

CSD 17

“It always seems impossible until it is done.” Nelson Mandela.”

The themes for this session of the Commission on Sustainable Development are agriculture, land, rural development, drought, desertification, and Africa. Reaching the Millennium Development Goals, in the midst of global financial crisis, planetary climate crisis, and an increasingly violent political reality does seem like an impossible task. But never has the language of ethical responsibility, urgency, and hope been so concrete. While working groups rewrote the chair’s document in the large conference rooms, side events during the first week included two extraordinary panels: “Poverty and the Climate Crisis,” sponsored by several Congregations of Women Religious, including the Sisters of Mercy, and a legally, scientifically and ethically enlightening Learning Center Course on “Climate Ethics.”

The United Nations has no power to make or enforce law; its authority resides in its moral, ethical voice. Underlying ethical themes of CSD 17 cut across political agendas and national, corporate self interest to spotlight the moral responsibility of the global community to act together in this planetary phase of human civilization for the good of the whole living Universe because... simply, it is the right thing to do.

Don Brown, Penn State University Professor of Environmental Ethics, Science and Law demanded that we “turn up the volume on the climate crisis,”¹ reiterating the urgency mentioned by Gerda Verberg, the Chair of CSD 17, in her opening statement. “As a global society we cannot accept increasing levels of poverty and hunger.” “...global warming and declining natural resources are now adding an unprecedented sense of urgency. Ever rising trends in energy consumption are a major concern... we are using far more of our natural resources than our planet can regenerate... we all have to face these dilemmas, including the dilemma of competing claims for food and fuel.”²

Mitigation of current impacts of climate change asks profound questions of our generation. Can we justify inaction in the face of the fact that climate change will continue to hurt millions? Do we have moral responsibility to developing nations suffering from disasters they did not create, to future generations, and to ecosystems on which we depend for survival.

However deeply the ethical issues seem buried in scientific/technical language we are beginning to spot the ethical issues and understand that fighting on scientific, economic terms without ethical values is impossible.

John Holdren, recently appointed as White House Science Advisor by President Obama has said at previous CSDs that we have 3 options: mitigation, adaptation, and suffering.

The global community agreed to put an Adaptation Fund in place, but few contributors have provided funds to make it functional. Sadly, militarism is depleting precious resources and funds across the globe.

Now is the time to move from reflection to action, to abandon what benefits a few for the greater good of the larger system.

Do we need a universally agreed upon set of values? Do we need a term of ultimate appeal, as John Brinkman, MM suggested? Can we see as the atmosphere sees?

Or as one Georgian Court University student asked, “Isn’t the ultimate reference point the facts themselves?”

In the panel discussion sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, four speakers emphasized that education for critical thinking, global citizenship, and ethical maturity was essential. How to think ethically must be fully integrated into school curriculum at the earliest stages.

One approach, demonstrated by Kiara Worth, a sustainable development specialist, to educate and promote community-based mitigation and adaptation is theatre. The use of dramatized story about how climate change came about, and how it is changing lives, is powerful and can lead to ethical considerations. “Civil rights became real when we saw police dogs on people’s legs.” The arts can inspire action because art connects heart, head and hands.

On the same panel, “Poverty and the Climate Crisis,” Ambassador Dessima Williams of Grenada (AOSIS) had a specific set of proposals for Copenhagen-15. She admonished the US for setting targets for CO₂ caps too low. She stressed that CO₂ levels must be capped at 350ppm and temperature must be kept from rising more than 1.5 degrees. She went on to describe the complexity of poverty, naming 21 distinct categories of “being poor.”

Some wish to take advantage of the agricultural/food crisis to begin new agricultural practices which would replace agro-business with its devastating effects on water supply, its use of petrochemicals which degrade soil and poison rivers and streams, while companies like Monsanto see the crisis as an opportunity to unload GMOs on developing countries desperate for food.

Nnimmo Bassey of Nigeria and The Friends of the Earth emphasized the difference between food security (eat to be full) and food sovereignty (choice about what to eat), and asked how can we achieve real solutions to the food crisis? He spoke about why GMO crops will not feed the world. GMO products in use today merely cut down on weeds and labor; they displace traditional food crops, and dramatically increase the use of herbicides, degrade the land, and drive up the price of seed; 83% of the world biotech acreage for rich nations goes for feedstock; terminator seeds drive farmers to suicide while Monsanto makes millions of dollars.

He supported real solutions: planting conventionally drought tolerant species of corn; introduction of Nerica, a new agro-ecological rice suited specifically to Africa; “push-pull maize” to control stem borer and strangling weed; natural predators to protect Cassava from mealy bugs. He asked us to beware of Gates and Rockefeller Foundations funding biotech projects in Africa trying to make ethical claims for disrupting traditional order; he called for help to strengthen Africa’s ownership in its own development; he promoted sharing information, financially supporting traditional, small, no till, low tool farming practices, not imposing “solutions” on traditional farmers. He warned against using least developed countries to take on the nanotechnology experiment.

Elenita Dano of the Third World Network, passed out a book she had authored on the hype of the Green Revolution in Africa and cautioned the global community to be wary of “philanthro-capitalism.” She pointed to Asia where such imported solutions backfired and achieved tragic consequences.

Water is always an issue if not one of the specified themes; the Water Caucus met daily to write a statement to deliver at the high level ministerial meeting. @How can we

speak of rural development and agriculture, drought and desertification without seeing water as the root of all problems and solutions?

During one of the meetings of the Water Caucus, the Ambassador from Zambia asked if we would learn from the financial crisis; “how far do we want to go before the ecological system collapses. He offered simple, elegant wisdom on carbon sequestration: “leave the good oil in the ground.” On our responsibility toward Earth, he explained: “In my country we attend to the hen that gives the eggs. Our well-being depends on the well-being of the planet’s ecosystems.”

From a text accompanying a display of Cameron drums in the lobby I wrote down some words by Ban Ki-Moon on the slave trade.

“We must acknowledge the great lapse in moral judgment that allowed the (transatlantic slave trade) to happen. We must urge present and future generations to avoid repeating history.” Can we understand the ecological crisis as a “lapse in moral judgment,” and work together as a planet to care for the most vulnerable?

What could we do without to eliminate the 21 categories of poverty? What could we divest of now to invest in the well being of future generations and the ecosystems on which all life depends? And if we must make sacrifices, let us bear them with grace.

“The future is not some place we are going to but one we are creating. The paths to it are made, not found, and the activity of making changes both the maker and the destination.” John Scharr

References

1. www.un.org/esa/dsd/csd_csd17 Learning Center Course, “Climate Ethics”
2. www.un.org/esa/dsd/csd_csd17.html

For more information on CSD 17 go to:

www.un.org/esa/dsd/cds17

www.climateethics.org