

Outreach 1997

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speaking for the CSD/NGO Steering Committee

The Voice of the NGO Community at CSD

Countdown to Earth Summit II

PRE-EARTH SUMMIT II EDITION

At Least They're Coming

AT A GLANCE

COMMENTARY

RIO GRINDS

WTO SAYS NO

ACCESS ISSUE

NGO VIEWPOINT

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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COMMENTARY...

1997: The Year the Earth was Saved..?

Close to 70 Heads of State have so far confirmed their participation in the Special Session to review the implementation of Agenda 21. The Special Session or Earth Summit 2, will open on the 23rd of June and run for five days. Political heavyweights like Chancellor Kohl of Germany and the recently weak-kneed US President Bill Clinton will be there. In all probability, the other G-7 leaders will fly in directly from Denver, Colorado, and deliver carefully crafted messages to us all.

Earth Summit 2 will be big in every respect:

massive security, a many hundreds of NGOs, and a multitude of media people. Estimates run as high as 3 to 4 000 journalists and NGOs of varying quality and interests. And above all, by attracting this many State leaders -- the event will be politically crucial, too.

If the final document to come out of Earth Summit 2 contains a strong statement on behalf of

economic growth, social development and environmental protection, the message to the rest of the world could be of immense inspiration. On the other hand, if the State leaders fail to grasp the importance of this historic moment and issue a watered down or meaningless statement - or worse, can agree on no statement at all -- the shockwaves of pessimism could reverberate throughout the world for years to come.

The week is expected to be strenuous in every aspect. Press conferences, negotiations, NGO side events and exhibitions, in addition to the heavily guarded meeting in the General Assembly Hall, will often run parallel to each other. In addition to this, a Committee of the Whole will meticulously work its way through the final document to grind out a consensus text. We have reason to believe that the Committee of the Whole (unfortunately referred to as the COW) -- will in fact resume its work on June the 16th, one week prior to the start of the Special Session.

This event also marks a first for NGOs.

This is the first time representatives of the major groups will be allowed to speak from the prestigious General Assembly rostrum. The NGO community has been accepted by the UN, not the least because of their valuable contributions to Local Agenda 21s. This is a challenge of potentially epic proportions. If NGOs continue to deliver quality work, the positive repercussions on transparency and accountability throughout the UN will be significant. Should we fail to live up to this challenge and the expectations we by now have created, opponents of NGO participation in international as well as national fora will have received gratis arguments.

Nitin Desai, who carries a special responsibility as Under-Secretary General and head of DPCSD, said in a meeting with NGOs last week that the delegates who come to the Special Session should not renegotiate the text of Agenda 21. That was neither expected nor preferred. "After all," said Desai, "this is only a review meeting, a kind of stock-taking of where we are environmentally, five years after Rio."

This is, of course, all the more interesting when viewed against the 70 or so participating Heads of State. Never before in UN history have state leaders shown this great an interest in a review session. Does this mean that they are all concerned about environment and sustainable development, and will demonstrate their political courage and foresight by arriving with honest commitment to action? Or have they simply been pushed into this position by the energetic work of thousands of grass-roots NGOs whose diligent labouring and promoting of sustainable development has achieved a level of public support that makes it politically unacceptable not to participate?

As the 20th Century is closing, this UN conference may well be one of the last to attract political attention of this proportions before we start the 21st. And it is only fitting that the conference deal with a matter that in scope is truly global and can only seek its proper solution through global cooperation. This political as well as stylistic point may very well be over-utilized by speech-writers and their Heads of State before the Special Session is over. Thus they may convert the historic event of entering a new and untouched century into a cliché before it even has taken place. On the other hand, a cliché is only a cliché when it describes empty and meaningless statements.

And we wouldn't want that, Heads of State -- would we?

...jgs

RIO GRINDS...

A series of several recent meetings and papers have suggested the designation of additional categories as major groups. Following are some of those that are most deserving of such empowering.

