

A Youth Perspective on the 14th United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
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Introduction

In early March of this year, I found out that I had been selected to attend the 14th Annual United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-14)¹ as a Youth Delegate. I was to attend as part of the U.S Youth Network for Sustainable Development (SustainUS)² “Agents of Change” delegation. As Agents of Change, the thirteen of us³ selected for the program would have the opportunity to participate in the UN’s annual discussion on sustainable development issues that took place between governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders.

The themes for the commission rotate every two years; the first year is a “policy year” in which policies specific to the year’s theme are made, while the second year is a “review year” where the policies are reviewed. 2006 was a review year, and the themes for the 2005-2006 cycle were energy, climate change, air pollution and industrial development. As the only engineer in the delegation, I was ecstatic about the opportunity to obtain a global perspective and represent those of us in the engineering community who are actively involved in this area.

I also saw the program as a way for me to understand how the UN system operates. In the past, I had been exposed to several different views on the UN. To some, it represents a powerful forum for the world’s finest to come together and serve humanity by addressing the most urgent issues facing the world. To others, it represents an organization that is bureaucratic and very limited in its ability to bring about positive, sustainable change. I hoped that this experience would help me understand the UN’s strengths and appreciate its limitations.

Arriving at the United Nations

I arrived at the United Nations on Monday, May 1st, the first day of the two week meeting. I had always been fascinated by the fact that the UN headquarters is on “international territory” and therefore not subject to U.S laws and regulations. The halls of the UN had a very unique feel to them - the building staff and UN employees clearly reflected the diversity of the UN’s global membership. I also did not have to pay taxes in the UN building, which allowed me to purchase my daily lunch for \$2.50 – by far the cheapest lunch anywhere in New York City.

I knew that the UN had several official languages (English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Arabic), but what I did not know until I got there was that every major meeting was simultaneously translated into these languages, thus enabling delegates to listen (and speak) in the language they felt most comfortable with. Using earpieces available on every seat, the meeting participants and observers could cycle between different languages. I also found out that health care is free for anyone from anywhere inside the UN headquarters.

In many respects, our delegation saw this environment as being an excellent model for how a peaceful and understanding world could be like. We felt like we were in a completely different place – which carried with it the inherent disadvantage of feeling out of touch with what was happening “out there”. Most of our delegation noted that we became so immersed in the meeting’s proceedings over the two weeks that we had no idea of what was going on in the rest of the world. I know that while I was there, I felt somewhat detached from reality – which made me

¹ The CSD-14 Official Website: <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd14/review.htm>

² The SustainUS website: www.sustainus.org

³ The Agents of Change delegation biographies:
http://www.sustainus.org/mambo/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=66&Itemid=170

think about whether any of the delegates ever get so caught up in the rhetoric, the clothes and the hallways that they become insulated from the needs and problems facing the people they are representing.

Negotiating Language

The Commission on Sustainable Development consisted of the official meeting of the UN member states, stakeholders and invited panelists, as well as side events that ran parallel to the official meeting. I spent the first couple of days in the official meeting, which carried on for 6 hours a day, with a lunch break halfway through.

I had arrived expecting to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new information at these meetings, but surprisingly, I found the opposite to be true. Because CSD-14 was a review year, I had expected there to be discussion regarding each of the specific policies adopted in CSD-13. I had expected concrete data and results from worldwide projects that had been implemented in response to the CSD-13 policies. I had expected countries to share how these policies had been implemented in their countries, and highlight successes and failures so that the policy could be improved in years to come.

While some countries did offer such feedback including case studies and concrete data, most kept their statements extremely general. What I found very exasperating was to hear statements that were so broad so as not to appear to have any intrinsic value. As an example, some of the country's delegates spoke about the conclusions reached at other international conferences that had been held regarding energy and climate change. As a case in point, the main conclusions from a regional conference on energy were: 1) A large part of the population in the region live without access to an energy supply; 2) Experience shows that an increase in energy supply is correlated with ecosystem damage; 3) Collective efforts should be made to internalize environmental costs worldwide.

While each of these points was valid, they seemed to be somewhat obvious and certainly did not seem to me like something that should be mentioned repeatedly. Instances like this reminded me of a quote by New York Times reporter Esther Fein: "If the United Nations is a country unto itself, then the commodity it exports most is words." Someone I respect deeply had advised me to be wary about the UN - "all it does is negotiate language". A few of us in the delegation, myself included, felt disillusioned and disheartened during those first couple of days.

