COMMENTARY

A Social Worker’s Report from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20)

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In June 2012, heads of state convened to finalize a policy framework on sustainable development called “The Future We Want” at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio + 20). To date, this is the largest United Nations gathering ever held, with over 12,000 government officials and over 10,000 representatives of major groups (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2012). The two main themes of the conference were (1) “a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and (2) the institutional framework for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2011c). The conference attendees presented ways to redefine economic growth as inclusive and how the green economy can provide decent jobs. This document will guide international sustainable development for the next 10 years.

I joined this conference as part of the Ecocity Builders delegation, which convened the cities track for nongovernmental organization (NGO) major groups. Social workers and community organizers around the world would find this conference of interest because it emphasized the relationship between sustainable development and poverty eradication. The role of the United Nations Environmental Program will also be strengthened. Despite these achievements, the NGO major group issued a statement rejecting the outcome document. The United Nations will track progress using sustainable development goals (SDGs) after 2015. Social workers should take the opportunity to engage the United Nations to shape the SDGs.

SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social work has been involved with improving environmental conditions and eradicating poverty since the days of the settlement house movement. Globally, social development is the primary paradigm of poverty eradication. Social development is a process of planned change that combines community development with economic development (Midgley, 1995; Midgley & Conley, 2010). Many nations have a Ministry of Social Development that organizes micro-credit and other antipoverty programs. Social development workers organize lending pools, cooperatives, and nonformal education (Hall, 2004). Even some social work programs in the United States offer a social development curriculum that includes interventions such as asset building (Sherraden, 1990), for example. Recent social work texts have included chapters on sustainability and the environment (Estes, 2010; Gamble & Weil, 2009; Mary, 2008; van Wormer & Besthorn, 2010), and scholars in the International Consortium for Social Development have argued that social work should embrace the connections between social development and sustainability (Mohan, 2011), especially given the common theoretical interest in systems theory (Welch, 2012). Indeed, the Council for Social Work Education made sustainability the theme for its 2010 conference in Portland, Oregon, to explore ways of “greening” the profession.

THE UNITED NATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The path to Rio + 20 builds on past environmental conferences, including the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission issued a report that recognized three pillars of sustainable development: the environment, the economy, and the social (Brundtland, 1987). The report defines sustainable development as meeting current needs in such a way
that it does not compromise future generations. Often, sustainability is framed as a cost that reduces economic growth and in turn increases unemployment. This report set the framework for the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which resulted in treaties on climate change, desertification, and species protection. The follow-up actions of this conference were referred to as Agenda 21 and included common but differentiated responsibilities for each member state and embraced precautionary principle (United Nations, 2011a).

Meanwhile, on the antipoverty front, the World Bank (1990) published a provocative report on global poverty that found 1 billion people living in abject poverty, on less than one U.S. dollar a day. The 1995 World Summit on Social Development called for each country to measure and set goals regarding poverty. These Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) began with a pledge to cut global poverty in half. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2004) convened the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, where the world reaffirmed its commitment to Stockholm, Agenda 21, and the MDGs.

The United Nations General Assembly authorized Rio + 20, and preparation for the conference took place in New York for more than a year (United Nations, 2011d). Although diplomats representing heads of state actually draft the consensus document for approval, the United Nations has a consultative process with nine major groups representing business and industry, children and youths, farmers, indigenous people, local authorities, NGOs, the scientific and technological community, women, and workers and trade unions. Each major group met prior to the conference in New York to make comments on the zero draft for consideration in the final document (United Nations, 2011b).

Meanwhile, the government of Brazil organized the Rio Dialogues: a combination of social media conversations inviting broad participation from world citizens that culminated in a four-day event prior to the main summit (Government of Brazil & United Nations, 2012). Brazil invited representatives from major groups and ordinary citizens to submit proposals via the Rio Dialogues Web site. An expert panel picked the top 10 proposals for each of the following categories: sustainable energy for all; forests; water; food security and nutrition; oceans; sustainable development for fighting poverty; sustainable cities and innovation; the economics of sustainable development, including sustainable patterns of production and consumption; unemployment, decent work, and migrations; and sustainable development as an answer to the economic and financial crises. These proposals were voted on internationally via the Internet, and the results were tabulated by continent, gender, human development index, and age. Attendees of the conference were allowed to vote on a second priority from the top 10. Brazil convened an expert panel for each topic and facilitated a conversation with attendees before drafting a third recommendation. The recommendations were consolidated and published as an appendix to the official consensus document. Citizen engagement through social media allowed access to information prior to the conference and the submission of recommendations for consideration.

