

Dominicans at the UN

“Cry out as if you have a million voices, for it is silence which kills the world.” –Catherine of Siena



RIO +20

Where was the common good?

Power can be a dangerous thing – at least the way in which it is exercised by the world’s leaders. I can’t help but feel that it is exercised in a vacuum; or better, a bubble. Decisions seem to be made as if their potentially destructive impacts are really nothing more than “collateral damage.”

Negotiations...endless negotiations over a text. But not just over any text. It was a text that held the flourishing or the continued diminishment of Earth and all her peoples in

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Rio +20: Where Do We Go From Here?

While in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, I scanned the Internet daily, looking for coverage in the US press. Save for passing mention in the Washington Post, there was nothing. After the fact, however, the New York Times posted an article on Sunday, June 24, in which it quotes the Pew Environment Group's critique of the meeting: "It would be a mistake to call Rio a failure, but for a once-in-a-decade meeting with so much at stake, it was a far cry from success." The final draft of the outcome document, entitled "The Future We Want," is not an ideal text. However, it does reflect a number of the key demands of the developing countries. Here are some of the highlights.

Reaffirmation of the Rio Principles, Agenda 21, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation

RIO PRINCIPLES

While there is great disappointment that the final document did not go far enough, it was crucial that all of the *Rio Principles* were reaffirmed. These were among the outcomes of the first Earth Summit in 1992. One of the most contentious issues in Rio last month was the inclusion of Rio Principle #7 – *common but differentiated responsibilities*. According to this principle, all countries share a common responsibility to protect the environment. However, because the developed countries bear a greater responsibility for the degradation of Earth and her ecosystems, they are the ones who should lead the way. The United States was unrelenting in its insistence that there should be no singling out of any one Rio principle, and indicated that this would be its "red line" in terms of negotiations on the text. Canada, the European Union, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Switzerland also objected to specific reference to this principle. On the other hand, the G77**, speaking on behalf of many developing countries, were equally as insistent that *common but differentiated responsibilities*, as well as the principle of *equity*, be included in the final text, as they are essential for genuine global cooperation in

sustainable development. That the final document reflects both of these principles is a major victory for the developing world, and provides civil society with important leverage in its post-Rio advocacy efforts.

AGENDA 21

Along with the Rio Principles, *Agenda 21* was also endorsed at the first Earth Summit in 1992. This was a visionary plan of action in social and economic areas, such as combating poverty and changing patterns of unsustainable consumption and production; as well as for conserving and managing the natural resources that are the very basis for life – protecting the atmosphere, the oceans and biodiversity; preventing deforestation and promoting sustainable agriculture. At that time, governments agreed that the integration of environment and development concerns would ultimately lead to the fulfillment of basic needs, improved standards of living for all, better protected / managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future for all.

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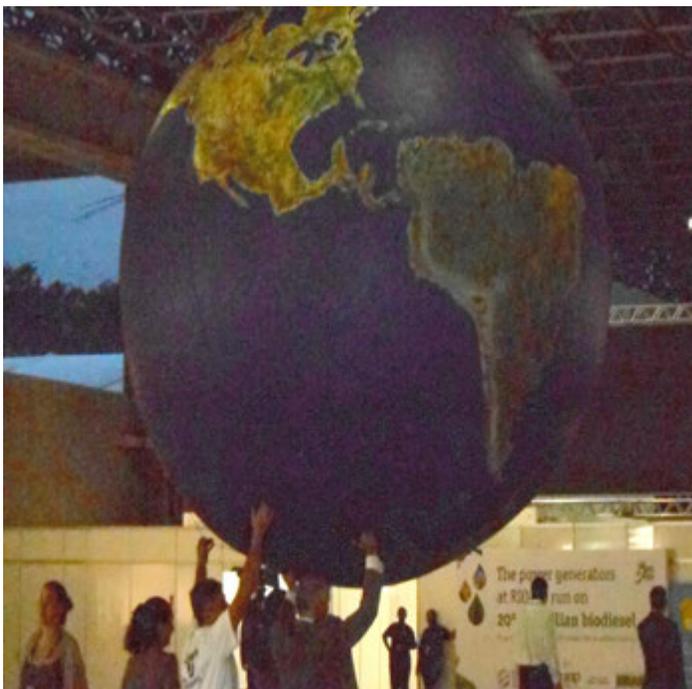
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JOHANNESBURG PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION – 2002

This was a reaffirmation of the commitment to the Rio Principles and Agenda 21, as well as to the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental. Of particular note in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation are the following: “Peace, security, stability and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, as well as respect for cultural diversity, are essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring that sustainable development benefits all.” (#5) And: “We acknowledge the importance of *ethics* for sustainable development and, therefore, emphasize the need to consider *ethics* in the implementation of Agenda 21.” (#6)

That both Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation were reaffirmed last month in Rio is critical to our ongoing work of advocacy. The United States, among others, fought any reference to these previous commitments – no doubt due to the fact that we have never complied with them, and, “*out of sight, out of mind.*” However, civil society here in the United States will bring greater pressure to bear on our government to assume its appropriate share of the burden for the environmental crisis that looms all around us, and for which we bear significant responsibility. This will be particularly important as we move closer to our national elections in November. Also, the mention of “*ethics*” in the Johannesburg document is particularly noteworthy, as the moral and ethical implications of our national policies regarding the economy and environment are never considered.

