研究論文 DOI:10.24567/0002005340

Debates on Sustainable Development: Personal Insights from a Feminist Political Ecology Approach

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The article is a personal reflection about the politics of sustainable development in global negotiating processes and what feminist theory and practice can bring to those processes. I first reflect on my experience as an advocate for gender and environment when the sustainable development debate first emerged at the UNCED Earth Summit in 1992. I then suggest how feminist political ecology in theory and practice can provide insights into how to reshape the sustainable development agenda by embracing the politics of care and commoning.

Keywords: Earth Summit, sustainable development, feminist political ecology, care, commoning

I. Introduction

As the ever-escalating environmental crisis indicates, sustainable development — a fair and just economic and social development that can be sustained without damage to the environment — continues to elude us. In this paper I share my personal experience of several decades as a feminist advocate and researcher involved in challenging and reframing sustainable development policy debates. As I write this article, the second Trump administration has shut down funding for development aid and UN agencies and confirmed its support for the fossil fuel industry and climate deniers. Now more than ever it is important to recall what the sustainable development agenda stands for, and why feminists need to engage with it.

The article is a personal reflection about the politics of sustainable development in global negotiating processes by looking at what feminist theory and practice brings to those processes. Taking the feminist approach that personal is political does not mean just recording personal experience and emotions in some form of autobiographical recollection. Rather, it recognizes how starting from personal experience and observations strengthens what Sandra Harding (1986) calls "strong objectivity" which makes visible how knowledge emerges from personal experience. Inspired by Harding's feminist standpoint theory, I critically reflect on my own experience as a feminist advocate to understand the knowledge claims made by people that guided political negotiations around sustainable development at both the grand scale of international relations and at the personal level of individual desire to protect the environment.

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The article is a contribution to the feminist interrogations of existing economic and social orders from the perspective of the personal experience of someone living within that system, with the objective of producing knowledge that can bring about change.

In the first part of the article, I reflect on my experience as an advocate for gender and environment when the sustainable development debate first emerged at the UNCED Earth Summit in 1992. In the second part I discuss how the insights of feminist political ecology help us to reshape what sustainable development could mean today, over 30 years later, as we consider how to tackle increasing inequalities, environmental degradation and the climate crisis. I suggest that feminist political ecology can help us to shift the sustainable development agenda by embracing the politics of care and commoning at the centre of sustainable development processes necessary for the survival of our lifeworlds.

II. Sustainable Development at the UNCED Earth Summit

Since the early 1990s I have been involved in advocating for gender and environment in development policy as coordinator of campaigns and research projects at the international network the Society for International Development, the first international development NGO, founded in 1957. Over the years I have participated in various fora – policy, activist and academic - to bring a feminist political ecology critique to the discourse (meaning both practice and theory) of sustainable development within the global environment and development governance system, as well as social movement and academic arenas (Harcourt 1994; Harcourt 2012; Baksh and Harcourt 2015; Harcourt 2016; Harcourt and Nelson 2015; Bauhardt and Harcourt 2019; Harcourt et al. 2023). At first, when engaging in sustainable development debates, I presumed with enough political pressure it was possible to change the economic system and end the exploitation of both nature and labour, and specifically women's labour. I belonged to the postdevelopment camp that was explicitly critical of economic development and neoliberal capitalism especially in its destruction of environment and cultures (Harcourt and Escobar 2005). As I trace below, in the early discourse of sustainable development there was hope that it would be possible to negotiate development processes and change the direction of political and economic capital to respect environmental limits and to improve the livelihoods of women and men in countries of the Global South. Over the decades, this hope faltered and alternatives to capitalist logic of exploitation of people and nature have become imperative.

Sustainable development in its first incarnation in the 1970s was about bringing poor countries of the Global South into industrialisation through development projects that provided economic growth and environmental protection (Arsel 2022). The stated goal of sustainable development following the first United Nations Conference on Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, was to balance modernity, industrialization and economic growth while conserving the environment. The push for sustainable development was led mostly by governments of the rich countries of the industrialised world — the Global North — to counter unsustainable economic development practices based on the exploitation of the natural resources of people and territories, mostly of the developing countries of the Global South. Countries from the Global South in that period

contested sustainable development policies, concerned that protecting the environment would block their possibilities for industrialisation and economic growth (Arsel 2022). The shift towards sustainable development as a global concern involving the different interests of governments and civil society as well as businesses and industries in both the Global North and South began in the late 1980s with the Brundtland Commission on environment and development. The Commission redefined sustainable development as an integration of economic growth, social justice and environmental conservation to meet the needs of the poor and future generations while "protecting and enhancing the environment" (WCED 1987, ix).

