

# A Post Rio+20 World:

## Planning Our Own Sustainable Futures after a Summit that Promised Nothing!



**By Uchita de Zoysa**

*(Note: The writer is Executive Director of Centre for Environment and Development in Sri Lanka and the initiator of the Peoples' Sustainability Treaties at Rio+20. He participated in the first Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and has followed the Rio+20 negotiations during the past two plus years and was lead author of the Peoples' Sustainability Manifesto which can be found at [www.sustainabilitytreaties.org](http://www.sustainabilitytreaties.org). Pl send your comments to [uchita@sltnet.lk](mailto:uchita@sltnet.lk))*

***Last year, at United Nations Conference held in Bonn, I warned the international community that Rio+20 could easily turn in to a funeral ceremony of sustainable development. Sensing threats to the real issues on sustainable development, I urged the global civil society to step out of their fragmentation and act collectively and proactively using Rio+20 as a platform. While Rio+20 preparatory sessions tried hard to bury the real issues, the final summit resulting in nothing has actually saved the sustainability agenda for another day to be battled.***

### **A summit to keep the sustainable development agenda alive or dead?**

Chairing a side event at the first preparatory committee meeting in New York in May 2010, I asked Felix Dodds of Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future why we need another summit. "A Summit can help us keep the sustainable development agenda alive" was his answer. An interesting argument, but did Rio+20 ever promise to inject life to a sustainable development agenda? On the contrary, it ridiculed forty years of serious attempts to place the world on a sustainable development path and tried to change the direction established twenty years ago through Agenda 21; these attempts were made by redefining sustainable development from a narrow green economy perspective, by drowning the calls for equity, and by trying to slaughter the rights to sustainability. One thing was obvious from the beginning; we had to fight to keep the true sustainable development agenda alive while Rio+20 tried to murder it.

### **A zero minus draft**

The first real evidence that Rio+20 could seriously damage twenty plus years of sustainable development work was when it released the Zero Draft of the outcome document. For many of us it was a zero minus draft, and a red alert warning to rally civil society for a greater battle. The zero draft ignored the hundreds of submissions made by national governments, civil society organizations and major groups and came up with a document that even shocked government negotiators who called for greater imagination by the UN Secretariat for Rio+20. This document not only lacked any imagination but took us twenty years backwards in the sustainable development agenda. Many of us were once again forced to doubt the sincerity of the United Nations and left to question its motives and influences.

Many questions that were under the carpet started to come out; whose agenda was this zero draft trying to promote?

### **The future we don't want**

The zero draft of the outcome document was ironically named as "The Future We Want". This led to an immediate outcry and a campaign that was to be called "The Future We Don't Want" was mooted in response. Rio+20 which was a boring and low participatory event suddenly came alive with rights based groups from across the world joining the debate and challenging the UN process. Rio+20 for a long time was not driven by governments. It was the UN secretariat and the different UN agencies like UNEP that drove the agenda. Lethargic representatives from national missions in New York, especially from developing countries, were reluctant participants to most of the negotiations that took place in the preparatory meetings and intersessionals. Little was known by governments back home and they could care less given the low profile of the conference. The negotiations were simply kept alive by civil society and major groups who continued to challenge the agenda and emerging issues which finally drew attention of most of the sleeping national delegates. But, by the time they woke up, the zero draft was already on the table leaving them a single option of negotiating forced text.

### **Saving the summit**

From the beginning it was rather strange that the UN Secretariat for Rio+20 had decided to hold the third preparatory committee meeting in Rio de Janeiro just four days before the summit. When the three days of negotiations ended without any progress, it was also unusual that there was no real panic amongst parties to the conference. The four days prior the summit were used by the Brazilian government to hijack the peoples plans for Rio+20 when they came-up with an alternative Sustainable Development Dialogue Days. Making a late and forceful entry into the itinerary of events, this new initiative had been planned rather smartly by the Brazilian government to manipulate and save a losing process. It was obvious that the Brazilian government could not afford to have the Rio+20 Summit ending in a total failure or deadlock. They as hosts, with lot of reputation at stake, had to come-up with a completely new strategy to save the summit. Once the UN secretariat handed over the summit to the Brazilian hosts, they took over the outcome document and came up with another version of "The Future We Want" which was released as a consensus document of all parties; they had always had a plan to simply save the summit and save themselves.

### **A summit of nothing**

The day prior to the commencement of the Rio+20 summit, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2012, the Brazilian government released the final consensus outcome document. Before the summit commenced on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and before national leaders and delegates arrived in the plenary hall, the summit was more or less over and done with. "The Future We Want" outcome document was already adopted by consensus and rest of the agenda was for heads of states and delegations to make their official statements. Even I have to admit that the document was a sharp piece of diplomacy that included more or less everything in question, but shrewdly avoiding any new political commitment. Therefore, the political leaders who arrived in Rio de Janeiro, who are used to making convincing speeches to dead audiences, made their statements without any conscience or guilt. Many governments praised Brazil for its smart diplomacy while those outside the plenary were cursing the global hypocrisy that had taken place. Ultimately a summit of nothing came out with a nothing outcome – simply a set of words and sentences and paragraphs that does not hold our governments responsible for action. The Summit was saved and the fight for sustainable development was left yet for another day. Sadly, the fight ahead looked rather grim too in the sparsely filled conference rooms at Riocentro on the last day of the summit; many had already left or were out shopping and sightseeing.