Top Ten Suggestions for New Major Groups

10. Country & Western Singers
9. Real Estate Agents
8. Professional Basketball Players
7. New York City Taxi Drivers
6. Retired Diplomats
5. Exotic Dancers
4. New York City Parking Attendants
3. Frogs
2. Recently Defeated Members of Parliament
1. Guys Named Bill

UPDATE ON OUTREACH...

Outreach will be published on a weekly basis from now until Earth Summit 2 in June, at which time, it will resume on a daily basis. We invite all NGOs to continue to submit statements, articles and announcements - of both UN and national or regional activities. Send contributions by e-mail to wfuna@undp.org - or on IBM PC disk by "snail mail" to:

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One UN Plaza, Room DC1-1177
New York, NY 10017

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION REJECTS THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE...

bodes ill for the upcoming UN Special Session

The World Trade Organization (WTO), which is authorized by the world community to set standards for world trade, commodity agreements, standards for production, financial transactions and much more, has now also decided to overrule popular and political concern for health. Only an organization intrinsically endowed with the awesome powers of money and trade could so blithely decide something that, at least in other quarters, would stir up a serious debate on environment and health, and serenely ignore all such concerns.

Scientific precaution has become hostage to trade absolutism. The New York Times reported on Friday, May 9th, that the US had won a major trade victory over the European Community, when the WTO ruled "that Europe's import ban on beef produced with growth-enhancing hormones is illegal because it has no scientific justification." The text of the report, which has not yet been released to the public, evidently goes on to expound on the positive effects the decision will have on global trade. The WTO has now set absolute standards for science by not allowing reasonable doubt to be taken into consideration. After this, the standards of absolutism will reign in all matters related to trade and environment.

A victory for globalization.

But the precautionary principle was never meant to be a pure scientific principle. Nor was it meant to fit into the uneasy compromises of the world of politics. It was developed to allow science and politics to deal with the massive amounts of uncertainty that exists in trying to analyze the future environmental and developmental consequences of actions taken today. It has been challenged many times, but repeated decisions taken by a variety of UN conferences have kept it alive. Measuring the environmental consequences of world trade may still be carried out after the WTO decision. But unless such analysis can show a 100% certainty of being detrimental to the environment, such a study will be inconsequential to regulating trade.

The precautionary principle is of course a threat to trade. It allows for no quick fixes. It demands

long term planning: not three-year plans, not five-year plans. No, at the minimum, proper environmental consideration would require 30 year planning. Such an investment philosophy would be ludicrous by today's thinking. A dollar invested today should yield a handsome profit at least by the end of this year. But the precautionary principle implies calculating values on a completely different scale than money and profits are handled today.

The precautionary principle does however, allow for trade-offs, but it requires they be for the benefit of all, and in many instances that demands justice and fairness. It also requires that trade be regulated according to environmental and sustainability standards, and it demands investment in social, developmental, and environmental efforts. None of which are considered choice areas for the smart investor today. And above all, it calls for the implementation of Agenda 21. All of which is too costly for many of the parties that have invested their future in increasing globalization. Indeed, the only ones left to fight for precautionary principles and the implementation of Agenda 21 in all aspects of life -- which also includes trade -- are NGOs. No wonder they are denied access to the WTO.

Globalization is currently considered an unqualified contribution in the evolution of society and our civilization. So far there is little in the text that will be negotiated during the Special Session that contradicts this statement. Many delegates during the CSD negotiations were leery of even investigating possible trade and economic regulation based on environment or sustainability. The air fuel tax flew away. Emissions standards were considered detrimental to energy and transport. Multilateral and UN cooperation were substituted for national responsibilities. And there is little sign that Earth Summit 2 in June will dare touch the WTO. It reigns supreme.

...jgs

THE ACCESS ISSUE...

CONTINUING THE DIALOGUE

on NGO access to the General Assembly

On 30 April, an NGO Consultation on increasing access to the General Assembly, its Main Committees, Special Sessions and all areas of work of the United Nations was held at UN Headquarters. Organized under the auspices of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with ECOSOC (CONGO), participants included DPI and other NGOs, as well as Secretariat officials and Representatives of Permanent Missions.

