishes of participants.

Several issues seem to be important in discussing policy dialogues and their likely outcomes and gender implications. The first is the question of participation. Is participation restricted to special groups or is it open to all interested groups? How are special groups defined for purposes of participation? Participation may be restricted, for instance, to groups that have powerful influence on the functioning of economies, such as employers' federations and workers unions; to groups with specialized knowledge of public issues, such as technocrats and specially chosen intellectuals, journalists and public figures; or to groups that are likely to be affected by specific public policies regardless of their technical expertise on the subject or strategic locations in the political economy. The nature of group participation has implications for the definition of policy agendas.

Closely related to participation is a second issue: relations between group leaders and followers. To what extent are leaders representative of their followers? Are there structures that allow for the selection of leaders to represent followers in policy dialogues, or do actors assume leadership roles on the basis of their status, activism and knowledge of the issues? Are leaders able to regulate the behaviour of followers to accept binding agreements that may come out of dialogues? Conversely, are followers able to hold leaders accountable if they strike poor deals or are co-opted by dominant actors? Can dialogues regulate the ample "free-rider" or "principal-agency" problems that leaders often exploit in institutions? Relations between leaders and followers are important in explaining the organizational settings of policy dialogues and the way power is likely to be used or not used in the policy process. As we shall see, the corporatist model seems to be much better structured for dialogue than, for instance, the global sustainable pluralist, or human

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