It was at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro that the Brundtland Commission's view of sustainable development was placed at the heart of international environment and development negotiations. It was in Rio that I first witnessed sustainable development policy negotiations at the global governance level at the Earth Summit. I attended the Earth Summit wearing two hats, one as a gender and development advocate and the second as a writer for *Development* the journal of the Society for International Development.[1] My tasks included covering an informal pre-meeting for Rio with Maurice Strong, founding Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme and chair of the Rio Earth Summit, as well as reporting on the events at the Earth Summit.

In my reporting I paid attention not only to the grand scale politics of state negotiations but also to the personal relations that enabled the negotiations. Due to opportunities my job offered, the Earth Summit enabled me to observe how personalities, and their networks, impact global policy. Attending the pre-summit business council meetings as journal editor and report writer gave me an insider seat into the negotiations as the UNCED Earth Summit was being prepared. I saw how Maurice Strong, a Canadian millionaire fossil-fuel magnate operating with the political clout his money could buy, led the global environmental governance processes. In public and behind closed doors, he was adamant that sustainable development should not be just a government process. He opened the way for both the business sector and civil society to join in the negotiations, albeit at different levels. Through Maurice Strong, members of the fledging business council for sustainable development[2] made up of key international companies became embedded in the sustainable development policy debate as corporate and specifically oil wealth merged with global government at the negotiating tables. In this way Strong used his influence to promote a green agenda and to open up the concept of sustainable development to different stakeholders.

The role of Strong and those around him (including those in my organisation) meant that from the beginning the sustainable development agenda was positioned between business interests and the civic ideals of visionaries like Barbara Ward, a British economist and writer who was an early advocate of sustainability writing the report for the 1972 Stockholm meeting.[3] Ward pushed for rich nations to share their prosperity with poorer countries. She founded the International Institute for Environment and Development and was a member of the Club of Rome, which commissioned the influential report *Limits to Growth (*Meadows 1972).[4] The authors of *Limits to Growth* argued that continuous economic growth would lead to environmental disaster given the finite natural resources of our planet. The report examined ecological as well as socio-economic development trends using early computer models. Many of its authors were involved in discussions

leading to Rio.

Ultimately, though, the concerns of the visionaries and environmentalists were seconded to business interests. The global environmental architecture set up at Rio was based on the assumption that government regulations and agreements could be put in place to ensure businesses would follow a green agenda. The underlying narrative was that further industrialization would be the best for the Global South while paying attention to conservation through technologies and development projects. Businesses would recognise that a totally free market was not workable and that some measures need to be in place to counter environmental degradation. Strong helped to establish business as partners with government in the sustainable development debate, bringing in their economic technical professionalism and skills. Business inserted itself, via connections with Strong and others, into the UN environmental mega-conference system as part of global environmental structure to tackle climate, biodiversity and forestry pollution. These goals were captured in Agenda 21 adopted by 178 countries which set out guidelines for global strategies to clean up the environment and put in place sustainable development. In addition, governments agreed on technical treaties around climate change and biodiversity: The Convention on Biological Diversity to protect plants, wild animals and endangered species and the UN Framework on Climate Change that required nations to reduce their emissions.

At the same time Strong opened up the possibility for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to shape the debate as a 'third' sector. Strong enabled the setting up of the Centre for Our Common Future led by Warren 'Chip' Linder which coordinated NGOs during the Earth Summit and also promoted corporate responsibility as a strategy alongside environmental conservation and an anti-poverty agenda. NGOs were cast as non-state actors, as observers and advocates and implementers of agreed international guidelines through projects funded by state and the private sector. NGOs were at that time represented by a few established environmental and development NGOs such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or charities such as Oxfam or my own organization — the Society for International Development. Their voices were heard in the progressive document that emerged from the Earth Summit through the Club of Rome, 'The Earth Charter', which spoke to the broader social issues of human rights, environment and development.[5]

The result of Rio was that business and industry groups could utilize sustainable development as a tool for their 'green agendas' in the UN. Transnational corporations and the World Trade Organization became part of global environmental governance structures. And there was also space for sustainable development as an ideology and vision to be shaped by NGOs as they pivoted around the UN governmental system at a distance.

