

Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World

World Citizens Assembly

Lille - December 2 to 10, 2001

Thematic Group

Governance and Environment

The discussion started with everyone speaking in turn to present what was said the day before in the socioprofessional group in which they had participated.

Here is the summary, under four distinct main themes, of the very diverse discussion:

1) Economic interests prevail over ecological considerations: "Natural resources," which one should actually call "natural goods" or even yet "common goods," are exploited without any consideration of medium- and long-term consequences. This is true, to a variety of degrees, in most countries. Furthermore, all countries are already, or will be concerned by the consequences - not only by the consequences of local actions, but also by the consequences of the destructive actions in other parts of the world. In the field of the environment, local actions have repercussions on the global level!

The main reason for this mindless behavior is the present economic order, which grants increasingly greater ascendancy to the financial powers, multinational companies in particular, which are expected to obtain constantly greater profits at the expense of environmental balances.

In the countries of the South, the destruction of the environment is often the consequence of economic actors who are still taking advantage of regulations that have been less changed than in the countries of the North; but the poverty of the major part of the population leads it to consume natural resources without any concern for their natural-regeneration capacities (of forests, soil, etc.). It is imperative never to dissociate the problems related to environmental protection from social and economic issues! It is always necessary to solve, at the same time, the problems of hunger and material poverty.

The acceptance of a number of international conventions is only a first step. It is then necessary to fight so that they are really applied. Often, economic actors have enough influence to have their interests prevail - at the international level, at the national level, and even at the local level.

Another important aspect: economic interests do not press societies to adopt a different lifestyle than the one that currently rules in the societies of the North, which is characterized by the importance of material consumption and waste. "If we wish to extend this lifestyle to six billion persons, we need two other planets," said one participant. Another one proposed to link the reduction of waste and the change in lifestyle in the countries of the North to the requirements of demographic control in the South.

2) Yet, there are, at local levels, experiences proving that alternatives are possible. Several participants mentioned examples (see, among others, the Integrated Territorial Management and the Soils Management Workshops). These experiences are most often linked to a change in the ways of exercising power involving active subsidiarity and the participation of the population.

3) Environmental awareness is not developed enough. Several participants highlighted that environmental education

is not only necessary for children, but for everybody, even for political leaders. The Environmental Education Workshop drew up numerous proposals in this respect.

How can the idea that environmental protection is an absolute priority be popularized? The most original proposal came from a Slovakian participant: we need to ask the United Nations to organize a contest addressed to writers of talent, for which they are to create an environmental hero as enthralling as "Harry Potter."

Environmental education supposes a political education in the noble sense of the term. It is also necessary to transmit the skills and conceptual means to take an active part in political decision making.

4) Governments do not assume their responsibilities, in particular their responsibility to preserve water, the seas, the forests, soils, etc. Sometimes they are undermined by corruption or they allow themselves to be dominated by all kinds of lobbies. They rarely have international conventions applied in any substantial way. Yet several participants mentioned positive examples, for example in China and in Macedonia. But it is most often NGOs, which are familiar with the problems and actually attempt to cope with them, that take the initiatives and place the authorities before their responsibilities. This is the case in India, in the fight against the pollution of the Ganges.

Environmental protection requires the involvement of brave men and women who do not submit to the interests of private economic actors and do not defend the interests of irresponsible governments. They must be independent in every respect, including financially. NGOs, independent research institutes, and sometimes single public figures whose moral authority is widely acknowledged, can make things change. It is indispensable for governments to cooperate with the civil society to obtain a change in destructive practices. The transformation of relations between human beings and the biosphere involves the transformation of governance.