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Reflections of Rio+20: Being there and looking back while seeing a way forward

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*We are not simply the generation that we have been waiting for;
We are the leaders we have been waiting for.
– Mayan saying*

Twenty years have passed since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)—also known variously as the Rio Summit, Rio Conference, or Earth Summit—in 1992. Much can change with the passing of time. In 20 years, a child becomes an adult, and, in many cultures, this maturation is evidenced through the ability to think for oneself, to become self-reliant, and to contribute to the larger community.

I had the privilege of attending Rio+20 in June 2012 as a writer for the International Institute for Sustainable Development (www.iisd.org). In the weeks since the event, I have witnessed a flood of reports expressing disappointment in the shortcomings of outcomes from participating governments. However, I have also witnessed grounds for hope, optimism and pride.

I was particularly impressed with two events that demonstrated people were taking action and leading the way to creating a future we want—the Sustainability Dialogue Days and the Equator Prize Gala.

I invite you to join me in challenging the myopic focus on failure and consider that the time has come to stop blaming governments and accept responsibility that we, the people, can participate in creating the future we want.

Rio+20 was the most participatory conference in the history of the United Nations, illustrating a new vision of global democracy. There were over 12,000 individuals registered, 500 official side events, and another 30,000 participants in one or more of the 3,000 unofficial parallel events that took place throughout Rio de Janeiro.

There were representatives from 191 UN member states and observers, including 79 heads of state or government.

Sustainability Dialogue Days

Protestors and lobbyists were invited to join appointed officials to create a new form of dialogue at the Sustainable Development Dialogue Days.

The government of Brazil, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), launched a digital platform, "Vote for the Future You Want," that invited representatives of civil society from around the world, including the private sector, NGOs, scientific leaders, community members and online voters, to engage in an open debate on sustainable development. The Dialogue Days broadcast the message that people have a voice and that there is power in that voice.

This marked an important change from traditional United Nations negotiations, where appointed officials debate to determine world affairs. It demonstrated how a democratic progress can be inclusive and consider the concerns, challenges and opportunities of all constituents within political debates.

The dialogues gave "power to the people and particularly women," said Brice Lalonde, Executive Coordinator of Rio+20, Minister for the Environment, France, and Chair of the Round Table for Sustainable Development at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

We have the tools. Let us use them to make this world sustainable for all.
– UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

The Dialogue Days focused on the 10 topics that were determined by online voting:

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| 1. Sustainable cities and innovation | 5. Unemployment, decent work and migration |
| 2. The economics of sustainable development, including sustainable patterns of production and consumption | 6. Water |
| 3. Sustainable development as an answer to the economic and financial crisis | 7. Food and nutrition security |
| 4. Sustainable energy for all | 8. Sustainable development for fighting poverty |
| | 9. Forests |
| | 10. Oceans |

The event drew together specialists and civil society to discuss and debate these 10 topics. Three recommendations for each topic were to be forwarded to heads of state, based on the top recommendations selected by online voting, an in-session vote from the audience, and the panelists' preferred recommendation.¹

The messages that came from this event were clear and strong. At each of the 10 sessions, world leaders and community members consistently saw the pathway forward intrinsically linked to the empowerment of women.

Vandana Shiva, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, India was perhaps the most direct in warning against false solutions and stated that women, not corporations, can solve the problem of hunger.

The empowerment of women was inscribed in several of the resulting recommendations.

¹ For a complete review of the recommendations from the Sustainable Development Dialogue Days, see IISD coverage: <http://www.iisd.ca/uncsd/rio20/sdd/html/ymbvol201num4e.html>.

*'Eli 'Eli kaumai'—A Hawaiian phrase that can be translated as to 'descend, deepen the revelation.'
Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele explains it as a need to seek understanding and wisdom
from a higher plane, no matter what level we are currently at, to dig deeper.*

The treasure seeded in indigenous knowledge also surfaced as critical in moving to a future that is sustainable. This sentiment was well summarized by Guilherme Leal, Founder, CEO, Natura Cosméticos: “to take care of ourselves, we must care for the whole.”

Reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have recognized that the effects of climate change often fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable groups that have had the least to do with creating the problem. The voice of the people spoke and made the recommendation that sustainable development must respect diversity of people, culture and the dignity of the poor, and suggested promoting dialogue and transparency to build a global citizenship based on mutual respect.

We have no time for the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.
– Martin Luther King

In all, there were over 58,000 voters from 192 counties casting about 1.37 million votes: 42 per cent from Europe, 35 per cent from the Americas, 8 per cent from Oceania, 7 per cent from Asia, and 6 per cent from Africa. There is great potential to increase the level of participation. After all, *American Idol*, a popular television show in the United States, had over 110 million votes in its first season, and, by season 10, nearly 750 million.

Clearly, there is a way to engage more people in the voting process. It is critical to the success of ongoing dialogue and participation that the online portal is available and accessible, potentially through creating a mobile application.²

Equator Prize Award Gala

Another important event was the Equator Prize Award Gala on June 20, 2012. It further illustrated what is possible with an inspired parade of global beauty and pride—25 community leaders were acknowledged, awarded, and honored for their accomplishments in sustainable development.

Former Minister of Culture of Brazil and bossa nova legend Gil Gilberto united hearts in Rio at the event, allowing music to honour, uplift, and unite the accomplishments of heroes for sustainable development.

These visionaries have created the future in the present. They have taken responsibility for seeing the challenges in their homes and have made a difference. They didn't wait for a government official or politician to pave a way forward. They plowed through obstacles and beat the odds to build new foundations for our future. These leaders not only deserve to be acknowledged for their accomplishments, they should be held high for all to see, as role models for those working in the field of sustainable development.³

The awards were given in the thematic areas of food security, freshwater access, sustainable energy, oceans and biodiversity.

² We have a choice to take responsibility to stay informed and ask organizers for the changes we want: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&nr=596&type=13&menu=23>, <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=12&nr=81&template=343>.

³ For a complete list of Equator Prize 2012 winners with links to their projects visit the website: http://equatorinitiative.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=684&Itemid=702

Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), acknowledged the work of communities in her statement, “I trust that we all know that we cannot address climate change globally unless communities claim their power to implement solutions—and creative solutions—on the ground.”

During the award ceremony, the messages of preserving and honouring indigenous knowledge and women from the Sustainable Development Dialogue Days were echoed.

As Braulio Ferreira de Souza Dias, Executive Secretary, CBD, put it, “There is no way to conserve biodiversity if we don’t preserve the traditional knowledge associated with biodiversity.”

Helen Clark, Administrator, UNDP, said “There can be no sustainable development without women’s empowerment.”

Achim Steiner, Executive Secretary, UNEP, commended the energy, creativity and innovation of this year’s Equator Prize winners: “If we do not celebrate this, then we really overlook the best hope we have for making what we are talking about in Rio actually happen after Rio.” He paid respect to the many individuals who remain unrecognized, including those who end up in jail or lose their lives for protecting the environment.

It is far too simple to reflect on Rio+20 as a disappointment and merely focus on the shortcomings of the outcomes. Whether officials were limited by the larger geopolitical landscape, economic pressures, or other political weights, the steps were certainly weighed down to small pitter patters as opposed to the hopes of giant leaps.

Yet there is more to learn from the summit. In a final statement to a meeting of major groups during Rio+20, the children and youth caucus told the government delegations: “We came here to celebrate our generation. We have danced, dreamed and loved on the streets of Rio and found something to believe in. You have chosen not to celebrate with us.”

These children and youth have articulated the very essence of Rio+20, that although the world had hoped for more, the celebration of accomplishments outweighs the benefit of resentment from disappointment. It is up to us, the people, to name leaders, to share resources, inspiration and continue to model, scale-up and build on the present for a future we all want.

If we simply look to others to provide us the change that we desire, we become mere observers in a life that is worth living. While there is value in holding others accountable for prior commitments made, nothing exceeds the value of creating the future we want, being part of the change, experiencing it in our bones, through our senses, and in our own hearts.

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