

## MEETING OF THE ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, NEW YORK CITY, MAY 14, 2013

Herman Greene

Every once in a while, a meeting stands out as being of potentially great significance. Such was the meeting of the 20 people, listed below, who gathered in the Forum 21 Research Institute's Green Building in New York City on May 14. It is easy to report on what happened in the meeting, but difficult to report on the "event" that took place in the meeting. I'll start with an attempt to convey the event, and then give a report on what happened in the meeting and the next steps.

### The Event

I don't know of any better way of conveying the event than a picture of the attendees. The event was the people who were present and the spirit they brought to the meeting.



We were Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i, interspiritual, and more. What brought us together was a loving concern for the fate of the world and a conviction that ethical and spiritual values are at the heart of sustainable development.

We spoke out of, but beyond, our traditions. We were a manifestation of the fact that the spiritual and ethical essence of humanity is in flux and where vital development of these are occurring includes, but is not limited to, the classical religions. We were religious, spiritual and

secular-values based organizations (VBO) and we came to consider “Ethical and Spiritual Values and the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda.”

## What Happened in the Meeting

Felix Dodds gave the opening talk. He served as Executive Director of the Stakeholder Forum from 1992-2012, and has perhaps been the leading civil society representative in the UN sustainable development process. For example, he co-chaired the NGO Coalition on Sustainable Development (1997-2001) at the UN and chaired the United Nations 64th DPI NGO Conference on Sustainable Societies—Responsive Citizens (2011), and he played a leadership role in securing Rio+20 (2012) and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). He is the author of *Only One Earth: The Long-Road Via Rio to Sustainable Development* and is co-author, with Liz Thompson and Jorge Laguna Celis, of the forthcoming book *From Rio+20 to a new Development Agenda: Building a Bridge to a Sustainable Future*.<sup>1</sup>

Some of his important messages were

- Rio+20 was not a failure. To the contrary, sustainable development, as distinguished from conventional, market-based development, had been relegated to an inferior position during and following the 2002 Johannesburg Earth Summit. Brazil picked up the ball and succeeded in pulling off an important summit that moved sustainable development back toward the center of development. Those NGO leaders who dismissed Rio+20 needed to understand the role of Rio+20 in the context of the 20-year history that began with Rio in 1992. Rio+20 set the stage for significant work on the UN’s post-2015 development agenda (Post-2015).
- Post-2015 will set the agenda for global development for the 15-year period beginning in 2016. While the process of developing Post-2015 has been difficult to follow, it’s not too late to engage significantly in commenting on the agenda. All documents developed thus far are reports, not final outcomes.
- If you want to participate in commenting on Post-2015, comment in writing. Copies of NGO comments already submitted are on the website of the Stakeholder Forum. See <http://www.sustainabledevelopment2015.org/>, <http://www.stakeholderforum.org/sf/index.php/our-publications/governance-papers/496-post-rio-to-post-2015-think-pieces>, and <http://www.stakeholderforum.org/sf/index.php/our-publications/governance-papers/495-post-rio-to-post-2015-background-papers>.
- Are we “civil society” or “stakeholders”? According to *Agenda 21* we are stakeholders and we must operate from that perspective.
- As compared with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will likely have five new goals: Water, energy, food, health, and education.

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<sup>1</sup>For more about Felix Dodds, see <http://www.felixdodds.net/> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix\\_Dodds](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Dodds).

- Cross-cutting issues include post-conflict, gender, governance, urbanization, and sustainable production and consumption. Those who don't have specific SDGs for their issues will need to see how to address their issues under the goals being developed.
- NGOs involved in sustainable development tend to speak to progressives/communitarians, but also need to speak to conservatives/libertarians.
- There will be many disruptive technologies and developments as we move forward.
- We are in the planetary phase of development and we need global citizens in a global citizens' movement.

Next, we began to go around the circle of participants to discuss their current activities and concerns and how they felt we could collaborate. After Felix's fine speech, we thought what followed would be interesting but not of enduring significance. We were wrong. The conversation was very moving and included insights such as these:

- GIWA-Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (water, sanitation and hygiene). Improve toilets in schools so girls can go to school. This is both practical and spiritual. Imams in India are praying for this.
- We are living in a big transition. We are seeing the human race move from adolescence to maturity.
- What is development for? It is for full human development. What is happiness? It is about wellbeing for all.
- The operating principle of the human race is the recognition of the oneness of human kind—all humanity coming together functioning with different capacities and abilities but forming this one body. This is a practical and a spiritual principle. It is driven in part by technology, science and economics, but there has to be an underpinning of spiritual and moral values.
- We need to grasp the idea of universal participation.
- Development is really taking place on three levels: the individual level, the community level and the institutional/policy level.
- Civil society participation in the UN is critical. We are interconnected communities and each has a responsibility and capability of playing a role.
- This is a learning process for everyone, continuous learning. We have to approach it in a humble attitude of learning, not telling someone else what they need, but discovering together what is necessary to move forward.
- The most productive thing we can do is to engage in discourse.
- The SDGs on their own are not going to be the answer. They need to be animated by a deeper understanding of what development is and what its purpose is.
- From a Buddhist nun: we have been taught to be professional religious, but not how to be global citizens.
- The time for scanning our religious traditions for ecological insights and then proclaiming we are green is over.
- We are in a crisis. With a two-degree-Celsius temperature rise, many of the major cities of the world are gone.

- Leaders in different religious and spiritual organizations haven't made their central task transformative change in relation to the current civilizational crisis, though their traditions were born from their founders who received calls from the radiant source that created and sustains all beings.
- We need to look at our own religious practices. For example, cremating human remains and putting them in the Ganges is questionable today. These practices can be re-adapted in an ecological context.
- The Japanese word for being busy means losing one's mind. We need to be brought back from losing our minds.
- Evolution teaches us that the keys to survival are awareness and a skill set.

What bound this group together was not an imperative, but a spirit. It is what will sustain the work of this group going forward and this spirit, which is present in many people and in many places, is needed to change the world.

### **Next Steps for ESI**

In the last hour we discussed potential collaborations and here are some of the potential collaborations presented:

- Authoring a book on ESI (not what this ESI group is about, but rather a call to leaders of values-based organizations) with chapters from the people present
- Commenting collectively on ethical and spiritual values in the post-2015 UN development agenda
- Advocating for culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development
- Developing an education curriculum on sustainable development for VBOs (this is to help enable people to understand how to be global citizens and the relationship of ethics, spirituality and culture to sustainable development).
- Working on the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (WASH stands for water sanitation and hygiene), and support a similar initiative focused on energy
- Hosting ecological civilization conferences
- Engaging teams of scholars in different regions of the world to prepare a vision and pathway to ecological civilization (the transition from economic-industrial civilization to ecological-cultural civilization)
- Promoting the International Ethics Panel for Ecological Civilization, Ombudsmen for Future generations, Trusteeship of the Global Commons, Office of Ethical Assessment in the UN Secretariat and other ethical structures of governance.

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Finally, here are the people who were present on May 14 or who were invited and remain interested. If you have an interest in joining or finding out more about this initiative, please contact, the convener, Richard Clugston, at [rmclugston@aol.com](mailto:rmclugston@aol.com).

Attendees (20):

Ken Kitatani (Forum 21)  
Rick Clugston (Maine Interfaith Power and Light)  
Herman Greene (Center for Ecozoic Societies)  
Sr. Joan Kirby (Temple of Understanding)  
Alison Van Dyk (Temple of Understanding)  
Chang Ji (Dharma Drum)  
Guo Chan (Dharma Drum)  
Peter Adriance (Baha'i)  
Dinah Wiley (Yoga in Daily Life)  
Larry Troster (GreenFaith)  
Patrick Nickisch (URI)  
Kurt Johnson (Interspiritual Multiplex)  
Judy Kuriansky (International Association of Applied Psychology)  
Monika Mitchell (Good Business New York)  
George Houston (Sukyo Mahikari)  
Felix Dodds (Tellus Institute)  
Sharon Hamilton-Getz (World Harmony Council and Forum, and the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns)  
Ashley Young (Independent film maker)  
Ellen Tabak (Sukyo Mahikari)  
Divya Chand (International Association of Applied Psychology)

Others-invited and interested:

Martha Gallahue (URI)  
Rebecca Tobias (URI)  
Monica Willard (URI)  
Cynthia Sampson (URI)  
Bruce Kersten  
Khenpo Prema Wangdak