

A Growing Strength

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Wangari Maathi is a leading voice in the Greenbelt Movement of Kenya. She delivered a speech on behalf of non-governmental organisations at the Earth Summit after consultation with many other groups.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been a major force of change in the past twenty years; many of the most well known and active of them at work today were formed as a direct result of the Stockholm Conference in 1972. At the Earth Summit NGOs organised their own parallel event, the Global Forum, which featured representatives from thousands of diverse organisations world-wide.

The environment and development NGOs have followed the UNCED process from its inception. Some tirelessly walked the halls of the United Nations for two years, making serious proposals for action to the governments of the world. Others watched the process from afar hoping that political leaders and government officials would rise and meet the challenges presently confronting the human species.

Three different governmental approaches were distinguishable in the UNCED process: that which seeks the urgently needed structural changes in the way it manages its resources and share its benefits; that which makes merely cosmetic adjustments in a hopelessly unsustainable economic, social and environmental order; and that which is simply bent on preventing progress.

UNCED has brought about a leap in public awareness of key environment and development issues, and its failure or success must be assessed on the basis of the progress it makes on issues that are vital to building environmentally sound and socially equitable societies. These include: eliminating poverty; fair and environmentally sound trade; reversal of the net flow of resources from South to North; clear recognition of the responsibilities of business and industry; changes in wasteful patterns of consumption; internalisation of the costs of environmental and natural resource use; equitable access to environmentally sound technology and its benefits; redirection of military expenditures to environmental and social goals; and democratization of local, national and international political institutions and decision-making structures.

Without progress on these issues policies and actions agreed to at UNCED and elsewhere will be seriously undermined.

Solutions must be found to growing North/South inequities and increasing ecological degradation. But changing inequitable social structures within countries is equally important.

New patterns of international cooperation are required to address global concerns but, unfortunately, negotiations so far have often been compromised by the paralysing logic and narrow interests of traditional power politics.

However, the nature of the environment and development debate has changed forever. UNCED has achieved the first step in the integration of the two key components. Issues such as poverty, trade and debt were put on the negotiating table and, as never before, discussed by such a broad range of governmental and non-governmental actors.

However what has been gained through UNCED risks being sabotaged by the failure of governments to make commitments to concrete actions on certain key issues. We recognize the collective responsibility of all governments, and in fact of all sectors of society, in this failure.

The important, indeed vital, role which NGOs and social movements have to play in international negotiations has been broadened through the UNCED process. UN procedures will never be the same again.

One of the most positive results of the Earth Summit process is the growing strength of the international environment and development movement. NGOs have been meeting for over two years now and have been building bridges between the North and South, East and West.

We will continue our struggle towards a democratic, socially equitable and ecologically sustainable world. We are empowered through our own networks, and have developed cooperation treaties for concrete action.

We recognise the progress made in many areas in UNCED and we will continue to push vigorously and relentlessly for the steps yet to be taken. We will fight to ensure that those tools that UNCED created to achieve a new pattern of civilisation are used democratically, fully and effectively. We urge the elected leaders and governments to do the same.