

IT is becoming increasingly evident that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) being held in Brazil this week, may not be quite the "turning point for humanity" that it was once expected to be. Northern countries remain reluctant to acknowledge their overwhelming responsibility in regenerating this scarred earth, and southern nations appear to view the conference, more and more, as a means of getting money and technology. Critical issues of international trade and aid, poverty and affluence and consumption patterns remain unaddressed. In the process, the earth and its citizens will probably continue to suffer.

In such a situation, it is left to ordinary citizens to take up the challenge of forging a more just and sustainable future. And, that is indeed what is happening. Thousands of citizen's groups and countless individuals are getting together in response to what is seen as the many failures of the UNCED process, a sort of counter-process which may be far more significant than the official event itself. If anything, this may well be UNCED's most significant contribution.

It is doubtful that anyone has a complete tab of the number and range of responses that UNCED has evoked around the world. Possibly the most significant effort to distill out of these responses a common position is a recently finalised document called *Agenda ya Wananchi* ("Children of the earth" in the African language Swahili). This 34-page document presents an analysis of what is wrong with the world and what can be done about it, as seen from the viewpoint of over 1,200 citizen's groups from nearly every country on earth. Representatives of these groups had met in December 1991 at Paris to participate in "Roots of the Future: A global NGO conference in relation to the 1992 earth summit." After four days of intense debate and discussion, the first common declarations draft was torn apart and redone.

The result was a bold new vision, a manifesto for a future which is, to use the classic phrase of the Greens, "neither left nor right, but forward". Indeed, this document could become the basis of a blueprint for a just and sustainable future, something which government officials and politicians are never likely to come up with.

Refreshingly, *Agenda ya Wananchi* starts on a note of excited hope: "Suddenly, it is like the birth of a new earth. People from across our planet are becoming the caretakers of their own destiny, building an expansive web of solidarity and social invention. They come through different paths of existence: city slum-dwellers, urban tax payers, unsettled peasants, indigenous families, environmental activists, angry professionals, the graduates and the illiterates, women empowering themselves, alienated teenagers, inspired artists, grassroots educators, veteran pacifists, smiling prophets,

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AGENDA YA WANANCHI



mothers and fathers and children and many other builders of human freedom at the end of a century scarred by totalitarian terrors." This process of growing solidarity finds its expression in India in, to take just one example, the joining of hands of the movements against the Narmada, Suvarnarekha and Tehri dams. To fight against the take-over of the country by foreign forces like IMF and the World Bank. Increasingly, people are seeing a common adversary: a local, national, and global system which is socially exploitative, ecologically unsound, and ethically bankrupt.

The document presents an interesting analysis of this destructive system. It comprises of: a centralised structure of governance which strips people of their decision-making capacity; a market network which benefits a minority while passing on ecological and social costs to poor people and to future generations; a world financial system in which southern countries end up transferring far more resources to the north than vice-versa; a military juggernaut which has little respect for the environment or for human life; a global materialist culture which is bulldozing all cultural diversity; an indecently

wasteful consumerist style of life which is recognized as a far greater environmental threat than population growth in the south; a universal gender bias which disrespects the crucial role of women in human and ecological sustenance; developmental processes and projects which are inappropriate for the locations on which they are hoisted; and the lack of environmentally and socially sound planning. While not exonerating southern countries of their ecological sins, the document clearly lays the bulk of the blame on industrialised countries which have themselves used, as also thrust upon the rest of the world, a voracious, unsustainable, and unjust 'developmental' process.

But if the current developmental model is fundamentally flawed, what is the alternative vision of citizen's groups? I can do no better than to quote the document itself: "We are convinced that the only way human beings can live in harmony with each other and with nature is through a respect for women's capacities and for cultural plurality; the creation of a fairer, frugal and equal world in economic terms; the development of a technological system with a human face that is built on self-reliance and local needs;

and, the development of a system of both global and national level governance that is built upon 'participatory, grassroots democracy' in which all human beings have the right to information and access to appropriate mechanisms to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their progress, their culture, their health and their environment, and in which respect for the evolutionary destiny of all species and for the integrity of natural systems is a fundamental ethic."

Noble goals, but how does one achieve them? The majority of *Agenda ya Wananchi* dwells on answering this question, on delineating a blueprint of principles and actions. Refreshingly, it does not confine itself to demanding action from governments alone, but, in fact, starts by describing the citizens' own responsibilities. Thrust areas for both

sovereignty, such as is happening in Malaysia, Brazil, India, and many other countries. They pledged to help in the struggle to re-empower the socially marginalised sections of society, including "the poor, the colonised, the indigenous people, the traditional fisherfolk, and the nomadic populations." They also urged each government to establish a citizens' right to information.

The Agenda takes a radical view on the issue of biodiversity conservation and biotechnology access. It demands that governments stop the application of patent systems on living organisms and halt hazardous genetic manipulation, both of which severely threaten biodiversity. It also urges governments to provide royalties and compensation for the use of traditional biological knowledge and materials and give preferential

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citizens and governments are similar, but there are differences in emphasis and specific actions.

Perhaps, the most critical thrust is on urging governments to promote participatory democracy at all levels in all spheres of activity, and on committing citizen's groups to struggling for this. The current form of democracy, wherein people merely have the right to elect a few leaders and then stand by while decisions are taken for them, is rejected in favour of a system of day-to-day, participative decision-making. For this, devolution of power to the level of local communities is crucial, and the document urges respect for the rights of these communities to use the natural resources around them in sustainable ways. Countries which in the UNCED process are repeatedly harping on their sovereign rights to such resources would do well to heed the message that national control is not enough, and that the principle of sovereignty must be applied to local communities also. Participants at Paris made it clear that they were opposed to international controls over natural resources, but were also against the destruction of such resources and resource-based communities under the cover of national

access to southern countries to modern biotechnology. The justification for these demands is worth quoting here: The north pays nothing to the south in return for these genes, collected and nurtured by southern farmers for centuries, or for the knowledge provided by indigenous communities and traditional herbalists, while most technical knowledge emanating from the north is protected by patents. Has any entrepreneur paid any royalties to the American Indians for the knowledge they have given the world about rubber, quinine, curare (without which modern surgery would be impossible), potatoes, tomatoes, avocados, tobacco and corn? What royalties has Ethiopia received for its coffee and Madagascar for its vanilla? It is a matter of global justice that the use of all knowledge, is suitably compensated."

Agenda ya Wananchi is, perhaps, utopian, and necessarily weak in detail. But the current crisis needs a vision towards which we can collectively strive, even if not completely fulfill. Half-hearted measures, such as the exercise that heads of state are going to indulge in at Brazil, are not going to save this earth and its inhabitants.

DAM projects are coming in for criticism across the

TROUBLE IN CHITWAN

supposedly based on a 20-fold increase in the use of the organochlorine, BHC. This