### **An eluding summit of equity**

The former Director of the Rio+20 Secretariat Tariq Banuri, joining us in the civil society during his stay in Rio de Janeiro, said this should have been the summit of equity. Disillusioned by the low imagination and low commitment levels of the summit, he recognized that the only positive outcome could be that Rio+20 having many summits within the summit; meaning that the global civil society and different stakeholders organizing their own action to decide their own futures could bring some hope. But, these other summits too seemed to have eluded the ultimate goal – joining hands for a common future. The so called Rio+20 Peoples Summit, hijacked by a Brazilian NGO Organising Committee, was a chaotic demonstration that led to thousands of civil society representatives from across the world being stranded and lost without any sense of direction or coordination. Compared to the Global Forum organized by the International NGO Forum in 1992 at the first Earth Summit, this was a sad show of how fragmented the civil society has become. While those who were serious about meeting like minded groups to build plans for the future were stranded, the mock social forum appeared more satisfied by lending the space to conference-junkies, travelling-hippies and eco-pilgrims to sing, dance, dine, shout and also trade their products. In the corners of the Peoples Summit, very dubiously, there were large tents managed by big corporations and mining industries. The mind of the curious was burning with the question “who sponsored the chaos and distraction so the Brazilian government could enforce effectively their smart diplomacy to save the summit?”

### **Manifesto of the Peoples Sustainability Treaties**

Alternately, fourteen Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties evolved through a consultative process with hundreds of civil society organizations converged at the Rio+20 to launch a Manifesto on the final day of the summit. They declared that another world is possible after Rio+20 and pledged their commitment to a transition toward increasingly sustainable futures on earth. The signatories to this Manifesto refused to sit idly by in the face of another failure of governments to provide hope for a sustainable future for all. They announced their own responsibility for undertaking actions, inviting and encourage similar actions and commitments by other rightsholders and stakeholders, communicating a vision for healthy communities, sustainable and equitable human well-being and its associated strategies, and coming together in the form of a global citizen’s movement to shepherd the transition to a sustainable, equitable, and democratic future.

This manifesto calls for action that helps move simultaneously toward a more localized socio-economic structure and toward a supra-national mindset that helps us transcend the parochial concerns of a corporate-capitalistic globalization to activate a global citizens movement. The signatories have pledged to:

**Equity** is the overarching demand from the civil society world, and must be the foundation of the collective global response. We call for equity within generations, equity across generations, and equity between humans and nature. For this we need to revert back to making individual and societal decisions based on equity and ecological factors and not merely on monetary factors. A different sort of economics, a new approach to learning and education as a process, a revised understanding of ethics and of spirituality then become the ways in which we can work toward a more Equitable society; one that recognizes our integral relationship with the natural world

**Localizing** our systems of economies, decentralizing governance, and advancing sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods becomes the new social order of sustainable societies. Localism is the

theme emerging across the board which is linked to the principles of devolution, of decentralization and of subsidiarity, turning localism into a world-wide movement becomes the key to unpacking many of the complexities we face, whether in the case of sustainable consumption and production or in the case of radical ecological democracy. Protecting the rights of Mother Earth and of humans, transforming our governance systems through radical ecological democracy, respecting cultural diversity, and strengthening sustainable economies is the way towards sustainable futures for all. It is thus essential that we create a more effective, responsible and democratic system of global governance

A **Global Citizens Movement** is the collective response towards transitioning to a sustainable world. All sections of society must thrive to converge upon their visions and convictions and find common ground for collective action that can bring about the transformation required to ensure the wellbeing of all on the planet—humans as well as nature. Such a global citizens movement would catalyze for a peaceful and prosperous new world that generates widespread happiness and contentment – thus propagating widespread practices of mindful intentional action. For this, a new sense of ethics, values and spirituality must be seeded within current and future generations through a redesigned system of learning, education and enlightenment.

#### **From a summit of nothing towards a transition to sustainability**

Many industrialized country leaders including USA, UK, and Germany ignored Rio+20 sending clear signals that it was already a summit of nothing. For them, the G20 Summit, just a few days before, was more important than a world summit. For those who actually arrived in Rio de Janeiro, they would have realized that visits to beautiful scenic places would be more memorable than the actual summit. For me, the day I was part of a meeting in the office of Mr. Shah Zukang, the Secretary General of Rio+20, was the end of hopes for the summit when he stated that he has no vision for the summit. This was a summit of nothing that could not draw any vision for sustainable futures and derive political commitment from our leaders to further the sustainable development agenda drawn in 1992. Indeed, since 1992, there has been a retrogression in the consensus that was reached at the Earth Summit—and reflected in such principles as burden sharing, articulation of rights, mobilization of support, and protection of the vulnerable. Repeated attempts to revive this consensus—at Johannesburg in 2002, Bali in 2007, Copenhagen in 2009, and now Rio de Janeiro in 2012—have come up empty handed, thus thwarting efforts to build upon it

We as citizens of the world are now left to look after our own sustainable futures. In this realization, advancing global citizen's movement to shepherd the transition to a sustainable, equitable, and democratic future, one in which ethics is both a right and a responsibility—at the level of the individual, the community and the planet has become more important than ever.

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