

Report on the North American Civil Society Consultation on Rio+20

March 8, 2011, New York

North American civil society groups meet



On March 7-8 the United Nations held its [2nd Preparatory Committee Meeting](#) for the [UN Conference on Sustainable Development](#) (aka “Rio+20”). In conjunction with this UN “PrepCom,” civil society groups from North America also came together to discuss these preparations. On March 8, the Citizens Network for Sustainable Development, We

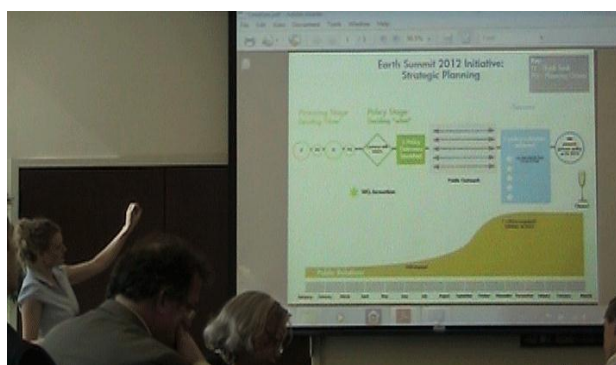
Canada, the National Resources Defense Council, and Bahai’ International organized an open consultation inviting US and Canadian citizens and organizations to share and discuss North American civil society plans for getting the region, countries, and communities informed and involved. **Marie-Pierre Daigle**, National Director-East, We Canada, facilitated the event.

Aleksandra Nasteska, National Director-West for We Canada, introduced the [We Canada](#) initiative and Canadian Earth Summit Coalition, whose aim is to raise the profile of the Rio+20 conference and engage all sectors in “a huge social movement across Canada to change behavior towards sustainability.” Recently launched with 22 partner organizations, the initiative is driven by young adults (Generation Y) and experts in sustainability. Young people bring a range of assets to the table, she pointed out, being

educated, engaged, and actively using social media (e.g., [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#)). Aleksandra also identified some of the 20 high profile campaign “champions,” famous Canadian actors, artists and environmental heroes (e.g., [Severn Suzuki](#)) they have recruited to spread the word about the initiative.



Helen Beynon, Policy Development Director for We Canada, described the timeline and plans for a consultative process to engage Canadian citizens in policy recommendations on the conference themes of green economy and sustainable development governance, to be submitted to the the Canadian government for consideration at the domestic and global levels. The aim is to make sure Canadian citizens have a clear voice.



Jacob Scherr, Director, Global Strategy and Advocacy at [Natural Resources Defence Council](#) (NRDC), with thirty years of experience on sustainability issues, spoke of the importance of Earth Summit 2012. He congratulated the Canadian campaign for moving ahead on this effort. He noted that the United States is still in an early stage in preparing for Rio; so far there have only been a few meetings of US NGOs. Nevertheless, interest is spreading and we are building momentum. He noted the [letter sent to President Obama](#) in September 2009, signed by twelve environmental groups, urging the president to support Brazil's proposal for an Earth Summit in 2012 and to help make this a success.



One encouraging sign of high level engagement was the recent appointment of US Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, to the [Secretary General's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability](#). Jacob cited Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Gumbiner's recent remarks at the UN that "we have developed a robust process within our government to evaluate how far we have come since Rio, and to identify gaps that we need to address and emerging issues where we need to make progress. This effort is reinvigorating discussions on sustainable development within our government."

The focus needs to be on critical action. He noted Earth Day Network's call for [a billion acts of green](#). The debate is not just about the conference in Rio but about shaping the future of civilization.

Jeffrey Barber, Executive Director of [Integrative Strategies Forum](#) and National Coordinator of the [Citizens Network for Sustainable Development](#) explained how CitNet was created to help American citizens and organizations understand and participate in the original Earth Summit in 1992, as described in the book [Time for Change](#). CitNet and others continued to engage with the President's Council for Sustainable Development and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, which offer important lessons.



The objectives of Rio+20 are (1) to secure renewed political commitment for sustainability, (2) review progress, and (3) address the new challenges of the 21st century. Success depends on not forgetting the commitments from the original Agenda 21 agreements still to be implemented, such as development of national sustainability strategies. Last year on Earth Day, CitNet members and supporters launched a [petition to President Obama](#) calling on him to present to the world in 2012 our country's long-term vision and strategy for making America sustainable. The call for sustainability is not new; it has become a broad social movement involving thousands of initiatives, organizations and networks. Now national and global dialogues explore how to create a "green economy" and the governance needed to make sustainability the norm. With the

national elections coinciding with Rio+20, candidates can be asked what steps they are taking to ensure a sustainable future for America. 2012 provides us with a unique opportunity to tell the story and share the vision of sustainability.

Peter Adriance, is the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is NGO liaison for sustainable development. He is also one of the founders of the US Partnership on Education for Sustainable Development and the Citizens Network for Sustainable Development. Peter recalled the moment in October 1990 when 120 organizations came together to discuss how to work together to have a better impact on the upcoming Earth Summit. Today we are now asking these same questions for Rio+20 – but now have the advantage of new media tools we did not have in 1990, such as email, cell phones, and the internet. We need to use these tools to get the message out as well as connecting people and help them get involved.



