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Civil Society Calls for Greater Engagement in the UNEP Process

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UNEP Rio +20 Conference

"From Outcome to Implementation" – That was the theme of the first universal session of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Governing Council and Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC/GMEF), which convened on Monday . The agenda for the meeting, open to all 193 UN member states for the first time, sought to create a framework for the implementation of the Rio+20 "The Future We Want" outcome document.

My role at this meeting was unique. In December 2012, I was elected to serve as one of the two Regional Representatives for North America to UNEP. My duties include participating in the GC/GMEF and representing the interests of North American civil society. The key priorities for the region were identified during a consultation of stakeholders in December. For example, North American civil society called for the creation of a new narrative for how we communicate environmental concerns, shifting the current reactionary narrative of doom and gloom to a proactive and positive portrayal of the opportunities available under the green economy.

On the ground in Nairobi, Kenya, I contributed to a ministerial roundtable including the U.S., China and over a dozen other countries on the importance of scaling up resources and capacity for the Sustainable Buildings and Construction program under the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production. The voice and expertise of civil society is crucially important as our leaders make major decisions that affect each of us as well as generations to come. However, the role of Major Groups and Stakeholders, a formal designation within the UN process, is limited and complicated.

While government delegates debated policy provisions line-by-line, the Major Groups turned their collective attention to the clause of the Rio+20 outcome on greater stakeholder participation. Civil society groups attending the GC/GMEF represented diverse interests, from non-governmental organizations and business associations to farmers and children and youth; however, they all agreed that civil society needs a formal role in future UNEP agenda-setting, policy-making and implementation. After much deliberation, collaboration and compromise, the Major Groups developed 11 principles for stakeholder engagement that call for the right to full and effective participation within UNEP, including access to information and the right to contribute through oral interventions.

The GC/GMEF is still underway in Nairobi, Kenya and the fate of future civil society engagement within UNEP processes remains uncertain. Many countries acknowledge that civil society stakeholders are crucial to the functioning of the UN process, as non-governmental organizations, business and industry, and others will be affected by the decisions made and, in some cases, be called upon to implement their outcomes. The support of these nations for the inclusion of the 11 principles in the outcome document gives hope to our cause, but only the final day of the GC/GMEF will reveal the true colors of countries as they make a final determination on the subject.

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