

Stop the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’!

Lessons learned from 30 years of UN summits

Pat Mooney

As a kind of culmination to 30 years of international summitry, a series of global meetings in the first years of this century were supposed to restore development assistance, eradicate hunger and allow us all to grow sustainably. When 2003 rolled around, no one was cracking open the champagne. Predictably, the Monterrey Summit on Financing Development, the World Food Summit, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development met everyone’s expectations – and no one’s aspirations. When governments and UN agencies fail, we in civil society should scrap our boring rhetoric about ‘paradigm shifts’ and get on with ‘regime change’. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements that were embroiled in the summits must end the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ – the pitiful pageant of pep rallies that have pacified civil society organisations (CSOs) since 1972 – and develop a tough love strategy for our intergovernmental work.

Summits plummet: By any standards, 2002 was a turning-point year. Three gala international fora were held that should have changed our lives and our environment:

- › The Monterrey Summit on Financing Development should have re-established the old Pearson formula (0.7 per cent of gross domestic product, GDP) as official development assistance and confirmed a ‘rights-based’ agenda for development funding.
- › The Rome World Food Summit – Five Years (*and getting*) Later – should have acknowledged that governments were falling well below the targets they set in 1996 and should have adopted the Food Sovereignty agenda laid out by Via Campesina (the international social movement of peasant organisations) and others; and have tackled the politically thorny but critical issues of worldwide genetically modified (GM) seed contamination and agricultural trade wars.
- › The Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development should have made progress on each chapter of Agenda 21. Instead it declared victory simply because it kept the USA at bay on trade, human rights and biotech.

What we had variously called Rio+10, Earth Summit III, or Stockholm+30 became ‘Johannesburg minus Action’. Jo’burg brought to an end a year of bum-numbing ‘diplomania’ and, hopefully, an end also to three decades of slavish CSO marching to the beat of intergovernmental drums.

Origins of the Stockholm Syndrome

In 1972, the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment became the first global environmental ‘happening’. The conference’s main structural innovation was to facilitate the active participation of civil society – what was later defined by Marc Nerfin (of the conference secretariat) as the ‘Third System’. As Nerfin described it, the First System was the Prince (government), the Second System was the Merchant (business), and the Third System was the Citizen (the people). Thirty-four years ago, the people’s system was invited into the hollow halls of the UN System.

It was an auspicious beginning for the Third System. Stockholm was a triumph. It inspired a swarm of new national cabinet portfolios (ministers of environment) who, in turn, needed somewhere appropriately important where they could ponder (hence the United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP, was born) which, in turn, required a new crowd of ozone-depleting national and international bureaucrats (since dubbed ‘biocrats’).

What is the Stockholm Syndrome?

Shortly after the conference, a bank robbery and hostage-taking incident in Stockholm grabbed world headlines – not because hostages were taken, but because once rescued, they didn’t want to leave their captors. Two of the four victims were eventually betrothed to their bandit heroes. Psychiatrists called this behavioral phenomenon the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’. The theory goes that given sufficient duration, desperation, and dependency, captives may instinctively bind their fate to their captors in the hope of reciprocal loyalty.

But, the Stockholm Syndrome also has geo-political dimensions. By opening up intergovernmental fora to civil society, the 1972 Stockholm Conference launched an era of intergovernmental (mostly UN) theme park jamborees running from women to water, to food, habitat, and population, but always achieving its highest political perfection during environmental blockbusters for which Johannesburg was the most prominent of UN conferences. Southern governments have tended to shackle themselves together with advocacy CSOs in the



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hope that some day, somewhere, they will find – if not true love – at least sanctuary.

‘Talksonomy’ of an extinctable species

As a species, the Stockholm (Conference) Syndrome has distinct markings. First, all sub-species within the species must have a mandate to ‘solve’ an earth-shaking (or, at least profound) issue. For this purpose, there is always an exhausting preparatory process during which government and civil society combatants gather under an uneasy flag of truce to sort out the agenda and, thereby, sidestep the solutions. (It generally takes so long to agree on the agenda that there is no time to negotiate a programme of work.) Second, every conference of the genus must teeter on the brink of disaster for as long as biocrats can hold their bladders (and/or blood pressure) in order to keep the media interested and in order to convince the South that even if nothing is accomplished, at least great losses were heroically averted. Third, summit or otherwise (the World Trade Organization’s ministerials trump any summit), there have to be rumours of impending Greats. Without the Pope, Castro, or a retired US President, delegate and media attention drifts. (This is getting tricky. After 30 years, the Pope is something of a ‘cheap date’ and ex-Presidents are a dime a dozen. Only Castro has kept his lustre. Of late, however, U2’s Bono has pulled off some impressive diplomatic gigs.) Fourth, there has to be a clarion call to arms – some ringing testament to international resolve to do better (or at least to stop doing so badly). Finally, but vitally, there must be a walk-by cast of thousands of passionate placard-waving CSOs convinced that the sky really will fall, if the conference does not pull up its socks.