This distance was evident at Rio itself. As Chair of the UNCED Earth Summit, Strong created divisions among civil society, governments and business. While businesses could attend the official meeting, new practices were put in place at UNCED that determined who could be at the negotiating tables, restricting NGO attendance to those with consultative status one to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC 1).[6] Strong was instrumental in the setting up of the Global Forum for NGOs held at Flamengo Park, which was attended by half a million people and over 1,600 organisations. This International Forum of NGOs and Social Movements was

the largest ever civil society encounter with the UN system at that time. The Forum brought together international networks of women, youth, religious leaders and indigenous peoples (Seymoar 1992). I was able to attend the two spaces, as my organisation was ECOSOC 1. While in the official venue I could listen and take notes (invaluable for my journal and reports), it was at the Global Forum that I was able to speak and where there was a clear space for a gender, environment and development agenda.

If Maurice Strong and his cronies helped to open the sustainable development agenda to the business sector, it was the indomitable US Congress-woman Bella Abzug and her women's rights network that brought women, environment and development issues to sustainable development through the recently founded Women's Environment Development Organisation (WEDO).[7] WEDO was the leading group at the Summit that organised caucuses on women, development and environment in the official UNCED space and which sponsored the large and visible Women's Tent in Flamengo Park. WEDO's preparation for the Earth Summit began in 1991 at the Miami Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet (Harcourt 2006). It was organised by the Women's International Policy Action Committee made up of 54 women from 31 countries. The Congress itself hosted 1,500 women from 83 countries who collectively prepared the Women's Action Agenda 21, which demanded space for women's voices to be heard and directly fed into the Earth Summit through the Planeta Femea (The Women's Tent) at the NGO Global Forum. Planeta Femea assembled over 1,200 women daily to consolidate their perspectives on environment and development issues and to enable NGOs, especially women's NGOs, to shape sustainable development.

The Miami Women's Congress and the Planeta Femea enabled a united contribution by women to the official development discourse. In Miami, women strategized together about how to be effective in the global policy debate so that they could ensure diverse women's needs were in international policy agreements, and how then to translate them into action at home. They were critical of the mainstream development that treated women, the environment and population as technical subjects within the overarching goal of improving economic growth. Instead, they aimed to shape the sustainable development agenda by acting as a bridge between local needs and the complex global policy setting with the slogan "act local, think global". They challenged gender-biased, monocultural, militaristic and economistic discourse focused on markets and Western science and they questioned elitist technical solutions to poverty, injustice and environmental degradation (WEDO 1992; APDC 1992). The message from Miami was that the destructive forces of global capitalism and patriarchal exploitation are intimately linked and have led to ecological destruction and gender inequalities. At the same time the experiences shared in Miami illustrated how women resist the exploitation of nature and women's productive and reproductive labour in cultivating sustainable and just ecological practices.

The Miami Women's Action Agenda 21 and Planeta Femea's Women's Declaration at the Rio Conference fed into Chapter 24 on women under the section "Strengthening the Role of Major Groups", in Agenda 21, which was the final text of agreements negotiated by governments at the Earth Summit (UNDPI 1992). The women's agenda was far ranging, bringing together in a holistic and critical account "women's issues" from sexuality and health to legal rights to land and the fight against big corporations destroying community and nature as well as gender blindness of

economics and development policy. The emphasis was on finding strategic common ground, along with a shared sense of optimism that the women's movement could take on the establishment in the spirit of the Women's Action Agenda 21, which pushed an alternative order of economic, social, cultural and political interaction based on gender balance, and equity and justice for all peoples, species and generations (Antrobus 2004).

Both the Miami and Rio de Janeiro meetings were historic moments that fostered a collective feeling of hope and excitement and a belief that women could negotiate with government and ultimately bring about transformative practices and culture. As Abzug stated, they heralded "a new direction – a world at peace, that respects human rights for all, renders economic justice and provides a sound and healthy environment" (Dankelman 2012). The aim was to move the narrative from women as victims of environmental degradation to see women having agency and knowledge to shape the agenda. Even if the strident demands of Miami were watered down in the official Agenda 21, women's voices and demands were there.

During the following UN mega-conferences of the 1990s, leading to the 2000 Millennium Development Goals and 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, women advocates and professionals working in UN agencies pushed for a strong understanding of the need for a gender and environmental approach to development (WEDO 1992). As I have written elsewhere (Harcourt 2012), as the governance structures became institutionalised, personalities such as Strong and Abzug became less powerful. Still, given the current situation of Trumpian chaos and destruction, it is salutary to recall earlier legacies and how individuals can impact agendas even if ultimately, we need to find alternatives to economic development and neoliberal capitalist agendas.