Although the official meeting was very broad and general, and sometimes quite slow, I saw it as a good opportunity to obtain a snapshot of what was happening around the globe. I learned that the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) had been seeing an increasing number of hurricanes, tornados and natural disasters, which they said were brought about by the exacerbating effects of climate change.⁴ They said that the issue of climate change was not something that they had to deal with in the future, but something that was a part of their daily lives today. I learned that my home country of Pakistan was planning to provide 650 MW of power through wind energy by 2007, and increase the share of renewable energy as a percentage of total energy to 10% by 2015.⁵

I also observed the significant presence of the United States delegation, which had stated on the first day that its focus at the meeting would be on sharing case studies, best practices and measurable results.⁶ Over the course of the two weeks, the U.S delegation presented the

⁴ S.I.D.S report by the UN Secretary General (PDF): <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/5770411.html>

⁵ Article about Pakistan's wind energy goals from The Daily Times, a local Pakistani newspaper: http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006%5C05%5C21%5Cstory_21-5-2006_pg5_13

⁶ The U.S State Department's Website for the CSD-14: <http://www.state.gov/g/oes/sus/csd/2006/>

commission with several of its successful case studies, with an emphasis on precise and measurable results which I felt was commendable. However, no failures were discussed by the delegation – information about such failures may have added more value to the discussion. The U.S Delegation also had a Vice President from Pfizer speak on their behalf at the official meeting, as their “civil society advisor”.⁷ I found this to be very peculiar, especially given the recent controversy concerning Pfizer’s illegal testing of drugs in Nigeria.⁸

Over the course of the CSD, I mostly continued to attend the official meeting, but also took the time to participate in some of the side events, which were usually a workshop or discussion focused on a specific theme. As an example, I attended a discussion dealing with the future of Carbon Dioxide Sequestration which was organized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.⁹ I found these discussions to be focused, precise and somewhat technical – and used them as a way to recharge before the next day’s official meeting. I also spoke to as many people as I could during my time off – government delegates, NGO representatives, UN employees and other youth at the commission. (Unlike some of my SustainUS colleagues, I did not have the privilege of meeting Martha Stewart).¹⁰ I tried to learn as much as I could about the events unfolding around me. One common thread in the discussions that I had was disappointment at the virtual absence of the World Bank in the discussions taking place. Many felt that the Bank, which provides financing for worldwide development projects, could have greatly influenced the proceedings through its active involvement. This concern was also expressed by some countries during the official meeting.

Putting things into perspective

Despite many of the frustrations I experienced at the commission, my experience as a whole allowed me to put the CSD into perspective and appreciate what it was able to accomplish.

Firstly, I realized what a massive undertaking it was to have a democratic and fair dialogue between so many countries and stakeholders. The CSD-14 is ten business days long, and it is within this time period that the 191 member states of the United Nations and the major stakeholders have to discuss the global policy on issues as complex as energy efficiency, climate change, air pollution and industrial development. The engineer in me calculated that if each member country or stakeholder group were to speak, they would be allotted a total of only 18 minutes over the course of the entire ten days. Such a time constraint effectively prevents in-depth discussions during these sessions, but allows every country to participate and convey a succinct message and viewpoint.

Secondly, I came to appreciate that the CSD-14, and to a great extent the United Nations System in general, is largely focused on policy making rather than on policy implementation with respect to sustainable development. While other UN agencies, such as UNICEF, are well recognized for their policy implementation work in the field, the UN bodies that deal with sustainable development issues, such as UNEP and UNIDO, are not as engaged in implementation work. As an engineer, almost all the exposure I had had prior to the CSD was on the implementation side, and it took me some time to be able to differentiate between these two roles and acclimatize myself to the policy side of things.

Thirdly, I recognized that the CSD presented an excellent opportunity for governments to establish contacts and lay the groundwork for exchanging some of the more technical information

⁷ Sustainable Development Issues Network Daily Newsletter (PDF): sdissues.net/SDIN/documents/TI05-08-06.pdf

⁸ “Panel Faults Pfizer in 1996 Clinical Trial in Nigeria” – The Washington Post article:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/06/AR2006050601338.html>

⁹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change official website: <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

¹⁰ “Ladies of SustainUS lobby Stewart, Inc” on the SustainUS Agents blog:

<http://sustainusagents.blogspot.com/2006/05/ladies-of-sustainus-lobby-stewart-inc.html>

that may be necessary for implementation. As an example, the Brazilian delegation offered its government's support to other countries looking to promote biofuels like ethanol as part of their national policy. Opportunities such as these were greatly facilitated by the CSD – I felt that a lot of valuable information could be exchanged if the initiative to do so was present. Whether or not every country took advantage of this was debatable – nevertheless, the framework for such a dialogue was present.

Unanswered Questions

An area that deeply concerned our SustainUS delegation was that some of the conference participants were not experienced professionals in the issues being discussed. A couple of government delegates from developing countries told me very frankly that environmental issues were not on the forefront of their country's concerns. In addition, many of the government delegates were regular diplomats who were based in New York, and were delegates at not only the CSD but to specialized conferences on other issues as well. While there is a greater representation of countries' environmental and energy ministers during the high-level segment of the commission (the last three days), most of the commission's final document has been prepared by this time.