He cited practical examples that tell this story, such as [One Planet Living](#), a program of [BioRegional](#), helping individuals, businesses and governments to operate within the earth's limits. Another is [The Planeteers Blog](#), inspired by the popular Captain Planet series created by Barbara Pyle and Ted Turner, offering tips for sustainable living. He also mentioned the [Earth Charter](#), with 7,000 members in the US, highlighting the ethical and values side of the discussion. Peter especially applauded We Canada as an example of using social media and networking to foster outreach and engagement.

Dianne Dillon Ridgley, environmentalist, human rights activist and sustainability expert, looked back from the events in 1992 to today and the people making this movement today. Aside from the policies and plans, much of what Rio+20 will be is about *moments*.

Dianne pointed out that the meeting, the text, and the policies are all important; but it is also important when *you convene the world*. “This is a moment to impress and shape



how an entire generation will be engaged and be excited and understand how they will walk in the world for the rest of their lives.” She recalled Severn Suzuki and cited Chicago planner Daniel Burnham, “Make no small plans, because they do little to stir the hearts of men.” This is in fact an incredible moment and not a time for small plans and gestures.

Identifying herself as one of “Rachel’s daughters,” she recalled the [World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet](#) that played a significant role in the lead up to Rio’92, along with many of the movement’s key leaders – Bella Abzug,

Michael McCoy, Wangari Maatai, Vandana Shiva, including those involved in the 1972 Stockholm conference. This is in fact a 40-year continuum to get this change, in which we see the environment not as something to include but which is the context in which we exist. This is our moment, when we move beyond talking about ‘Mother Earth’ and begin to *mother* Earth (as a verb).

Discussion

The discussion then opened up to participants in the room and those calling in.

Tom Forster from [International Partners for Sustainable Agriculture](#) (IPSA) suggested that in addition to renewed policy and value outcomes, the importance of an *implementation agenda*. The US and Canadian governments played a major role in this at the CSD 16-17 sessions on food and agriculture, teaming up with civil society to not only influence the text but to translate this into national policy and programs, such as on urban-rural linkages. In our outreach to US and Canadian civil society, we need to get across the message that this matters, bringing these points down to the ground through our engagement infrastructure and tactics back into our communities.

Annie Wilson from [Sierra Club](#) asked about common points we could agree upon, hoping that something useful will come out of the process yet skeptical given the lack of a common platform of priorities. How do we move forward and not self-destruct?

Jim Barton called in from North Carolina recommending attention to the [Millennium Consumption Goals](#).

Jim Rochow from [Trust for Lead Poisoning Prevention](#) echoed Tom Forster's point about the need to focus on an *implementation agenda* so that Rio+20 outcomes involve practicable recommendations to be implemented nationally.

Rob Wheeler, from the Citizens Network for Sustainable Development and also World Transforming Initiatives, cited the General Assembly's enabling resolution calling for each country to establish *national preparatory committees*. He posed the idea of forming an ad hoc group to pose to the Administration the need to establish this, including the grassroots and leading actors in sustainable development.

Rob also cited Deputy Secretary Gumbiner's recent speech urging governments to It is necessary "to take a long-term view, develop a strategic approach, and involve all levels of government and elements of civil society" and "to promote frameworks and incentives for sustainable economic activities, promote transparency and inclusiveness, set ambitious yet realistic targets, and measure progress towards those goals." This is a framework for creating a national strategy for sustainability. We need to hold him to these words and move towards creating this national strategy.

Wade Ferguson from the [Vermillion Institute](#) in Calgary, Alberta, called in urging to push the policy agenda beyond the theme of "green" economy to one focusing on "sustainable" economy. Whereas the Brundtland report and the original Earth Summit got it right, there has been a tendency to reduce the meaning of sustainability to simply "green." He encourages working together to develop communications and outreach to expand the concept, putting emphasis on people, planet and prosperity.

Tara DePorte, Executive Director of the [Human Impacts Institute](#), asked about what mechanisms already exist to participate in this process and if not, could we create a committee as was suggested today.

Randolf Horner, [American Council on Renewable Energy](#), wanted to clarify that there is no tension between sustainability and clean energy, green technology and green jobs. The future of the earth depends on our abandoning old paradigms, that “growth is good” – which is not much better than “greed is good.” If we want to meet the Millennium Development Goals and raise billions of people out of poverty, we must supply them with clean energy to enable that rise. If we compromise by saying “cheap energy now, clean energy later,” there isn’t going to be anything in 50 years for people to look back on. The good news is that massive amounts of long-term private capital are moving into clean energy, green and sustainable enterprises.

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The discussion then focused on follow-up steps to coming together, within and among US and Canadian civil society. Each of the event partners will communicate and coordinate with each other in developing this process, informing participants and working together in outreach and future activities.