I have drawn attention to WEDO and the work of Abzug because it set the way for a collaborative feminist engagement within UN spaces that remains in practice today. The caveat is that though women became more visible in negotiations around sustainable development, their demands became more mainstreamed and less feminist (Baksh and Harcourt 2015) as over time the radical perspectives of Miami's The Women's Action Agenda and even the Rio Conference Agenda 21 became diluted. The ins and outs, ups and downs, of how feminists worked within the environmental governance system to bring gender into sustainable development I have discussed in other reflections (Harcourt 2005, 2012). I now turn to how feminist political ecology emerged as a field of study in conversation with gender, environment and development activists and policy makers working on sustainable development.

III. Feminist Political Ecology concepts applied to sustainable development

Broadly speaking, feminist political ecology studies the individual and collaborative politics and practices in the search for environmental sustainability, social justice and economic transformation. In this approach, feminist political ecology sees gender as a profoundly important concept with which to analyse the world (Elmhirst 2011). Gender is not just a static descriptive category, it is in a constant state of negotiation and articulation in different racialized, social and political environmental contexts. Gender relations are produced in the multiple and intersecting exercise of power within economic, socio-natural networks and institutions and in our everyday

practices that are continually renewed in the material environments we live in and experience (Harcourt 1994).

When analysing sustainable development policy, feminist political ecologists examine how gender inequalities are embedded in a multidimensional web of relationships between women and men and other genders, which operate at every level of human experience according to location, natural environment, culture, governance and socio-economic structures. Sustainable development requires profound systemic change at different scales; from changes in everyday relations to global institutional transformation, individual experiences of gender relations interact and are shaped by the global arena.

Feminist political ecology sees gender as key to understanding relations with the environment. It is through our gendered selves that we make sense of the material and emotional dimensions of how we live life. Our experiences of our gender connect us to others through scales of meaning from our intimate relations and surroundings to global institutional formations. How we perceive and are perceived in our gendered selves determine how we go through our personal life's cycle, interact with others on a daily basis, fare in different institutions, social, economic and cultural groups, and how we endure the marks of oppression or privilege. Our gender determines who has access, who can negotiate, linked to culture, education, labour we perform as well as geographical context and type of knowledge we hold. At the Miami Women's Congress and Planeta Femea the focus was on how to bring women's experience and knowledge into decision making spaces so that their gendered experience of environment, beginning with their productive and reproductive labour, at different scales could contribute to a grounded transformative sustainable development.

From my short reflection on the Earth Summit, using the lens of feminist political ecology we can see how gender relations intersect with economics and politics to shape the sustainable development agenda. It is a complex discourse where powerful peoples' influence, experiences and knowledge (such as Strong or Abzug) count. But it was also the different practices that determine which policy emerges: the inclusion or exclusion of groups of people at the official negotiating table or the creation of different spaces and possibilities of influence due to sheer numbers at the NGO Forum. Understanding the different ways relations operate according to gender, race and class in different policy negotiations helps us to see the how sustainable development emerges as a discourse practiced by governments, determined by powerful states, as well as conservation NGOs and business interests in a capitalist system. Strong and Abzug were two powerful individuals who impacted the way sustainable development policy was shaped, but so were the local individuals representing NGOs at Flamengo Park or the chief executive officers of businesses lobbying for a green business agenda at the governmental conference. Class, race and gender intersect in ways that determine, in this case, how individuals could access the rooms that made decisions about how environmental, social and economic resources could be accessed and shape the search for sustainable development.

Moving away from high level global negotiations which framed the international sustainable development debates, feminist political ecology also looks at sustainable development in practice in local places, the urban places, rural settlements, forests, fields, rivers and oceans which determine peoples' practice and knowledge of nature. Feminist political ecology does not separate out local environs from global spaces, rather it looks at how the local shapes the

global, and vice versa in sustainable development. Feminist political ecology focuses on how everyday ecologies are mediated by household and community practices as the global sustainable development agenda is embedded in different local, national and global economic policies. Feminist political ecology studies gender power relations in agricultural practices, waste, water and forest management and labour and household relations to see how sustainable development is rooted in local ecological and economic processes scaling up to the global larger picture. By exploring what is happening in specific places which are negotiating life and livelihoods in human damaged environments in different communities, different everyday labours, feminist political ecology calls attention to emotions, feelings, the spiritual, non-scientific knowledges and interactions with non-humans, with technologies, life and death. In this bottom-up rather than top-down approach to sustainable development, feminist political ecology contributes to rethinking economic and ecological values in a profound critique of capitalism.

