



# Women in Sustainable Development: Empowerment through Partnerships for Healthy Living

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**Summary.** — This article seeks to take partnerships seriously. Specifically, it is concerned with the nature, opportunities, and challenges facing women’s nongovernmental organization (NGOs), which seek to make real contributions to sustainable development. It uses a case study of COFERENE, a successful women’s NGO in Costa Rica, to explore the nature of partnerships, the contextual factors that shape them, the successes that can be realized from their wise use, and the potential problems that may arise. There are lessons, both optimistic and cautionary, to be learned from COFERENE’S experiences. This article analyzes these lessons. In synthesis, partnerships are complex and demanding, though there are cases in which women’s NGOs have used them effectively to foster sustainable development.

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*Key words* — geographical focus: global, country specific: Costa Rica, sustainable development, partnerships, culture, nonprofits

A woman said that her father was a street sweeper. If some people consider this a humble job, her opinion was that a person who has the job of picking up garbage is way superior to the person who throws away garbage.<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although progress for women can be ascertained throughout the world in health, education, and labor, there is still much work to be done (Stromquist, 1992, 1996, 1997, 1998; Wetzel, 1993; Wolfensohn, 1998; World Bank, 1999, 2000, 2001; United Nations, 1995a; UNDP, 1997, 1999, 2000). Sustainable development, an approach most prominently formulated by the Brundtland Commission Report in *Our Common Future*, affords women a significant public role. Defined as a development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987, p. 4), it is fundamentally different from previous development models. Sustainable development, at its core, integrates economic development, social development, and envi-

ronmental protection. The 1990s UN summit documents underscore the fact that women’s participation is essential in advancing sustainable development. These documents not only recognize that women are heavily affected by poverty, environmental degradation, and lack of education and access to health care (Benería & Feldman, 1992; United Nations, 1995c–d, 1996), they also emphasize that environmental damage and poverty are intricately linked (Ahmed, 1998; Benavides, 1998; Cooper, 1998b; United Nations, 1992, 1995b,c, 1996; UNDP, 1999, 2000; UNRISD, 2000; Viezzer & Corral, 1998; World Bank, 2000).

These international agreements on human centered sustainable development depend on the implementation of a set of principles. Among these principles, the *equality* and *equity* principles postulate the need to address discrimination based on gender (and other categories indigenous, age, disability, poverty, homelessness, or refugee status). The *health and well being* principle posits the need for a healthy population and a healthy environment. The *partnership* principle may be considered a way

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to accomplish some of the other principles (Cooper, 1999).

This essay explores how some women advance sustainable development through partnerships. More specifically, it examines the kinds of collaborative relationships that women's groups have forged with public, private, nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to create and engage in sustainable activities. These partnerships have facilitated environmentally sound, income-generating enterprises that promote healthy living. At the same time, these activities help them break away from social strictures in their private world, but especially in the public sphere (Friedmann, Abers, & Autler, 1996).

This essay is organized in the following manner. First, it presents a definition of partnership, a more complex task than may be apparent. Second, it introduces a case study of a women's grassroots organization, COFERENE,<sup>2</sup> in San Ramón, Costa Rica and considers the various partnerships it has created to advance the organization's mission to: (a) generate income for their families, (b) make women's role in society visible, and (c) promote environmental protection. Third, it analyzes challenges encountered by women's NGOs. Finally, it synthesizes lessons that can be drawn from the case study. An examination of these issues suggests the thesis that women play an essential role in advancing sustainable development through the creation of income-generating activities that preserve the environment and affirm the social fabric. In part, this is possible through creative partnerships with various sectors of civil society. Nevertheless, it is vital to be alert to both the liabilities and possibilities of partnerships upholding sustainable development.

The case study presented was developed in Costa Rica. At the onset, it is useful to understand the contextual factors surrounding this case study. The second smallest country in Central America, Costa Rica has enjoyed a peaceful, stable social democracy since 1948. In the early 1940s, the government made deliberate decisions to create a strong welfare state by adopting redistributive policies and making social investments (Solís, 1996). After a brief revolution in 1948, the army was constitutionally abolished. While other Latin America countries spent about 60% of the national budget on arms, Costa Rica invested that same amount on health and education equally divided. It has enjoyed free and public education for men and women. The welfare state reforms

included universal health insurance, unemployment and retirement benefits, maternity leave, severance pay, minimum wage, child and women labor laws, and housing, all of which contributed to the creation of a strong middle class, and "the notion that social justice is the best agent of economic progress" (Solís, 1996). In the early 1980s, however, structural adjustment and free market policies imposed on Latin American countries (Friedmann *et al.*, 1996) and on Costa Rica by international agencies weakened the welfare state and, if unrestrained, according to Meléndez-Howell, "the country's independence and democratic tradition will be directly threatened" (1996, p. 16).

The State made deliberate strides toward gender equality in 1976 with the creation of a women's government agency, Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia<sup>3</sup> (CMF) within a cabinet office and appointed the first woman to a cabinet position in 1974 (MIDEPLAN, 1996, 1997). The first woman appointed president of congress was in 1982.<sup>4</sup> The Gender empowerment measure (GEM) rank for Costa Rica is 24,<sup>5</sup> characteristic of nations with high human development (UNDP, 2000, p. 165).

The world recession of the 1980s as well as the war in Central America affected Costa Rica's quality of life. This is evidenced by increased poverty, influx of large masses of Central American refugees, decreased funding for social services, high inflation, and negative growth rates coupled with pressure from international agencies to privatize (Solís, 1996); the end of the decade witnessed minor improvements in health and education. Although Costa Rica continues to provide its citizens universal rights to a free and public education, preschool, health care, and labor rights protection, it suffered diminished social safety nets and overall quality of life. In the early 1990s, however, the government adopted and advanced sustainable development policies. While these policies particularly affected women and children, the concern and commitment for gender equality resulted in significant legislation for the protection of women's rights and promotion of equality.

The State has in recent years begun contracting out social service delivery through NGOs in Costa Rica despite lack of regulation (Cooper, 1998a; MIDEPLAN & UNDP, 1998); Latin America presents a more pronounced pattern (Alvarez, 1999). But, there have been institutional policies to render accountability in

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