One might have thought that after three decades some natural Darwinian survival mechanism – or genetic engineering – might have kicked in with a beneficial mutation, if for no other reason than to relieve the meeting monotony. Only one bland adjustment has emerged – the creation of Major Groups: the Multi-Stakeholder Forum – an admittedly eye-catching photo-op during which multinational corporations (represented invariably by the most visibly-marginalised Ivy Leaguer that money can buy), T-shirted trade unionists, and pin-striped CSOs (with cell phones slung low on their hips) stare earnestly across tables of endangered wood at one another while some hopeful-looking UN officials intone *bon mots*, assuring one and all that we ‘are all on the same side’, while Greenpeace climbs something high and decorous in the background.

If the species has not changed much, the cast for a *bona fide* Stockholm Syndrome drama has devolved somewhat over the years. When Marc Nerfin first postulated the Three Systems, the captors were the Princes of the First System (Northern governments). The captives were the Princelings of Southern governments. The (Keystone) cops¹ were played by UN secretariats that could never quite catch their mandate. The characters in the tragi-comedy related to each other symbiotically. The South came to these events in the hope of new money or resources. The North came to maintain the illusion of momentum. Civil Society came because we got to act like biocrats and – in the absence of anything else happening – we had a reasonable shot at presenting our posters, if not our opinions, on CNN.



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1 Keystone cops were early silent cinema comedies in the USA.

Now, the roles are changing. The First System is now industry and they are the captors. Governments (North and South) have been pushed (unknowingly) into the Second System. The cops (UN secretariats) are increasingly protecting industry and policing governments rather than the other way around. The People are still the Third System but many of us have been taken hostage. On stage, the pompous strutting and posturing remains as ever. Behind the scenes, the world's largest corporations have commandeered the tele-prompters.

But, the role changes have caused problems. In the good old days, when the North was captor and the South was captive, it was easy to tell who was on which side. With industry as captor and governments as captive, the scenes are getting muddled. Cell phone civil society has come to play a more visible role in Stockholm-grade performances. Consider: if the UN throws a party and civil society does not respond to an RSVP, there is no party. A thousand suits dragging their sorry briefs into a conference hall are a media 'flat line' unless somebody clammers onto the roof.

On the roof or inside the hall, we (civil society) have joined the South as victims of the Stockholm Syndrome.

Syndrome sundown: time for 'regime change'?

It is time to break free of our captors and try tough love with the UN. 'Tough love', of course, can mean anything from ratcheting up the rhetoric (by denouncing the UN's Global Compact with multinationals, for example – a good idea any time!), to withdrawing from the UN rat pack of party-goers (and spending our saved time and energies at the grassroots), to actively restructuring or dismantling the UN System.

Since any linkage between rhetoric and action is usually coincidental, CSOs shouldn't equate shouting with finding a solution. There are exceptions to this. In contrast to the UN, meetings of the G8 countries, WTO ministerials, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank jamborees – closed-door events where civil society is distinctly unwelcome – need all the parades, protests and other popular actions we can muster. Seattle and Cancun are examples of successful mass movement.

The second option – withdrawing from the global UN scene – obviously warrants serious consideration. Dismantling the UN System would be marvellously cathartic – but we will have to hurry to beat the United States to the punch. The *New York Times* called civil society 'the

other superpower'. If true, we should at least try to be on the 'other' side. Restructuring the UN – agency by agency – is not the stuff that makes a CSO's heart go pitter-patter but it is a defensible option.

Premature withdrawal?

As weak and miserable as the United Nations is, it remains the only credible countervailing possibility to the US trade and military juggernaut. If there had not been a United Nations, there would be no debate over the new US doctrine of 'the right to preemptive strike'. All nations would have to assume this right in the absence of any forum, such as the General Assembly or Security Council, able to decide collectively on whether war is necessary. Were it not for the existence of the UN, the failure of the USA and UK to prove the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq would not have been obvious. Had it not been for the Security Council, it would not have been obvious that the majority of its members would not support a second US/UK resolution. That the United Nations failed to prevent war in Iraq does not mean that it serves no purpose in preventing future wars or in focusing international attention on gross violations of the UN Charter of Human Rights. Most of civil society would agree that the world does need, at the global level, a forum for health (WHO)², an arena for food issues (FAO)³, a forum on labour (ILO)⁴ and similar opportunities to debate environmental, educational and scientific issues (UNEP⁵ and UNESCO⁶), etc. To abandon these admittedly weak-kneed institutions today would be to clear the way for multinational corporate hegemony.