This rethinking is not easy in the face of positivist science, which divides nature from society and siloes knowledge, separating hard from soft science and perceives nature as a resource, something to be expropriated, extracted and developed as part of capitalist progress. Over the years of engaging in sustainable development debates, I have become aware of how hard it is for western knowledge systems to understand relations with nature outside of capitalist exploitative gaze. Notions of care, reciprocity and commoning, which prioritize how to live with nature, can be perceived as unrealistic or romantic as they are not driven by economic growth or based on technocratic ways of organizing life. But with worldwide escalation of environmental and climate crises there is an increasing awareness of the need to question a capitalocentric view of nature. Over fifty years ago Rachel Carson warned that the attempt by people to control nature through pesticides and agribusiness was arrogant, dangerous and will lead to disaster. The uncomfortable questions Carson asked in her book *Silent Spring* in 1962 are even more vital today as the visible impacts of modern industrialization's exploitation of nature are impossible to ignore with climate change leading to fires, floods and global warming. We are exploiting ourselves, our health, well-being and our future.

A major set of questions that feminist political ecology asks is how to change our relationship with nature, and to act recognizing that cultures, societies and economies are dependent on nature, indeed are "tightly knotted" together in our "bodies, ecologies, technologies and times" (Haraway 2007, 107). Sustainable development cannot just be a story of economically and technologically determined finite systemic coherence ruled by institutional governance structures. As renown feminist thinker Donna Haraway warned: we need to become ecological naturalcultural communities if we are to avoid "irreversible climate change and continuing high rates of extinction and other troubles" (Haraway 2016, 11).

These naturalcultural communities can be viewed as commons where people's lives are intertwined with nature, and where nature is not seen as a commodity but as a lifeworld that all living beings share. Belonging to the commons means sharing responsibilities with other beings and recognizing the role of not only peoples' labour but also nature's 'labour' in making our shared commons built on economies of caring and sharing, of flourishing and regenerating. Care for and with other living beings is key to the project of commoning, recognising our personal and political entanglements with nature. These "affective

socionature entanglements" are nurturing grounds for "other than capitalist subjectivities" based on empathy for people and other beings sharing our lifeworlds (Singh 2017, 751). By recasting sustainable development as the search for just lifeworlds, feminist political ecology looks at the relation between more-than-human others and the gendered roles of the reproductive labour of caring for and sustaining the commons (the reproductive commons), critiquing the capitalist discourse about nature as separate from the social domain, to be used as resource for exploitation or conservation for human benefit. In this reframing, feminist political ecology sees care and commoning as key to narratives and practices of sustainable development as we 'politicize, reimagine, and recreate socio-ecological relations' (Burke and Shear 2014, 128).

In the following section, I look at how care and commoning can reshape the discourse of sustainable development.

IV. Care and commoning as ways forward for sustainable development

Feminist political ecology understands relations of care as the material and physical processes that sustain ecosystems and human and more-than-human living worlds (Elmhirst 2018; Harcourt et al. 2023). Care is at the core of safeguarding planetary well-being (Barca 2020). In its focus on care, feminist political ecology builds on multiple writings about care, such as Joan Tronto's understanding of the ethics of care and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care* (2017). These feminist writers see care as "everything that is done to maintain, continue and repair the world" (Tronto 2015, 3) so that "all can live in it as well as possible" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 161). They invite us to put "caring at the heart of the search for everyday struggles for hopeful flourishing of all beings" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 22). Tending to "relationships between people, place, and stories – will be crucial as we face the challenges of these times" (Todd 2016, 383). And, as ecofeminist Val Plumwood stated: "[w]e are in desperate need of stories that create much greater transparency of [environmental] relationships in our day-to-day lives. We must once again become a culture of stories … This is the real meaning of ecological literacy … we have eliminated the stories that connect the two realms of nature and culture" (Plumwood 2003, 44-5).

