Business Takeover at the UN

Mary “the non-prophet” Gilbert, QEW Representative to the UN

When you come into a complex phenomenon like the UN it takes time to get a fix on what’s happening. Your perceptions keep changing. It can be hard to tease apart your own new learning from any changes going on in the confusing institutional environment you are learning about. I am referring here to a gradual takeover of the UN by transnational corporations, which at first I didn’t see because I was busy learning the ropes.

Business in the Driver’s Seat

Since I began attending UN sessions in 2001, I have seen a stunning increase in the influence of business over decisions made at the UN. A year ago I wrote in Befriending Creation about a proposal from the World Economic Forum that would put corporations formally in charge of governance on global issues. (http://www.quakerearthcare.org/article/calling-all-voices) The proposal stated that the components of this takeover would not appear all at once but would show up little by little in international trade agreements. I believe we are seeing this now in the proposed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) that is being fast-tracked through the U.S. Senate, and in the proposed EU-US Free Trade Agreement, both of which are of concern to FCNL. (See http://fcnl.org/search/?q=TPP.)

This takeover trend is also taking place in UN climate negotiations. An article in the October 17, 2013 issue of Corporate Europe stated, "Last week’s ‘pre-COP’ saw around 40 ministers and negotiators meet for three days with representatives from big business. Some of the most polluting, climate-damaging companies were present... (T)he meeting to decide this November’s negotiating agenda was an invite only affair for government and business, with civil society excluded. So no public scrutiny, no accountability, and only the Minister’s own conclusions to indicate what was discussed." (http://corporateeurope.org/blog/big-business-allowed-precook-climate-negotiations-behind-closed-doors-foreseeable-future).

The Excluded Voices

In reaction to this trend, numerous civil society umbrella groups are coalescing, insisting on being part of the discussion. Reports are coming from Via Campesina, Rights for Sustainability, Third World Network, the South Canter, Peoples Treaties for Sustainability, Indigenous Peoples and other very sound groups representing many millions of people. These coalitions do have power, as shown in the run-up to the World Summit last June (Rio+20) when an open letter from NGOs to the High Commissioner of Human Rights stopped powerful countries from eliminating all reference to human rights in the outcome document. I plan to report more on the developing civil society landscape.

But Am I to Be a Prophet?

Some years back, attending the UN, I became aware that there is a war going on against Earth and all of us who participate in our planet’s living systems. I came home and sat in my backyard, not wanting to talk to anyone, wondering whether, now that I had woken up, I was called to be a prophet. Must I now warn people about the coming downfall? Tell them to repent? I did not at all want to be a prophet, and I went to bed unconsolated. I woke up unconsoled and wandered again into the yard where I had an enlightening thought. "I don’t have to be a prophet. Yes, there is a war on. Well then, I can be a war correspondent. Right?" Right.

I intend to speak more strongly in these pages, reporting on the war. I won’t be like a prophet telling you what to do. I will trust you to ask in prayer, alone and with others, how you are led forward.