Still, the overthrow of governments by industry has created a 'wild West' environment at the United Nations. The titles no longer fit the roles. NGOs are generally looked upon as 'nongovernable organisations' while governments are increasingly seen as little more than NGOs with GUNS (Government and the UN System). Wild West or not, while it can easily be argued that more of civil society's resources should be focused at the national and regional levels, the abandonment of the last century of cumulative international law and standards to the mercy of one superpower is unthinkable.



We each need to evaluate our own history with the UN System and sort out for ourselves whether we have 'used' or 'been used'.

2 World Health Organization.

3 Food and Agriculture Organization.

4 International Labour Organization.

5 United Nations Environment Programme.

6 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

This does not mean business as usual. It does mean that those of us working at different levels must be more strategic.

CSOs should work together at the next World Social Forum to announce an embargo on future summits. Instead, we should lay down precise agendas and timetables for an intergovernmental action on specific global issues. If substantive measurable progress is not achieved, then CSOs should meet and announce a specific strategy to influence the elections of UN agency directors-general and key chair positions. We should also be prepared to announce a programme to restructure the budget of specific intergovernmental organisations through direct lobbying at the parliamentary level among member countries of the agency involved. The intention would not necessarily be to ‘cut’ budgets but to refocus the budgets to achieve civil society’s agenda.

The challenge for CSOs will be both to construct a vision of where we believe the world should move in the decade or so ahead and to fashion a credible sequence of achievable goals along the way. Truth be known, we share the ‘diplo’s’ penchant for pontification. Are we capable of seeing the horizon and charting a course that takes us there? We think ‘yes’.

Constituency-based social movements and others in civil society with a specialised focus must continue to pursue their mandates and concentrate on the issues vital to their peoples. Perhaps, however, it will be possible for many of us to adjust our focus or to work together on issues of good governance – nationally and internationally – and for the Third System to make the First System institutionally, financially and publicly more accountable.

What do we do if we consider cancelling the UN’s party? A lot...

- › First, we each need to evaluate our own history with the UN System and sort out for ourselves whether we have ‘used’ or ‘been used’.
- › Then, national, regional and global advocacy partners need to talk to one another about what needs doing and what – if any – role is relevant for intergovernmental bodies in their (non-conference) programme of work.
- › Third, we need to evaluate our communications (including technologies) and cooperation approaches to better democratise dialogue and information flow so that national and regional

initiatives are strengthened by global initiatives. We also need to ensure that global information and actions are informed by – and more specifically are in the service of – national and community concerns.

We won't pretend to describe specific national strategies, although we hope that international actions will mutually enhance strategies and actions at local and regional levels. Internationally, however, we can see the post-Stockholm world operating on a number of interesting levels.

Early-listening systems: We need to strengthen the flow of strategic information between and among social movements and advocacy NGOs to ensure that the Third System retains an overview of new developments and trends. We all tend to be a little single-minded. In the last few years, for example, many of us have focused heavily on biotech, intellectual property/biopiracy and/or trade issues. Without doubt, these are critical concerns that must not be overlooked. Nevertheless, corporate strategies and technologies keep changing.

Social audits: If we are concerned that an intergovernmental organisation may be performing poorly and is not responding to minimal expectations, a consortium of CSOs could agree to carry out an external programme and management/financial audit of the agency. The audit – conducted by an independent but knowledgeable team – would consult extensively with governments, programme beneficiaries, and past and present employees in order to prepare an authoritative report and offer member states specific action recommendations. Such audits might take six months to one year and should bear in mind the organisation's leadership selection timetable and processes.

How to tickle your Member: Policy-makers at the international level have a secret erogenous zone that lies in the dark spaces between senior bureaucrats back at the capital and junior parliamentarians on budgeting and oversight subcommittees. Most parliamentarians approve UN budgets and programmes without any knowledge or awareness of the organisations their country is funding. Most couldn't care less. These parliamentarians relate to a handful of senior government bureaucrats who are generally too important to leave the capital and attend the actual UN negotiations. But budgets and programmes that are irrelevant in the national parliament can be vital to developing countries and UN secretariats. By cooperating closely, international advocacy organisations and social movements operating at the national level can effectively influence the national politicians and



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bureaucrats to move budgets and advance or deter specific agency programmes. It is also at this level that social movements can influence national governments' votes on the elections of new chair positions or new directors-general. If the Third System can focus on this erogenous zone at the national level and link its work to issues critical to social movements both nationally and globally, we can break free of the Stockholm Syndrome and take captors captive.