The day-long dialogue was a collective NGO effort to overcome the present stalemate in the negotiations of the Sub-Group on NonGovernmental Organizations of the Open-Ended High Level Working Group on the Strengthening of the United Nations System.

The Chair of the Sub-Group, Ambassador Ahmad Kamal of Pakistan, briefed the gathering on the progress of negotiations, or lack thereof, since after nine meetings they have failed to begin work due to the inability of the group to define its mandate. NGOs have not been allowed to observe the negotiations, as the large majority of the meetings of the Sub-Group have been closed.

Below are some main points and recommendations arising from the consultation, which were transmitted through the Chair for consideration at the 5 May, open meeting of the Sub-Group:

1. The process of examination of NGO access to the General Assembly, its Main Committees, Special Sessions and all areas of the UN should be conducted step by step, particularly in light of the overwhelming support, both by NGOs and governments, for the Sub-Group to request the Secretary-General for a comprehensive study on current practice of NGO participation in the entire UN System. This study must integrate fully the NGO perspective - only after intensive consultation;

2. Under no circumstances should the process take us backwards and regress on existing practice;
3. The reform and strengthening of departments dealing with NGOs is essential to maximize NGO input. This cannot be done without sustained and intensive consultation with the existing NGO bodies currently in place to coordinate the relationship between the NGOs and the UN. Suggestion has been made that NGO representatives be included on the Task Forces set up for the purpose of reform of UN Units, Departments, or Sections dealing with NGOs.
4. Better modalities are needed for NGO involvement and engagement in the long-term follow-up and implementation process, not just accreditation;
5. On the question of a Civil Society Forum, many NGOs felt strongly that it should not and could not replace current methods of NGO participation. Some see it as a "side-show" running parallel to the General Assembly rather than integrated into the process;
6. On the question of partnership vs. advocacy, NGOs overwhelmingly felt that it was not a debate of power sharing but rather one of access for observation, participation, consultation and input - not a question of "the vote." All recognize the inter-governmental nature of the United Nations;
7. On the question of numbers of NGOs attending GA meetings, it was stressed - as supported by the results of the CONGO survey - that the numbers would not significantly increase;
8. Any organization of NGOs on issues of common concern should be left to the NGOs themselves and not mandated by any outside mechanism.

It was stressed by several NGOs that only so much can be done at UN Headquarters. NGOs at the national and regional level must put pressure on their capitals to help jump-start the negotiations.

Assistant Secretary-General for External Affairs, Gillian Martin Sorensen, and Executive Coordinator for UN Reforms, Maurice Strong, addressed the group - fielding questions from the participants. A full report of the CONGO meeting is in the process of being produced and will be made available to those interested. For more information, contact the CONGO office in New York at: tel. (212) 986-8557; fax (212) 986-0821.

...the editors

NGO VIEWPOINT...

Minority Influence

Some remarks from a feminist & social scientist perspective on the work of the NGO community submitted by Minu Hemmati-Weber, Ph.D.

NGO consensus - a must.

These are a few remarks on why we - the NGO community in preparation for UNGASS - should strive hard for reaching as much consensus as we can. Most people will agree that it is and feels good to have consensus and act in solidarity as a group, even more so as a very diverse group. But there is more to consensus than having a good feeling. Practical experiences as well as strong empirical data from the social sciences provide strategically important arguments in favour of the hard work of reaching consensus. I would like to point out some of these arguments hoping that they might encourage all of us to take another deep breath after having had what a lot of people euphemistically call "some trouble".

The diverse NGO community represents an extremely diverse group and NGOs are in a minority position, striving to influence a powerful majority. Minorities are most powerful when they agree among themselves. The agreement of multiple group members on a single position identifies that

position as a viable alternative in most cases.

The influence of majorities will lead to 'social comparison processes' where the audience will ask themselves: Who will win? The consistency and consensus of minorities will on the other hand lead to 'validation processes' - people ask themselves: What is right? While majorities more easily make people conform (at least in public), effective minority influence will more easily make them change their conviction.

When will minority challenge majority

When a minority successfully challenges the majority view, the dissent can extend beyond the single immediate issue, pushing majority group members to be more open-minded in the future.

