

# **Dialogue of the Deaf**

*Shiney Varghese*

What did it mean for: the people of Bhopal, suffering since December 1984 from the worst chemical disaster in human history; those in South Africa, whose waters are being contaminated by industrial pollution; those in the USA, unwittingly being fed with genetically modified food; those families (not individuals) living on less than a dollar a day? For the concepts and practices of sustainable development?

A question of this kind posed after the UNCED in Rio (1992) would have given us answers such as: Adoption of Rio Principles; Agenda 21, a comprehensive plan of action for every area of human impact on the environment; and initiatives which gave rise to conventions such as UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and Convention on Biological Diversity, the two most important treaties dealing with sustainability. While real progress on abiding by the principles outlined or in implementing the conference goals has been slow, Rio was an outstanding success in terms of putting environmental issues on the global agenda.

‘This is not Rio’, said Kofi Annan. The UN-organized WSSD was touted as a conference on action. It was to come up with ‘a plan of implementation’ for protecting the environment while improving the lives of people living in poverty.

What we now have is a series of expressions of intent – to reverse the trend in bio-diversity loss, to phase out energy subsidy where appropriate, to increase access to modern energy services, increase energy efficiency and to increase the use of renewable energy, to enhance co-operation to reduce air pollution, to support phasing out of export subsidies (without reference to any obligation on the part of EU to reduce subsidy given to its farmers)- all these without any clear targets or timetables.

We also have a few deadlines, such as halving the number of people who live on less than a dollar a day or halving the people who do not have access to water supply and sanitation. (The unfortunate part is that targets on renewable energy had to be compromised to reach an agreement on sanitation target – How these two could be seen as one or the other escapes me: after all, the use of fossil fuels and hydropower aggravates the water crisis). Another agreement was to restore depleted fisheries by 2015.

But even where there are deadlines, there has been no clear multilateral agreement to commit funds for these new agreements. What is being played out is the reluctance on the part of developed country governments to establish multilateral funding mechanisms, for any action in the interest of sustainable development at global level. In off-the-record conversations both EU and US delegation members said, effectively: ‘why would our government fund an initiative where we will not have complete control? The funding, it has been decided, will come from “innovative partnerships”. What are these?’

## **World Summit on Shameful Deals (W\$\$D)**

'Innovative partnerships' are in keeping with the developments in the UN system, where business is being seen as partners in sustainable development – not necessarily in ensuring that they comply to all sustainability parameters, but in promising to bring in much needed money for the UN. On 4th September, Kofi Annan said that “the conference marked “a major leap forward” in teaming up the public sector, ...businesses and other key actors”. That is indeed the case. According to the UN report on the announcement of partnerships, ‘in a sharp departure from traditional conference practice, these partnerships represent an innovative mechanism for moving from paper commitments to joint action on the ground’.

While the UN has sanctioned partnerships, it has not developed multilaterally-agreed upon guidelines on partnerships. 'Innovative partnerships' are often Northern-driven. It allows the fund provider from consortiums with like-minded international institutions to choose or promote other partners such as private firms in their countries. Perhaps in keeping with colonial and neo-colonial legacies, EU announced water partnerships for Africa and Central Asia (whereby European water multinationals like Suez, Vivendi and Thames Water secure contracts in these regions, and European water professionals get consultancies and 'aid' to work there). The US announced \$970 million for those countries meeting standards such as good governance and sound fiscal policies (i.e., private sector participation and other policies conducive to US interests).

As I was observing the processes at WSSD, I was reminded of a report by David Korten on a UN event: ‘a true power lunch of lobster and an exotic mushroom salad co-hosted by the then President of the UN General Assembly, Executive Director of the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD on June 24, 1997) to examine steps toward establishing terms of reference for business sector participation in the policy setting process of the UN and partnering in the uses of UN development assistance funds’. At WSSD we saw how effective WBCSD has been in ensuring that businesses are more than equal to most UN member governments when it comes to policy setting processes. A majority of the partnership initiatives have direct involvement of companies such as BP, Proctor and Gamble, and Escom – which is polluting water in South Africa itself.

The World Bank along with Proctor and Gamble announced an innovative (sanitation) partnership to improve the health standards of children of Kerala, where I grew up and my parents live. The irony is that Kerala has the highest health and sanitation indicators in India, at par with developed countries. The only difference is that use of plant extracts are quite prevalent even today in this state for cleaning one's body, clothes, and utensils. With its high literacy it can be a large market indeed. (In response to the media advocacy strategy, according to a recent report, 'Kerala has washed its hands off the “washing the hands” project).