The primary reasons for the lack of such experts from individual countries at the CSD-14 appear to be financial constraints and a lack of motivation. I got the feeling that many of the delegates considered the CSD to be a formality and simply one of their many responsibilities as diplomats. In other words, I felt that country's governments didn't see enough value in the CSD to invest the time and energy needed to encourage participation from those who needed to be there.

In this respect, I felt that the Youth proposed a practical course of action. As part of our campaign at the commission, the Youth Caucus¹¹ encouraged governments to identify young citizens of their countries who were well-versed in these issues to join their government's delegation to the CSD. We envisioned a national, competitive process after which those with demonstrated interest and knowledge in the relevant issues would get the opportunity to participate in the CSD. Apart from bringing experienced people to the meeting, it would also bring a fresh and knowledgeable perspective to the government delegation and serve to empower these people by giving them the chance to represent their country. Recognizing that funding such a delegate from developing countries may be an issue, we encouraged countries to, as a first step, look for suitable candidates from home their countries that may be pursuing higher education near New York City or in the United States. The key to realizing the tremendous potential of the CSD, we felt, was having the right people there.

Another issue that I did not find closure on was why sustainability was not being labeled and discussed as a security issue. Our delegation felt that if the relationship between sustainability and security was more clearly established, then more people would pay attention to it and have a stake in it. While this issue was alluded to several times during CSD-14, a clear connection was not made. One of the invited panelists referred to the “map of war, failing states and corruption” being the “map of oil”, while representatives from the Small Island Developing Countries spoke about the devastation caused by hurricanes and other natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. In addition, our group saw the current strife in Darfur – primarily between a group of farmers and herders/nomads – as having its roots in the desertification of the local area.¹² I feel that if the right buttons were pressed, governments would pay more attention to these issues.

¹¹ The Youth Caucus Website: <http://www.youthcaucus.net/about>

¹² “Desertification is Important Factor in Darfur Crisis” – World Watch Institute Article: <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/4087>

Returning to Texas

On my flight back from New York, I reflected on my incredible two week experience. Ultimately, I felt empowered by the realization that our youth delegation was able to have a voice and command respect in an international setting. I was moved and inspired by the agents of change who were actively working on the policy side through their universities and organizations. While drafting policy documents was not something I had the experience or the temperament to do, it gave me great faith to see individuals who could use their intelligence, talent and seemingly endless energy to do just that.

As an engineering student, I thought about what I could do personally to follow up on my experience. I felt that the most important thing, by far, was to continue to educate myself and others about sustainability issues and trends. I took pride in the fact that the issues ESW-UT¹³ was discussing in a small CPE classroom were the same as those world leaders were attempting to address in the halls of the United Nations. Through the “Sustainability as Security” conference,¹⁴ the developing countries colloquium series, the energy task force, project biodiesel, the Chiapas project and other events, ESW-UT had provided its members with a plethora of ways to educate themselves about sustainable development issues. Through our projects¹⁵ we were actively working on the implementation side of sustainability, while building up valuable experience and perspectives for the future.

Yet, ESW-UT has faced many obstacles, some of which I was able to relate and compare to the obstacles faced by the CSD. Like the CSD, there was a need for setting concrete goals and presenting measurable results. While ESW-UT has realized success in some areas, there have been projects and ideas that have been discussed at length but not followed up on. I had a determination to ensure that we used a set of measurable results to evaluate our progress, rather than relying on implicit responsibilities or broad goals. By doing this, ESW’s credibility within the engineering community can be strengthened, thereby allowing us to more effectively highlight our issues to a broader audience.

I find myself ready to face the challenges that the future holds. I believe firmly in the power of my chosen discipline, and in young people around the world who are tirelessly working to address these issues. And – despite all its imperfections – I believe that the United Nations can and will ultimately provide the leadership and the backdrop for these changes to take place.

About the author

Sameer Kamal, originally from Karachi, Pakistan, is currently a Chemical Engineering Senior at the University of Texas at Austin. A Student Leadership Award and Outstanding Student Volunteer Award recipient at the university, Sameer’s main area of interest is the application of engineering skills and knowledge towards sustainable development. As President of the UT Austin Chapter of Engineers for a Sustainable World, Sameer played a key role in organizing the “Sustainability as Security” international conference in October 2005. A student organized event, the conference drew about five hundred students, academics and professionals for a global dialogue on poverty and sustainable development.

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¹³ Engineers for a Sustainable World - UT Chapter Website: www.engr.utexas.edu/esw

¹⁴ The “Sustainability as Security” Conference Archive: www.engr.utexas.edu/esw/conference.htm

¹⁵ ESW-UT Project Summary Website: <http://www.engr.utexas.edu/esw/projects.htm>