Sustainable Development Goals



These goals will be integrated into the United Nations’ development agenda by 2015. A 30-member working group comprised of representatives from UN Member States will work on a plan to be presented to the General Assembly in September 2013. The themes of the goals will include the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental; and will be based on Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, and the full complement of Rio Principles – including common but differentiated responsibilities. However, the development of these goals will not in any way divert focus or effort from the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, whose target date is 2015.

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the balance. But you would never know it from the way business was conducted. Initially, this text had “teeth”, and the potential to hold governments accountable in terms of their responsibility to foster a global common good. But is it all a pipe-dream after all?

The United Nations was established in the wake of the terrible destruction of World War II, as an effort to foster international cooperation. However, more often than not, it has become a grand forum in which narrow self-interest repeatedly trumps any notion of common good. The facts, on the other hand, are indisputable. We live in an increasingly interconnected world. The human and the non-human share an inextricable bond, with this significant caveat: the non-human has thrived for millennia, without us. We, on the other hand, are utterly dependent upon Earth and her ecosystems for our very life. Yet despite this truth, the human has become the most destructive force Earth has ever known.

Hubris is a dangerous thing, too. And when coupled with power, it constitutes a breathtaking force. Yet, it is precisely this deadly combination of power and hubris that held sway at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development – RIO + 20. While it is true that the UN is the only global forum where all nations, from the greatest to the smallest, have a place at the table, whether or not one’s voice is actually heard, and heeded, is quite debatable. As we witness in our own country, it is the voice of money and corporate connections that tends to win out.

There were moments during my experience in



Rio when I was quite honestly ashamed to be a US citizen. I almost cringe as I say this. Does it make me any less patriotic than those who have paid the highest price for our freedoms? I don’t think so. Rather, somewhere deep inside me, I have an abiding belief that we as a nation have the potential *to lead* in the best sense of the word. However, just as individuals do, we suffer from a corporate tendency to become *stuck - stuck* in our misguided belief that what is best for us, is somehow best for the rest of the world as well. But can that really be the case? All one need do is look around – *really look around*; read the newspapers; observe the signs in our own changing, erratic climate patterns, and the growing chasm between the rich and the poor right here in our own backyards. This is more the reality than is the comfortable lifestyle we enjoy. Yet we remain trapped in the illusion that this is simply the way it is – and there is precious little that we can do about it, anyway. And this is where we are just like the governments that hold sway at the UN – our own, among them.

Green Economy?

During the negotiating sessions, the European Union, in particular, was advocating a UN endorsed *green economy roadmap*, complete with specific goals and targets. However, there was great concern among developing countries and civil society that the green economy would provide an inroad for the commodification of nature, and increase the influence of *corporations* in determining the forward movement of sustainable development. The outcome document refers to green economy as “one of the important tools available for achieving sustainable development;” and that these policies must be guided by the Rio Principles, Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Among the parameters for “green economy policies” are the following: they must take into account the needs of developing countries; strengthen international cooperation, including the provision of financial resources and technology transfer; enhance the welfare of Indigenous Peoples; ensure the equal contribution of both women and men; address inequalities; and promote sustainable consumption and production patterns. However...after all is said and done, the extent of corporate over-reach in this area will be a major point of contention for civil society and the developing world.

Human Rights/Rights of Earth

The right to development (Rio Principle #3), was initially contested by developed countries, but as it has been long recognized by the UN, it was subsequently accepted. However, until the final day of negotiation, the United States would not accept the *right to food* – preferring “the right to an adequate standard of living, including food.” How could anyone be against a clear articulation of the *right to food*? Especially in a time when peoples’ access to food has been irreparably compromised by global climate change, deforestation, hostility towards small-holder agriculture and the unconscionable manipulation of agribusiness? No doubt, another point of leverage for advocacy.

Developing countries were pleased with the recognition given to the rights of Mother Earth and to the rights of Indigenous Peoples. And, while there is reference to the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, the language is vague and non-committal.

Paragraph 39 of the final document is particularly noteworthy, and least likely to be tended to by the developed countries:

“We recognize that planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home and that “Mother Earth” is a common expression in a number of countries and regions, and we note that some countries recognize the rights of nature in the context of sustainable development. We are convinced that in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations, it is necessary to promote harmony with nature.”

Post Rio+20: What We Still Need to Do

All international agreements are just words on a page. It is the parties to agreements who by their actions bring the agreements to life. The inaction of governments over the past twenty years has created the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. We have the technology, the knowledge and the finances to change course. What is lacking is political will, and a sense of the greater common good. This is where the role of civil society around the world becomes ever more crucial.

Our advocacy here in the US now must focus on several key areas:

- Government accountability to previous agreements: the Rio Principles, Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation
- Corporate accountability through a mandate to have corporations report on the sustainability impacts of their policies and practices
- Sustainable Development Goals as part of the post-Rio development agenda
- The universal rights to water, sanitation and food
- Elimination of harmful subsidies, such as for fossil fuels
- The transfer of appropriate technology to the developing world, without harmful conditionalities; and the need to explore new and additional financial resources to assist the developing world in its efforts in sustainable development. These are two other areas in which the United States, among others, watered-down their previous commitments
- Raising the ethical implications of policies that foster national self-interest, at the expense of the greater common good



Many consider RIO + 20 as the failure of an international process. However, an international process can only work within existing political will. Political will is not created within international venues. It is created back home, and on the streets. Now, it is up to civil society to take RIO + 20 and move it forward. That means it is up to people like you, and me.

Margaret Mayce, O.P., DLC/NGO Representative to the United Nations

Alexandra Sajben, Dominican Volunteer

211 East 43rd Street, Suite 704

New York NY 10017

ngo@domlife.org (908) 227-2265