

# Locating Youth Fervour and Misgivings in the Sustainable-Development Map

by Emily Freeburg

**T**o young people sustainable development is simple—it's a world where they want to live in forty years.

As many have discovered, to make sustainable development work, you have to involve the people directly affected and those traditionally not included in the power structure, including, more explicitly, women and youth. (The United Nations defines youth as someone aged 15 to 24, or sometimes anyone under 30.)

The importance of women's empowerment to achieve sustainable development and the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is well acknowledged, but the role of young people in achieving these goals is just beginning to be explored. Organizations like the U.N. and the World Bank now gradually understand the role young people have to play to achieve sustainable development and the MDGs through education and youth-led development projects.

The ways youth are involved in development are often explored at international youth meetings, which are happening more and more everywhere from Russia to Hawaii to Senegal. The meetings aim to empower and inspire young people to make a difference in their communities, with results that often end up as lobby-tools that stress time importance of consultation of youth in decision-making. The meetings are mixed successes depending on who you talk to—but they inspire a necessary intensity to examine issues, and the non-traditional setting allows for innovative plans to develop. As Sofie (age 19) from the United Kingdom said, "You can save the world, but it doesn't have to be in a suit or in a conference hall."

In August, at the World Congress on Youth hosted by the King of Morocco, one thousand young people from around the world came for two weeks with hopes to, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "be the change you want to see in this world."

Young women leaders were at the forefront, and their own words say best what problems they face, and what they can achieve. Many of the women I spoke with consider themselves feminists, but are hesitant to zoom in on women alone on issues like poverty, illiteracy and AIDS. They are all principally concerned with how to turn talk into action.

My conversations with three women from the Congress tell a story of what young women activists struggle with

around the world, as well as how they see the role of young women and young people in sustainable development.

When I asked her how she became a feminist, Shajia (age 16) simply replied, "I live in Pakistan." Like many in attendance, she was impatient with the discussions and paperwork at the Congress, although she found the meetings inspirational. "Everyone I know has a lot of passion, but no one's channelling it. I am from a country where no one is educated. It is important to go out to rural areas to teach people to read, but it is difficult to do that. Girls aren't exactly a common sight in Pakistan; only men can go out. We don't know where to start, there is so much to do. If you want to organize, people think you're just after popularity. It is hard to be taken seriously. We had a rally and against the war in Iraq and the only reason guys came was to check out girls!"

For Booshra (age 18) from South Africa, "Feminism is an issue discussed, but not a priority." She says the largest problem is poverty, and second place to that is AIDS. "Due to South Africa's history of segregation, the common feeling is that the first priority should be education. You can't throw a topic like feminism on them. In school, once you get to a certain level, you can talk about issues like poverty, but in rural areas, it is first basic education, and then sex education and AIDS education."



At the World Youth Congress, where these interviews were conducted, Amandla from Kenya (left) and the author, from the U.S., prepare to present the Youth Development Declaration to the Princess of Morocco.

"I don't know if it's right or wrong to prioritise problems. When I went to the World Summit on Sustainable Development all the delegates were housed in hotels and given champagne. I took a drive down the road and saw Alexandria, one of the worst slums. I thought about what sustainable development is, and seriously began to question if it was possible at all. Since then, I've been helping in rural areas instead of attending conferences, where you learn more and more, but don't do anything about it. I'm in a group of six girls, and now that we are done with high school, we will take a year off and go one step higher. We talk about sustainable development, but a lot of people don't know what it means so we are working to put together a video showing the differences between rural areas and rich urban centres."

Amandla (age 14), from Kenya, said that her generation "is quite comfortable using the term feminist." At her school, she says, "It is only the girls that are talking and volunteer for the activities; the guys are literally being left behind. Guys have this notion that being cool means not doing anything, not getting involved."

"The situation is very ironic. In Kenya's parliament, there are only seven women MPs out of 220. There is much inequality, and women have to campaign several times harder to get somewhere, but in the homes, they take care of nearly everything. We need to mainstream the home

situation to the workplace. It's not discouraging to me that I have to work twice as hard to get half the recognition that men get because it isn't that hard! But what's important [for these women MPs to realise] is that because they worked so hard to get that power,

they must remember to use their power to initiate change and to help other women. Then the struggle will have been worth it. Women must help their next generation. That's what guys do, they groom the next generations.

"[For women to have a role in sustainable development] we must raise women all at once, and once they are solid in high positions, only then the men can come back—just like in the drafting group of the World Youth Congress declaration, which was composed mostly of women. We need women to say, 'You cannot do this anymore. I've watched you for so many years and you have done nothing.' In Kenya the population ratio is like five women to every man, and if it should come to a vote, a woman should be elected chief because there are more women. The biggest problem in developing countries is women oppressing women. Once we can



At the World Youth Congress, a Moroccan girl expresses her activism through painting.

courtesy of Emily Freeburg

work together, women will become chiefs because theirs are the biggest vote blocs."

The young women who came to the World Congress had a long list of actions under their belts, from teaching HIV prevention to starting youth councils, children's theatre groups, and organizing community soil-compost projects. While at the Congress they did even more, leading meetings between Israelis and Palestinians, forming a network where Pakistanis and Indians met and became friends, and celebrating cultural differences through performance. And learning, once again that talk can be hard and action even harder.

Young people recognize sustainable development as a holistic goal that requires the creativity and courage of everyone. Young people will realize their role by other young people's telling them of it, but also by the older generation's reminding them that they have that role to fulfil.

To young people, sustainable development is the existence of a common vision—a future world where everyone knows how to read and there is no global warming; a world where there is enough wealth for everyone to live with dignity. For young women, the priorities are equal opportunity, poverty alleviation and literacy for all. For young people, the priority is getting a chance "to be the change." ☺

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