

After two weeks of tedious bracketing, revising and revising revisions of the Chair's text, the member nations of the CSD 19 failed to agree on a document concerning this year's thematic cluster of topics: Transport, chemicals, waste management, mining, and sustainable consumption and production (SCP) patterns. The brightest outlook on this disaster seems to be a hope that it will serve as a warning to everyone involved in the planning process for Rio +20, in 2012.

The issues that brought negotiations to a halt seemed trivial to some and critical to others. But underlying the conflict appears the literally Earth-shattering reality of contradictory worldviews, turning any potential ways forward into dead ends.

The worldview voiced most passionately, urgently and eloquently by "developing" nations such as Bolivia, and Venezuela, and the Indigenous Peoples Major Group, appears incompatible with the worldview of the "developed" nations that see and have treated Earth as a storehouse of commodities to be exploited for human use and financial gain. To this market-driven group environmental protection is valued, not for the sake of the natural world itself, but to insure maximum exploitation of resources sustained over maximum time.

This disregard for Earth as other than a provider of commodities and "ecosystem services" (e.g. trees as carbon sinks and suppliers of oxygen, etc.) is in sharp contrast to the UN Secretary-General's report to the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly, "Harmony with Nature." This report

"provides an overview of how the lifestyle of the twenty-first century, through its consumption and production patterns, has severely affected the Earth's carrying capacity and how human behavior has been the result of a fundamental failure to recognize that human beings are an inseparable part of nature and that we cannot damage it without severely damaging ourselves."

(Eric Chivan, ed., *Biodiversity: Its Importance to Human Health—Interim Executive Summary*, Center for Health and Global Environment, Harvard Medical School, 2002).

Sustainable development "rests on the understanding that all things are interconnected and nothing occurs in isolation. Holism calls for broader perspectives."

Voicing a broader perspective, the Ambassador Pablo Solon of Bolivia reported that the government of Bolivia will soon enact laws granting rights to nature. Ambassador Solon also advocated for the creation of "an adequate means of measuring the development and well-being of a society," arguing that Gross Domestic Product does not adequately measure "environmental destruction caused by certain economic activities."

The mining of minerals and the extraction of oil and natural gas are issues where these worldviews very visibly and painfully clash. To Indigenous Peoples who have had much experience with its disastrous consequences, "mining is a *fundamentally* unsustainable industry." Before mining operations can be tolerated in their communities, Indigenous Peoples insist on "free and prior informed consent," a

phrase vigorously rejected by nations benefiting from the spoils of under-regulated, multinational mining corporations. To Women “the history of mining is a history of violence.” Workers and Trade Unions noted the extreme dangers of working in mines. Children and Youth deplored and called for the eradication of child labor. From another perspective, Science and Technology noted the importance of intensive scientific research to maximize mining efficiency and minimize environmental degradation. Industry wants to reinvent extraction processes to be “green” and sustainable. Some see a financial “opportunity to convert waste streams back into resources” and others promote “zero waste.”

How is it possible for these worldviews to co-exist?

The term “green economy” floated into the rooms from a previous meeting of the G-20 and soon took root in the sinkhole of ambiguous UN jargon, interpreted as pernicious on one side and salvific from the industrialized nations’ perspective. Venezuela spoke of “green capitalism” as a “fierce capitalism” that decides what policies and actions to support based on what financial markets will gain. How is it possible for nations to come to consensus on sustainable consumption and production, which are so urgently needed to assure the continuation of human life, which is so dependent upon a delicately balanced and increasingly fragile planetary system?

The Major Groups: NGOs, Farmers, Youth, and Women tried to inject, within their allotted 60 seconds, some values-based thinking. Youth, seemingly stuck between two adversarial parents, pled for peace and dialog, pointing to the dire situation of the present ecological crisis, and cried for a pledge from the global community to work together for a viable future. “We want to help,” they kept repeating, “we really care about today and the future we will inherit.” Let’s hope their cogent presence will be both seen and heard as the global community prepares for and meets at Rio +20.

To see these young people in command of the latest information technology, tirelessly attending plenary sessions, involved in caucuses, presenting in the Learning Center and at side events, taking notes, planning strategies in energetic clusters between sessions, informed and emboldened by the interactive global web they have formed between them, is thrilling. How can one help but see a new organism evolving—one with heart *and* political will as well as finely tuned sensory apparatus and enviable communication skills, working to incorporate the lessons of the past with an inextinguishable hope for a sane, sustainable future?

When called on by the chair of the working group on mining, the Youth representative began her intervention with a personal story. “When my father gave my mother a simple gold wedding band in marriage, they did not know the real cost of the precious metal, that for a thin band of gold one human life had been lost, two tons of waste had been created, thousands of gallons of water contaminated, and scores of children exploited as laborers.” How shall we act on what we now know?

The Women’s Major Group pointed out the abuses done to Earth by the patriarchal paradigm in control for so long. As the voices and rights of women have been ignored for so long, so “voiceless Earth relies on us to speak out against its rape and oppression.” Women demanded an equal voice at the table and full participation in all decision-making processes. Because women are caretakers, their

knowledge has led to invaluable “best practices” that must be shared with the international community. They call for achieving zero waste, assessing all production and products in terms of the life cycle approach, cradle to grave, eventually evolving toward “cradle to cradle” accountability.

Besides the substantive issues, the overwhelming concern and urgent task requiring resolution immediately is how civil society will be able to participate in next year’s Earth Summit, Rio +20. A structure of organization is needed to assure that the Major Groups’ involvement is integral to the negotiation process and not relegated to the margins. If we hope for an ambitious outcome from Rio+20 Major Groups’ participation must be built into the structure from the beginning. The NGO Major Group called this level of involvement a “core value.”

The United Nations is the “conscience of the world,” but without a shared consciousness, without understanding our humanity as inextricably linked and in debt to the solidarity and complementarity of the whole, we continue to apply our best efforts to different and often conflicting goals. The very language we use is deceptive, yet we continue to let this language skew our thinking and render our documents impotent. We use the term “developed world” as if that were something for the “developing world” to aspire to, when we know the perpetuation of unlimited growth will break the balance of Earth’s systems.

In a world where the military expenditure for 2010 was \$1.5 trillion, how will we ever find funds to remediate land and water ruined by unsustainable production, to mitigate environmental damage due to climate change, and to relocate environmental refugees?

If it is necessary to grant legal rights to nature in order to protect and preserve it, what does this say about how disconnected we have become from the source and substance of our very existence?