Additionally, the minority viewpoint will seem much stronger if its advocates represent a comparatively diverse group of people - as when both women and men campaign for women's equitable access to leadership or when both people from the South and from the North join in supporting certain ideas on finance issues.

The tradeoff between quick decisions achieved by dividing into smaller groups holding different positions and high-quality decisions attained by careful consideration of multiple viewpoints is very important. Research shows that in the workplace, diverse employee teams tend to outperform homogeneous teams of any composition. This also holds true for gender, ethnic, cultural, religious, ideological diverse NGO-groups campaigning for development and environment at the CSD and UNGASS.

The powerful minority

Finally, minorities are most powerful when their consensus is more than a one-time affair. Research indicates that because majorities are hardly ever swayed immediately, a minority must remain loyal to its consensus over time.

Taking consistency too far, however, may be interpreted as rigidity or intractability, and the minority's influence may rapidly decline. - We might remember this point while we are trying to find consensus among us. And this is what we need: to persuade majorities. Conviction, not conformity, is related to deep personal commitment to values and ways of implementation in accordance with these values.

Most of us will feel reminded of their own experiences by this. One of the best known examples is the experiences and the great amount of impact gained by women's groups and worldwide networks who "have drawn strength from [their] diverse experiences and (...) have resolutely defended each other" (Women's Caucus statement to the High-Level Segment of CSD5, April 10th).

Lacking consensus in diversity and lacking consistency - be it between Rio and New York, between North and South or any other groups of NGOs - will always be at the cost of efficient influence. Credibility and the image of being a competent and important partner are at stake. So let's join under the values and goals assembled in the preamble of "Towards Earth Summit II", let's show patience and tolerance - and come to better solutions and gain more influence at Earth Summit 2 in June.

Minu Hemmati-Weber, Ph.D. (Baha'i Community of Germany / Department of Social Psychology & Women's Studies of the University of Saarbruecken, Germany, minu@rz.uni-sb.de)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

People's Tribunal on Human Rights, Environment and Development Tribunal planned for 22 and 24 June

A People's Tribunal on Human Rights, Environment and Development is scheduled to be held on 22

and 24 June 1997 during UNGASS to present testimonies on pivotal issues not currently being addressed in the official UNGASS process. An Organizing Committee was formed this week to begin preparations.

Several issues identified so far include:

- 1) the increasing role of trade, investment and TNC's in social development;
- 2) despite the end of the Cold War and promise of peace dividends, military expenditure continues to drain resources for sustainable development; and
- 3) the systemic denial of indigenous peoples' human rights.

This People's Tribunal seeks to be:

- 1) a forum for those who have no forum;
- 2) a means of mobilizing public opinion;
- 3) an indictment of those actors in the private and public sectors violating human rights and the environment by calling attention to specific international law, standards, commitments and obligations.

Each caucus will also have the opportunity to present their specific issues in a statement to the panel of judges.

Anyone interested in serving on the Organizing Committee, nominating a person for the panel of judges, or helping to identify specific cases for the tribunal should join the Human Rights/Peace Caucus on Friday, 25 April from 10:00-11:00 AM in Conference Room E. They can also contact:

Tara Krause, People's Decade of Human Rights Education (PDHRE), tkrause@igc.apc.org, (212) 749-3156/(718) 749-3156

Goodluck Diigbo, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), (212) 962-1210

Marsha Monestersky, WEDO/Consultant to the Sovereign Dineh Nation, (718) 859-8757

CSD 5 Mantra:

(Repeat)...Urgent Situation; Far Too Little Being Done; Bold Actions Needed; Measurable Steps Required; (Repeat)....

ATTENTION NGOs, be prepared for Earth Summit II

Most assuredly negotiations for the final document will start already on Monday June 16th. Accreditation for the meeting will start on June 11. All earlier UN passes will be acknowledged. But remember, because of the many State leaders that will be present, the UN will be surrounded by extremely tight security. So keep your papers in top order!

OUTREACH will bring more and updated information on all procedural matters for the upcoming event in the next issue.

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