Critical paths: One area that initially seemed to make progress was in the changing of the structural relationship between civil society and FAO in 2002, as a result of the World Food Summit. Along with an extensive list of substantial issues and demands, the NGO/CSO Forum at the Food Summit produced an equally extensive list of technical and institutional proposals intended to strengthen the participation of social movements in intergovernmental committees and to create new spaces for national organisations and marginalised peoples to interact with the FAO Secretariat and governments. Many of the proposed changes seem incredibly modest. Collectively, however, they amounted to a major structural adjustment to the way in which a UN agency relates to civil society.

Moving beyond platitudes, for example, a call for a new initiative on land reform or sustainable agriculture, to be effective, has to be accompanied by specific proposals for CSO–Agency liaison teams; identification of the exact intergovernmental committees and secretariat working groups that would develop the initiative; listing of background papers and conference documents needed to support the agenda; mapping of the timeline to be followed inside the House and intergovernmentally; and development of lists of potential resource persons for the process. If documents are not developed or items fall off agendas, CSOs should be able to know this immediately and respond accordingly through contact with the secretariat and with governments. Considering the global dimensions of the work, some of these steps may seem small, but they are practical.

This is not much of an adrenalin rush. Basically, we must create covenants of cooperation between advocacy CSOs and social movements that allow groups to set aside some of our less endearing postures of political correctness and/or opportunism. We must recognise that we have different roles and natures, which are complementary and enrich our vision. And we need to take advantage of the agility we have achieved in communications technologies to pack a sustained political punch both with national policy and opinion makers, and international negotiations. We need to mess with the operational nuts and

bolts of organisation, financial decision-making, and national and international leadership. If a UN agency secretariat does not undertake the internal steps they should, we go after the agency's funding and its electoral processes.

Civil society not civil servants: We also see a need and an opportunity to direct intergovernmental funding to People's Organisations and other CSOs, and for the creation of new partnerships and programmes involving governments and UN agencies with CSOs. But we do not believe that a useful option is to turn CSOs into new UN bureaucracies. We should make the global institutions that already exist work properly, or we should eliminate them and work with governments to create more effective bodies. But this does not mean creating a feeding-frenzy for hungry NGOs – or turning civil society into civil servants. As people's organisations are painfully aware, we NGOs have an enormous chameleon capacity, turning ourselves into anything that can attract funding. Our propensity for infighting, backbiting and bureaucracy is legendary. There is no reason to believe that we would do any better than the sorry creatures we dislodge. A major shift of funding to CSOs would quickly destroy the effectiveness of civil society in global governance.

Influence the election of UN leadership: The possibilities and ways that CSOs can influence the election of the UN leadership have been an area of increasing attention in recent years. Some attempts have been made in the election processes at FAO, as a result of the agency's restricted relations with CSOs, and also at WHO. A list of suggestions for possible action is offered below which may be useful in relation to the whole UN family of Agencies, Funds and Programmes:

1. Create a three-language election website in which information and news is posted.
2. Prepare and post a 'job description' for the Director-General based on advice from social movements, retired staff and diplomats and unions.
3. Encourage nominations from all quarters.
4. Prepare and post biographical sketches of every candidate.
5. Post interviews with each candidate – on programmes and policies.
6. Convene 'All-Candidates' meetings so that staff and governments as well as the media can form opinions.

7. Organise a pre-election ‘exit poll’ (confidential by mail-in ballot) for staff and publish the results.
8. Give the election a high media and political profile as a test of the UN’s governance capacity.
9. Monitor and post information about staff postings and project decisions, and track negotiations that might influence the process.
10. Monitor the actual ballot process.
11. Publish a report on the completed process – including an evaluation of the performance of staff, candidates and governments – with recommendations for future elections.

Meanwhile, of course, national CSOs can be talking with their parliaments about the FAO programme of work and budget.

Third System revisited: The shift of 34 years ago actually holds up pretty well over time. The original dream born in the Stockholm Conference in 1972 continues to have reason and value. We need to realise that industry has taken global governance hostage and we need to free governments – and ourselves – from corporate captivity. We need to use the considerable political acumen and muscle of the Third System to make tangible change. We should begin now.



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