Calling All Voices

by Mary Gilbert, QEW Representative to the UN

I’ve been going to the United Nations for 12 years now, witnessing how the nations of the world deal with human impact on our planet’s health. Everyone acknowledges that certain problems, such as ocean acidification, sea level rise, unprecedented flooding and drought are global and cannot be addressed by nation-states on their own. At the UN, which was set up to help nations work together, it has become clear to most civil society UN-watchers that the countries appear unable to leave behind narrow national interests to make effective decisions based on the general good.

The View from the Grass Roots

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like QEW represent ordinary people around the world who have a lot to say about decisions that affect their lives. We are finding that being heard is almost impossible. When it happens, what we say is mostly ignored. Here is an example.

In the fall of 2011 the UN asked all nations, all branches of the UN, and all groups within civil society, for input to be considered for inclusion in the first draft of what would become the Outcome Document from June 2012’s Rio+20 summit. Hard work by informed people went into the submissions, but the draft that emerged in January contained language only from select nations and from the corporate world. By the time Rio came around, special interests had added to the document, and despite strong struggles by poor nations, a lot of what was good in earlier drafts had been deleted. There are a few places in the Outcome Document that are hopeful, but in general it is a disappointment for civil society.

The authors of those sophisticated submissions from last fall, and similar “think pieces” put together by dedicated minds, don’t want their thoughts collecting dust on shelves. There is a movement bubbling up in different places around the world to put together collective statements expressing what kind of world ordinary people want, and to nurture a growing civil society voice that can speak as one. Some submissions originally prepared for the Outcome Document are feeding into this effort. Here are some examples:

- Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties. In mid October Patricia Chernoff and I attended a five-day workshop on creating a Sustainability Treaties platform that could be the basis of a united global citizens’ voice. Open-invitation “circles” are drafting planks for this platform. Fourteen Sustainability Treaties were brought to Rio in June, not to the official UN negotiations, but to a separate forum that was not choked with procedural obstacles to speaking and being heard. Here is a link to a website that lists the 14 treaties:
http://sustainabilitytreaties.org/draft-treaties/.

- IBON International / Rights for Sustainability (R4S). In October 2012 R4S held a Beyond Rio+20: Global Civil Society Workshop in Nairobi. Antonio Tujan, International Director of IBON, describes the initiative as “a Southern-led campaign that is grounded in grassroots struggles while engaging with the official processes related to the post-2015 development agenda.” From the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service publication at: http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?page=amdg10&id_article=4146.

The importance of its being “Southern-led” is that voices from “the Global South,” especially non-government voices, are hardly heard in international discussions. This group will meet again in Bonn in early 2013. Germany has offered to pay transportation and visa costs for representatives from money-poor southern organizations.

- CIVICUS (http://www.civicus.org/) is based in South Africa but is truly global. I attended a five-day CIVICUS meeting in September and became an individual member. (Please see my article in the November/December issue of BeFriending Creation for my impressions.) I haven’t yet read through their latest proposal, but it’s another serious effort to create a global citizens’ voice.

These affiliations are doing what they are doing because it is time. Some organizations are working independently of the UN and some are dedicated to working within the UN system. They are in supportive, close touch with each other.

The View from the Alps

The World Economic Forum (WEF), often called “Davos” because it meets annually in a Swiss resort by that name, is made up of 1000 multinational corporations. Some multinationals have larger incomes than quite a few nations joined together. They have unprecedented power. The WEF sees that most decisions with global impact are already being made by multinational corporations, which are beyond the jurisdiction of governments. These corporations plan to be around for a long time, and they plan to be in charge.

In fall 2012 the WEF published a proposal they call “Everybody’s Business: Strengthening International Cooperation in a More Interdependent World.” Their proposal would put corporations formally in charge of governance on global issues. They say they would then be able to rein in irresponsible corporations that are pushing the planet beyond sustainable limits. The WEF recommends that the current G20 be acknowledged as co-leaders with corporations.

The WEF envisions a very limited role for civil society. They see NGOs that agree with them as explaining the rationale for WEF decisions to citizens around the world. This one-way flow of information would be the exact opposite of the participation in decision-making that civil society wants.

My discussion here is a gross oversimplification, and I encourage you to learn more. Here are three links:

- The first takes you to the full WEF proposal: http://www.weforum.org/reports/everybody%E2%80%99s-business-strengthening-international-cooperation-more-interdependent-world.
- The second takes you to a short article about the proposal: http://unscd.iisd.org/guest-articles/a-post-nation-state-proposal-from-davos/.
- The third takes you to a Readers Guide that will spare you the necessity of reading the whole 600 pages: www.umb.edu/gri.

What to do?

The world does know what to do to facilitate the healing of our beloved planet, as well as why we should be doing it. The UN has established a Harmony With Nature website: http://harmonywithnatureun.org/, through which is found the latest Harmony With Nature Report from August 2012: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/317.
At this point the nations are not up to the job of heeding it, and both the corporate world and the grass-roots world recognize that.

A new dialogue may be needed here, between the multinational corporations and ordinary people. The corporations are coming out of the closet as the actual decision-makers, and the citizenry of the world is developing both strength and voice.

Uchita de Zoysa of Sri Lanka, originator of the Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties, says, “Time will tell. The question is, what should we be doing while we are waiting for time to tell?”

A note about the final quote: This is something Uchita said at the five-day session on the Peoples Sustainability Treaties I attended in October. Uchita is a Sri Lankan national with wide respect around the world. He’s one of those who wants to develop a voice outside the UN constraints, but he works easily with other NGOs and UN staff. For more about Uchita, please visit http://www.csradialogue2012.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83&Itemid=90.

Time will tell. The question is, what should we be doing while we are waiting for time to tell?

Uchita de Zoysa of Sri Lanka, originator of the Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties

---

**BeFriending Creation Volume 26, Number 1**
*The quarterly journal of Quaker Earthcare Witness.*

Quaker Earthcare Witness
P.O. Box 6787
Albany, CA 94706
info@quakerearthcare.org
tel:510-542-9606

- **About QEW**
  - Our Vision & Witness
  - Organizational Structure
  - QEW By-Laws
  - QEW in Practice
  - Upcoming Events
- **Get Involved**
  - Sign up for our mailing list
  - QEW Mini-Grants
  - Donate to QEW
  - Site feedback
  - Contact Us

**Source URL:** https://www.quakerearthcare.org/article/calling-all-voices

**Links**