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Conference Activities

Pre-Conference Workshops

A to Z of Climate Change

Colombo, Sri Lanka - January 18, 2016

Venerable Athuraliye Ratana Thero welcomed the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Commission for Environmental Economic and Social Policy (CEESP), scientists from Colombo, Sri Lanka, environmentalists, and religious leaders to discuss interfaith issues around climate change. A combination of 20 participants participated including Christians, Buddhists and Muslims and Hindus to consider the implications of the recent Paris climate negotiations on Sri Lanka. This post COP21 workshop included a panel presentation discussion that continued the issues presented during the December 2015, 21st Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris, France. COP21 was a significant event where world leaders hammered out a new agreement aimed at stabilizing the climate and avoiding the worst impacts of climate change.

Dr. Nigel Crawhall from IUCN CEESP presented the background on the role of religion in the context of climate change. In 2009, INEB held its first workshop on climate change and climate justice issues in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The UNFCCC Secretariat invited faith-leaders and faith-based organizations (FBO) to formalize their relationship with the Secretariat during COP19 in Warsaw, Poland. CEESP subsequently set up a

list serve for FBOs, including INEB members, and there has been an Interfaith Liaison Committee facilitating communications since Warsaw.

In September 2012, INEB supported the first pan-Asian Inter-religious Climate and Ecology (ICE) network conference in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. In 2012, it was already evident that climate change was impacting Sri Lankans and other peoples in South Asia, South East and East Asia. It was agreed in Anuradhapura to continue coordinating and mobilizing FBOs and spiritual leadership to understand the causes of the climate and environmental crises, and to improve coordination and sharing of strategies, particularly across religious traditions in Asia.

The first ICE conference in 2012 established an important dialogue between scientists and faith communities. The climate and environmental problems faced by humanity have substantial technical aspects that require understanding and being responded to. At the same time, the drivers of the problems and the impacts raise major moral and ethical considerations. This moral and ethical dimension, including the provision of emergency services, food aid, disaster responses all place a burden and responsibility on religious leadership. The interface between scientists, religious leaders, civil society and policy

makers creates an opportunity to understand the problems, threats and opportunities, and to create a shared vision and alliance for addressing the drivers and protecting the planet.

ICE I at Anuradhapura was followed up by ICE II in Seoul, Korea, in April 2015. Delegates to ICE II were active in Paris during COP21, and faith-based leadership, including Venerable Ratana contributed to the Sri Lankan national delegation in Paris.

Ahead of the next regional INEB conference on social justice and sustainable development, it was agreed to provide a forum for scientists, civil society, government and faith leaders to share with each other the relevance, analysis and challenges coming out of Paris COP21. These issues are pertinent to all Sri Lankans and need to be shared publically to help develop a shared vision for action and resilience.

Dr. Nigel noted in particular that the current political leadership in Sri Lanka is seriously concerned about issues of sustainability, climate vulnerability and the need to develop a national economic and development strategy that will help Sri Lanka weather the major challenges ahead.