It is in response to this that there was a civil society campaign on 'enforceable corporate accountability and liability' initiated by Friends of the Earth International and supported by many government delegates as well as almost all major groups – except business. The proposal for an international framework on corporate accountability and liability was almost killed in the pre-WSSD meeting at Bali. But due to the efforts of civil society groups, it made a comeback in WSSD, though in a more diluted form. The final implementation text of WSSD calls for

“commitment to actively promote corporate responsibility and accountability”. This text at least leaves the door open for the civil society to campaign for a strong treaty on corporate accountability.

At the beginning of this article, I asked a question: What will WSSD do for those living in the shadow of nuclear plants, those being displaced by large dams, those affected by food insecurity? Precious little. If anything, there may be many more joining their ranks. For WSSD did not have the political will to commit funds for renewable energy, or for achieving sustainable consumption and production in agriculture or industry. It did not think it necessary to rein in the trade and economic agenda promoted by the neo-liberal forces to ensure that social and environmental justice issues are addressed.

Venezuela’s left-wing President Hugo Chavez said the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) had turned out to be a 10-day “dialogue of the deaf”. Transparency was not a feature of either the WSSD decision-making or the processes leading up to it. Powerful countries held sway, and poorer developing-country government delegations were at a disadvantage.

### **On a positive note**

However, I cannot end this report without talking about not so concrete achievements. For one, the last week saw civil society groups of different orientations coming together to condemn the WSSD processes and outcomes. Many NGO groups who had for long been involved in UN processes were so disillusioned by the WSSD that in the last days, they joined hands with anti-globalization activists to protest against the outcome. This is the beginning of a new process; we will have to wait to see how it unfolds.

The final Plenary saw the Palestinian Authority Representative eloquently talking about the concerns of that state and its people, pointing out how sustainability is impossible under occupation, and getting a standing ovation lasting several minutes. This was in sharp contrast to Colin Powell’s speech, which followed immediately and was interrupted several times by US NGOs frustrated with the outcomes of the negotiations.

The other important initiative was from the African governments in almost unanimously rejecting the GM corn, which USA was trying to give as food-aid to famine stricken Southern Africa. Solidarity was expressed by other developing countries such as India in committing to send non-GM food to these countries.

Most importantly, the WSSD was not just about the 21,000 who were at Sandton Center. Well over 30,000 people from all over the world-landless, peasants, fishers, waste pickers, public sector workers, slum dwellers, activists-assembled in various venues in the outskirts of Johannesburg to express their individual and collective concerns. (This was the first ever time people who pick rubbish-known by various names in different regions-assembled globally in one place.)

The only official occasion where they were permitted to express their concern was on the day of solidarity March on the 31st of August. Over 30,000 people walked for over 12 miles from the poor, black residential area of Alexandria township to the periphery of the posh, white Sandton Center, where they were stopped by police. The differences between the areas are stark. Sandton Center is comparable with the best of the first world.

In Alexandria you see open gutters and broken pipes, broken down cars parked in the alleys, people loitering around, food sold on streets by vendors, all markings of a poor third world city. As you cross the boundary of the township, there is a change. You suddenly encounter the speeding highways of the developed world, with a sprinkling of people here and there (what a difference from the township, where people of all ages were milling against each other all along the route, to watch the rally, exchanging greetings with those who decided to walk for sustainable development). Banner after banner told the story of various struggles being fought all over the world for basic survival of humans and sustainability of ecosystems.

Through careful planning, civil society groups also managed to organize several actions on the last day to express our discontent.

Wear stickers of the day: wssd.morg, No more (shameful Summits) or W\$\$D

Wear Black and sit in mourning in front of the Sandton Square, where many delegates pass through

Stage a symbolic walk out from the official venue

Support the US groups in their expression of dissent during Colin Powell's speech both inside and outside. "Betrayed by governments", read a banner held up during the Colin Powell speech, by the mainly American protesters.

This civil society gathering was also an occasion to strengthen the networks, build alliances, strategize for future, and above all declare that another world is possible, and renew our pledge to work for it collectively.

Shiney Varghese arbeider for "Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy"