

Now that the climate crisis has center stage, will CSD 15 be able to come up with an expeditious plan of implementation that the international community can embrace and fund with political will and finances?

Just prior to CSD 15 the UN Security Council met in special session to discuss the impact of climate change on global security. Called by the UK, the session was chaired by British Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett, to consider “our collective security in a fragile and increasingly interdependent world.” Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called for a coordinated “long-term global response” to the scientifically verified climate crisis now having severe environmental, social, and economic effects, as well as consequences for peace and security. “This is especially true,” he said, “in vulnerable regions that face multiple stresses at the same time—pre-existing conflict, poverty and unequal access to resources, weak institutions, food security, and incidence of diseases such as HIV/AIDS.”

If the Millennium Environmental Assessment, published in 2001, was so blatantly overlooked, no one is missing the message of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) launched in April 2007. The IPCC clearly warns of the severe impacts climate change is already having on the human community, especially the poor.

The four thematic clusters of interlinking issues for this year’s CSD are energy for sustainable development, industrial development, air pollution/atmosphere, and climate change. The Chairman’s draft negotiating document, reflecting the input from last year’s CSD 14 (a review year on these same issues) formed the basis for discussion and negotiations during the first full week, April 30 to May 4, 2007, at UN headquarters in New York.

Feeling that the Chairman’s draft document itself was heavily biased toward the continuing use of fossil fuels and the assumption that global consumption patterns would continue to grow, many of the Major Groups showed frustration and spoke out about the need for radical transformation.

Women’s Major Group emphasized the critical need for gender mainstreaming in all areas of sustainable development and underscored the importance of women’s involvement in all decision-making processes and infrastructure design concerning energy access and use. Women and children are primarily affected by the burden of fuel acquisition, and health problems stemming from indoor pollution, itself an outcome of the lack of access to clean, affordable, and locally available energy sources.

Farmers regretted that no mention was made of agriculture in the document even though the Millennium Development Goals target the elimination of hunger.

A delegate from Palau representing Indigenous Peoples and Small Island Developing States drew attention to severe coral bleaching, loss of fisheries and ecosystem services. Due to rising sea levels, whole island nations and their cultures are presently at risk of extinction.

NGOs emphasized the necessity for private sector involvement in all areas of sustainable development. They especially warned of empty language in the Chairman’s draft which cloaked nuclear interests. Andrey Ozharovskiy, of ANPED and Ecodefence Russia issued a one page fact sheet on “Nuclear Energy: Selling Out Future Generations,” which was disseminated at a morning NGO Briefing. “The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)” the paper began, “called on governments to consider the

reliability, affordability, economic viability, social acceptability, and environmental soundness of energy services and sources. Based on these criteria, nuclear energy CANNOT be considered a sustainable solution.” The paper goes on with a paragraph discussing each of the above descriptions of nuclear energy. For instance, nuclear energy is not affordable or sustainable; the long term costs of waste management (plutonium has a half life of 24,000 years) and plant decommissioning, which are not internalized in direct costs and will be born by future generations, roughly 1,000 generations, thus “compromising their ability to meet their own needs.” Nuclear energy is not, contrary to popular belief, a solution to climate change. From a life cycle perspective, including mining and transportation, the production of nuclear energy leads to more CO₂ emissions than renewable sources of energy like wind or solar. In addition, the proliferation of nuclear energy could lead to the spread of nuclear weapons; nuclear power generating plants, and waste processing and storage facilities offer easy access to dirty bomb materials and provide targets for terrorist activities. Furthermore, if the subsidies to finance nuclear and fossil fuels were cut, renewables like solar and wind would become competitive on the energy market. The NGOs also brought up cautions about the unknown consequences of carbon capture and sequestration, and voiced concern that biomass fuels might take land from food production in poor countries to supply demands of the industrial world. The use of genetically modified crops to supply biofuels also brought up the fear of food security, contamination and increased pollution of soil and water supplies from inorganic fertilizers and pesticides.

The presence of young people at CSD 15 was truly inspiring. One young woman from the Youth and Children Major Group stood up in an Earth Values Caucus meeting and explained why she was here. “You say to yourselves (meaning the present generation of delegates and leaders) ‘what will we say when our children ask us how did we let this crisis happen?’ We are here because WE ARE ASKING YOU NOW.” And implicit in her appeal was the commitment that Youth was ready to participate in whatever way it could. Members of this Major Group spoke knowledgably and confidently in the general sessions about the moral imperative to act now; to include education for sustainable development in all curricula, beginning in primary grades; to phase out fossil fuels, nuclear power; to ensure that all growth indexes reflect ecological, and ethical criteria; that renewables be sustainable, low impact; and that the international community agrees on time-bound, measurable targets consistent with the carrying capacity of Earth.

“Penguins on Thin Ice,” a musical interlude was offered by the glee club of the High School for Environmental Studies in NYC, written and produced by Sharon Abreu from the Trade Unions Major Group. Sponsored by Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Trade Unions, Earth Values Caucus, and the Alliance of Small Island States, ten talented and environmentally passionate students touched the hearts of those so cerebrally engaged in the negotiations in the UN conference rooms. “Beat the Heat,” “Goodbye, Oil,” “Waters of the World,” “Titanic Island,” “22 Tons,” and “Our Now Is Here” were among the songs they performed. When the sound system refused to cooperate, the young women were just as happy to perform a cappella; so much for our paralyzing reliance upon technology!

Promising demonstrations of green alternatives creating jobs and boosting economic growth abounded. The creation of jobs is a huge step in the eradication of poverty, in accord with the MDGs, and reference was made to the Stern Review

(www.sternreview.uk.org) demonstrating that the cost of paying for the consequences of greenhouse gases later far exceeds the costs of reducing emissions now.

Most countries agree that in a world where 1.6 billion people still lack access to modern energy and energy services, where poor communities must still resort to deforestation, mining water and other natural resources, it is not enough to rely on voluntary participation. The EU suggests mandatory regulations, targets and time frames with a global energy fund to support least developed countries. Yet the G77 countries are weary of conditions that they will not be able to meet due to financial uncertainty. Meanwhile Small Island Developing States cannot wait while industrial countries work out the details. “Environmental protection cannot wait for perfection.” At the other end of the spectrum oil producing countries are concerned about security for the demand side of fossil fuel production.

Earth Charter principles still ring very true in the mix of ethical, ecological, and economic challenges. “Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe...alive within a unique community of life...The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples. The protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.” (Earth Charter Principle #2) Talk continues about whether to create a World Environment Organization, or increasing the funding and authority of UNEP. All that is crystal clear is the need to educate ourselves and act now. Given the IPCC, we know that not acting is a violation of the precautionary principle, but are we closer to concrete implementation as a result of CSD 15? To read the Chairman’s Final Report go to: www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd.

After the meeting, on the bus leaving NYC, I am mindful of the people who have traveled from all over the world to attend this meeting. The delegate from Costa Rica goes home to a country committed to carbon neutrality by mid century. The delegate from Tuvalu returns to his people who bear none of the responsibility for global warming yet are paying the cost with the loss of their homes, their communities, their culture. I, as an American, contributing 22 tons of carbon dioxide a year into Earth’s single atmosphere go home to the sound of power saws clearing my land to create soccer fields, to the noise of lawn mowers and weed whackers and leaf blowers attempting to maintain a beautiful, historic Georgian estate in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. I use fertilizers and pesticides, and drink soda and water from plastic bottles. I know the consequences. I drive a big fuel inefficient car and I leave my electric lights on 24 hours a day. Do I have a choice? Do you?

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