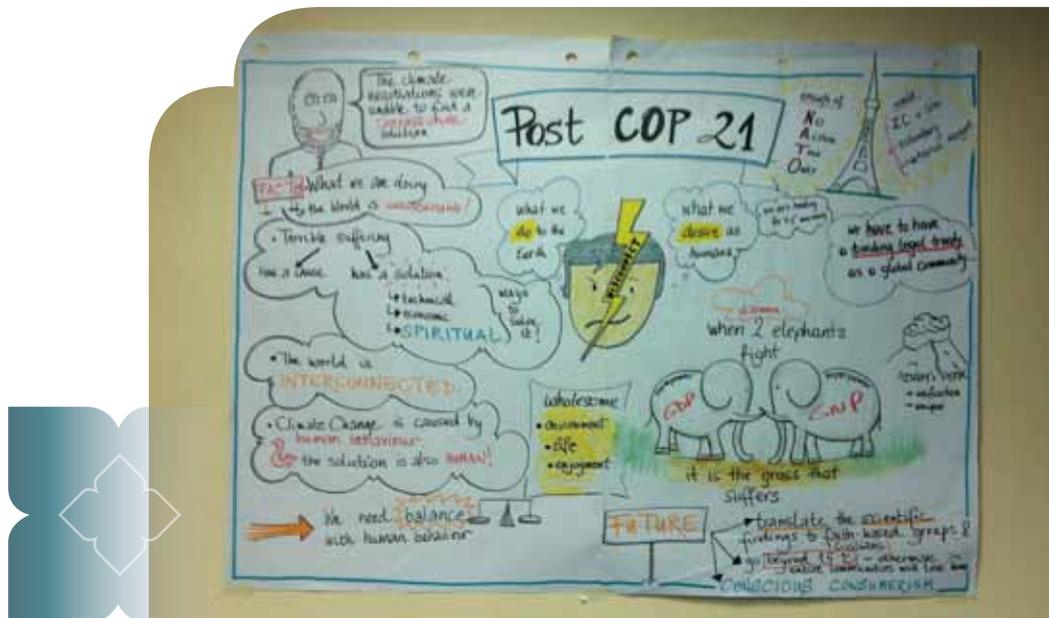
Key points made about Paris COP21:

1. First major agreement in the UNFCCC to include moral and ethical issues within the treaty agreement. Paris COP21 agreed to include language on human rights, gender equality, intergenerational equity, indigenous peoples' rights and other social justice issues;
2. There was opposition to human rights in the Paris Agreement which was led by Saudi Arabia, China and South Africa, with some confusing messages from Norway and others. Eventually consensus was reached on including the human rights references in the preamble;
3. The high profile of ethical and rights considerations appeared to have been supported by the release of the Papal Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, as well as other supportive climate justice

statements from Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu networks;

4. Paris COP21 agreed that the global target for slowing global warming should be below 2 degrees, ideally aiming for an overall increase of 1.5 degrees centigrade;
5. The US strongly opposed any language making the outcomes of Paris binding on State Parties;
6. COP21 received Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) pledges from all of the treaty's member states. On the one hand, the INDCs are a tacit acknowledgement that no binding global decision can be taken at this stage, however, on the other hand, the INDCs mark a step forward in national action plans and targets. The analyses of the INDCs clearly indicate that they are inadequate to reduce global warming. The current targets (without considering whether they would really be achieved) would set the planet on a temperature increase of at least 4 degrees centigrade, a scale that would likely threaten the survival of most or all of humanity and many other species.

Human beings seem to have an insatiable desire for consumerism and commodities. This consumerism and desire for material goods is a fundamental driver, both individually and culturally, which contributes to poor treatment of the Earth, the natural world, and a disregard for the suffering it causes to others. Many humans are made to suffer as a result of meeting the production demands of growth-based consumerism (poor working conditions, poverty, environmental and health degradation, inequality), as well as many other species all of whom have no say in human behavior and the destruction of the planet. Within this mind-set of mindless consumption and production exists a mental state of feeling disconnected with other living beings and the environment. Disconnection and desire combine to weaken our inherent capacity to feel our interconnected and interdependent nature, in addition to compassion for others and ultimately for ourselves.



The current paradigm promotes suffering and obscures its causes and consequences. In contrast, a sustainable development paradigm invites FBOs and society to reconnect with life, to reawaken compassion and find meaning within livelihoods and sustainable stewardship of the planet. Science, the science of biodiversity, climatology, agriculture and marine conservation, for example, are all tools for understanding the cause and effects of our current paradigm, and to consider a more informed way of living. Ultimately, this shift in paradigm must be driven by a right understanding of the current causes and effects of human behavior, including the moral and ethical components that are taught within our religious and spiritual traditions.