Commoning is a practice that connects nature and culture and brings to the fore care for human and other sentient beings by paying attention to and fostering environmental relations. Silvia Federici (2010) sees commons as 'community', as the relations built on principles of cooperation and of responsibility of humans to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals. Commoning is "the collective actions by communities which reconnect human and more-than-human beings. It is based on reciprocity and relations in practices of care where "people come, share and act together" (Clement et al. 2019). It is through commoning that communities reclaim and reappropriate local environmental resources as a "covenant of reciprocity" (Kimmerer 2013). It involves negotiating "access, use, benefit, care and responsibility [through] commoning as a relational process" (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016, 196).

Commoning as a transformative practice of care becomes an alternative way of doing politics, "of imagining and enacting pluriversal, postcapitalist worlds that challenges human exceptionalism and bounded individualism" (Garcia-Lopez et al. 2022, 84-5). It is through commoning that marginalised people around the

world are able to sustain their resources through relations of care, trust and responsibility with each other and other more-than-human beings. As a practice of care, commoning offers the alternative ways of thinking and doing that Haraway and Plumwood call for if we are to create liveable forms that sustain our lives and our development of communities where humans are in relation with nature. It can be seen as a socio-ecological transformative development based on solidarity, social equity and sustainability. It requires that we understand humans as part of living landscapes imbued with dynamic social and ecological relations.

Examples that have inspired me personally to think more deeply about commoning and care as a way forward for sustainable development include writings about the indigenous Australian practice of "Caring for Country". Caring for Country is the term used by First Nations Australians for "an integrated, more-than-human presence that incorporates land, animals and people, but also non-human beings such as tides, waters, winds, insects, rocks, plants, languages, emotions, songs and ancestors" (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013). Indigenous stories about Country are based on deep notions of care and human responsibility to live with other beings in reciprocal ways that nourish. As a white settler Australian, I may not fully understand relations with Country, but I am inspired by how Caring for Country is based on an "ethics of collaboration and care, based on recognition of human and non-human agency, is one that would nurture relationships, responsibilities and accountabilities" (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013). Caring for Country encompasses "looking after all of the values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations associated with that area, as well as associated processes of spiritual renewal, connecting with ancestors, food provision, and maintaining kin relations" (Turner et al. 2023, 1). Suchet-Pearson et al. explains the practice of Caring for Country in the Yolŋu ontology of co-becoming through the gathering of *miyapunu mapu* (turtle eggs):

> What it means to see humans as one small part of a broader cosmos populated by diverse beings and diverse ways of being, including animals, winds, dirt, sunsets, songs and troop carriers, we argue for a way of knowing/doing which recognises that 'things' can only come into 'being' through an ongoing process of be(com)ing together. They are never static, fixed, complete, but are continually emerging in an entangled togetherness. Fundamental to this ontology of co-becoming are key lessons around attention, responsibility and ethics (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013, 186).

The sharing of stories in these small examples of possible ways for transformation paying attention to turtles and togetherness with them are important. These examples are tangible evidence of why care matters and the importance of valuing care as an ethical and political practice. Following this approach, we can begin to understand how sustainable development can be based on caring collaborations with nature which recognise human and non-human agency and which nurture relationships, responsibilities and accountabilities. Care through commoning holds communities together, restoring neglected and damaged ecologies.

Instead of an anthropocentric human control over nature, sustainable development could pay attention to human relations with all sentient beings so that "all humans and non-humans, actors, actants, everything material, affective, all processes and relationships, are not *things*, are not

even isolated *beings,* but are entangled becomings, creative and vital and always in the process of becoming through their connections" (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013). These becomings happen on different scales, from respecting turtles' egg laying to the Australian government recognizing that sustainable development requires different kinds of knowledge about fire management, carbon abatement, invasive species control and water management if climate and environmental crises are to be overcome. White settler Australia is (very slowly) learning to walk in allyship and to take responsibility for a shared living world learning from indigenous practices' processes of commoning to care for and with Country (Harcourt 2019).

Another inspiring vision comes from Potawatomi Nation botanist Robin Wall Kimmere who invites us to consider sustainable development through an indigenous world view that argues that western knowledge should allow indigenous peoples to have "a voice in how that land cared for and cares for itself" (Kimmerer 2013). She argues for a "two eye seeing" model where sustainable development requires indigenous science as well as western science. She speaks about sustainable restoration which draws upon indigenous people's knowledge and relationship with the land. This requires restoring caring relations with the land through processes of healing and reconciliation. Her book *Braiding Sweet Grass* (2013) is based on such a process, "woven from three strands: indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most. It is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth" (Kimmerer 2013, x). Kimmerer sees sustainable development about learning reciprocity in such a way that "as we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us" (Kimmerer 2013, 340).