CONFLICT OVER EMISSIONS, WOMEN, AND WAR

As expected, following the experience in the Copenhagen climate negotiations, the nations of the world did not agree on key issues. Even the conference theme regarding the “green economy” generated controversy. Voices representing social and environmental organizations felt that a theme called “green economy” represented an affirmation that the economy is the most important aspect of sustainable development. The best presentations were those that showed how each pillar is part of an interdependent system. Conference participants did agree that the way governments measure progress using indicators of general economic activity like gross domestic product are in conflict with sustainable development because they do not account for the depletion of resources needed in future generations.

In general, the main block dominating the conference was the G77, a coalition of developing countries. They wanted to emphasize “common, but differentiated responsibilities” for sustainable development. On a practical matter, the G77 objected to language requiring cutting emissions unless the document included language about increased overseas development assistance or favorable terms for technology transfer. The United States opposed promises for increased overseas development assistance and insisted that any technology transfer be made with “mutually agreeable terms.” Population, women’s rights, and reproductive health also were controversial. The Vatican
took out language about sexuality education for adolescents and reproductive rights but, due to pressure by Secretary of State Clinton, was unsuccessful in a bid to remove language about access to family planning (LaFranchi, 2012).

Although we did end up with a document, civil society participants felt that the conference failed to address the critical issues of climate change, international boundaries, reducing emissions, increasing human population, nuclear energy, and the devastating impact of armed conflict. One NGO major groups delegation told the heads of state that the consensus document did not represent the aspirations of the world and did not reflect the input of civil society. These omissions are of interest to social workers because we are the ones who staff women’s health clinics, provide mental health services to veterans, and resettle refugees of war or natural disasters (Ife, 2010). The statement recalls Estes (2010), who warned that given the reality of international boundaries, without a true peace dividend, world sustainability is threatened.

**THE FUTURE WE WANT?**

Despite the conflict, from June 20 to June 22, the heads of state and environment ministers arrived to approve the “Future We Want,” give speeches, and hear from the major groups. The United Nations (2012) published this policy framework that will guide sustainable development for the next 10 years. There was also some interesting language about the rights of indigenous people to participate in a nonmarket economy. The document acknowledged the role of cities as a solution to sustainable development. Consistent with the recommendations of Estes (2010), the United Nations Environmental Program will be strengthened and given more of a central role in sustainable development. NGOs, member states, and individuals were invited to make voluntary commitments toward sustainable development and register them with the United Nations.

For example, as the convener of the cities track of NGO major groups, Ecocity Builders made a voluntary commitment to partner with Local Governments for Sustainability (also known as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) to develop International Ecocity Framework and Standards, as shown in Figure 1. As a social worker, I see this as an extension of the work done by communities across North America as part of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (2012) and the Community Quality of Life Indicators (Sirgy, 2011) research series. Social workers have participated in both of these professional networks to identify indicators of well-being that can be used to track the progress of local programs. One key opportunity for social work is the

![Figure 1: International Ecocity Framework and Standards Conditions](http://www.ecocitystandards.org/ecocity/systems-urban-ecology/)

development of the SDGs, which will replace the millennium development goals (MDGs) after 2015. Every country will report on its level of sustainability. Although it would have been preferable to have global consensus to take bold action, we still have an opportunity to have a voice in the development of the SDGs. At the conference, Jeffery Sachs, the economist who is director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, argued that the MDGs succeeded because they were imposed, not by treaty, but by a transparent process of nations working together to fulfill basic human need. In fact, three MDGs have already been met: to cut global poverty, substandard housing, and lack of adequate water in half (United Nations News Service Section, 2012). Collective action and global partnerships can make a difference. Social work as a profession should partner with the nations of the world to develop SDGs globally and participate in implementing them locally.

REFERENCES


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