Paying attention to Kimmerer and other indigenous scholars, feminist political ecology aims to "open up space for recognizing, envisioning, and making life-affirming ecologies rather than extractive systems of destruction' in ways 'capable of protecting and defending life and living worlds" (Ojeda et al. 2022, 150). In this understanding, sustainable development places care at the centre of environmental processes involving a collaboration of communities building up from there knowledge and experience to global processes in a bottom-up not top-down approach. Sustainable development would not be about the management of nature and green growth but rather about a commoning process that allows "emancipatory emergent ecologies that are care-focused and life affirming" to flourish (Ojeda et al. 2022, 157-158).

V. Strategies for sustainable development

In reshaping our understanding of sustainable development, feminist political ecology proposes that practices of caring and commoning resources could move the world towards greater social justice and ecological sustainability. Dialoguing with diverse worldviews, such as indigenous ways of living with the land, would allow a new form of sustainable development based on ways to reappropriate, reconstruct and reinvent personal and political lifeworlds (Rocheleau and Nirmal 2015).

As I have underlined in this article, care and commoning are both ethically and politically charged practices. Therefore, there is substantive political work to do in order to shape sustainable development so that it can help tackle gender

inequality and the destruction of the Earth particularly for communities exposed and displaced by climate change and environmental destruction in the Global South. As part of reshaping sustainable development, we need to find ways to promote and practice community, relationship building, and care for the planet and for each other. A caring economy that acknowledges gender/environmental relations has to be embedded in the principles of commoning, based on cooperation, sharing, reciprocity, and intersectional environmental justice. Instead of 'greening' the economy we need to be sustaining livelihoods to ensure nutrition, ecological balance, clean water, secure housing, gender equality, meaningful approaches to all forms of labour (Di Chiro 2019). To value care is to recognise our mutual interdependency and our need for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumentalist ones (Rocheleau and Nirmal 2015; Ojeda et al. 2022).

Care and commoning are about the everyday politics of securing the conditions for regeneration and flourishing. If we are to deal with the climate crisis we need to care for the soil, water, non-human animals and plants. Commoning includes care for local ecosystems and strengthened collaboration and reciprocity between humans and nature to create more resilient ecosystems and transform interpersonal relations to be more aligned with intergenerational, intercultural and interepistemic justice.

There are many examples of convivial caring relations among people and their environments where commoning as a practice of care is visceral, material and emotional, linking selves, communities, natural and social worlds such as traditional farming and fishing communities, agroecology, transition towns, slow food movements, community gardens and kitchens (Escobar 2007; Harcourt et al. 2023). What these examples tell us is that by placing care at the centre of sustainable development we can reshape our economies, societies and our relations with the environment in order to move towards planetary survival.

Instead of the dominant narrative of techno-fuelled extractivism, AI knowledge systems and fears about energy depletion leading to further conflicts, wars, climate disaster, we need to reshape the sustainable development narrative. It is important not to forget past visions such as those expressed in the Miami Congress and Planeta Femea at the Earth Summit over 30 years ago. Many of the issues we are grappling with now were foreseen at those events. For me, that vision of sustainable development still has meaning, not as a set of goals that require almost impossible agreements to be met by governments, businesses and NGO professionals but the grounded and rooted ways that communities already find to live within our limits, that are caring and respectful of each other and other forms of life on our finite planet. It is important that sustainable development supports and strengthens these commoning-communities as part of a place-based politics that is building a global network based on care.

Notes

1 I curated a special issue on the Earth Summit (The Society for International Development 1992) which features both Strong and Abzug and a series of Reports for Women in Development Europe (1992). For current information about SID see https://www.sidint.org/ and the Development journal at https://www.palgrave.com/gp/journal/41301

2 In 1995 this turned into the global business council for sustainable development made up of 60 business leaders (now 230) see https://www.wbcsd.org/

3 Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet (1972).

4 See https://www.iied.org/iied-founder-barbara-ward and her also her Report for the Stockholm Conference: Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet (1972).

5 See https://earthcharter.org/ and https://earthcharter.org/the-movement/

6 The United Nations body responsible for coordinating the economic and social fields of the organization (agencies and commissions).

7 For the history of WEDO as a global women's advocacy organisation on environment and development, see https://wedo.org/

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掲載決定日：2025年5月13日