The meeting explored how these major civilizational challenges are channeled into a UN treaty process, the UNFCCC, where State Parties are meant to provide global leadership on our responses to both science and ethics. It is not clear that the current political configuration at the UN wants to or is capable of honestly addressing the problems we are creating. The economic paradigm that is killing the planet is still considered to be normal and acceptable within such forums.

One of the major tensions visible in Paris, and, generally, in the UNFCCC is that high level politics eclipse common sense. The most evident competi-

The Colombo post COP21 workshop's summary diagram shows some of the ideas that were discussed by participants. On the upper left is the statement that climate negotiations have to find compassionate solutions.

Mischa Altman & Melinda Varfi

tion at the UNFCCC is between the industrialized Western nations (some of which were once colonial powers) and the block consisting of China and the Group of 77 – the bulk of countries making up the South or countries which liberated themselves from colonial control.

Some of the delegates questioned whether the political and economic competition between Beijing and Washington was in the interest of the peoples and the nations of the South. Clearly, national climate change policies can be developed from the grassroots, but these voices are not easily heard in the climate negotiations. Indeed, workshop participants drafted the following precedent setting statement entitled “Agreeing to Sustain Life: Our Ecological Conversion,” which has been accepted by the Sri Lankan Parliament. It was also read to the entire audience during the INEB conference’s opening symposium.

NGOs in the Colombo meeting expressed their despair at the UN process of negotiating the treaty. Their fear was that Paris COP21 offered

false hope and that it was covering an attitude of ‘ business as usual. ’ There was concern that multinational corporations and those who benefit from the fossil fuel economy are more influential than civil society, and that the outcomes are not going to be pursued. It was noted that there is a constant risk of despair when dealing with such serious matters and the frustrations of the negotiations processes.

Scientists noted that Paris was the first COP in a number of years to show some cooperation and progress. The INDCs and the new temperature target are beginning to show a more serious engagement with science. Climate change cannot be reversed, but a serious and sustained engagement with changing our energy systems, conserving the environment and changing human behavior can substantially mitigate the impacts.

Faith leaders observed that it is their duty to speak about issues of climate justice, sustainability and

our relationship with creation/the natural world. All religious traditions have an ecological component in their scriptures, and, moreover, they insist on equity, justice and the taking of responsibility for our actions. The faith leadership acknowledged the importance of having an interfaith/multi-faith approach. Many worrying trends towards the misuse of religion and fundamentalism are contributing to human suffering. Universal solidarity between different faiths is part of the antidote to the contemporary crisis. Religious leadership needs to be well informed about the climate and environmental crises, as well as continue and strengthen their leadership and encouragement both with the general public and with those who hold political office.

Religious leaders noted the importance of the Papal Encyclical and embraced the notion of an Ecological Conversion which speaks to social justice, economic equity and environmental sustainability.



Agreeing To Sustain Life: *Our Ecological Conversion*

Colombo, Sri Lanka - January 2016

Our Earth is changing rapidly due to human interventions. The climate is becoming unstable due to the release of fossil carbon. We humans are disturbing the atmosphere and polluting the world. Life is unraveling due to us. We are disturbing and threatening all lives on Earth, now and for generations to come.

We have violated the right to life of billions of life-forms on Earth. Science calls this depletion of bio-diversity and environmental degradation: the Sixth Mass Extinction. This is now what we want. We must act now to protect future generations and our mother Earth.

Scientists have alerted us to the grave risks and threat to our species and many other species. With all this science our global leaders have failed to act wisely and in time to protect the planet. Instead of focusing on saving life, our world leaders argue about economics, profits, and political dominance – they set their short-term agendas ahead of the well-being of creation and all humanity.

Without a healthy environment, there is no economy, no wealth and no life. It is time for what Pope Francis has called Our Ecological Conversion. It is time to set our priorities in order, to put life and well-being ahead of politics and growth-based economic doctrines.

We who have gathered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 22 January 2016, representing many different faiths from 20 countries declare that:

- ◆ Recognizing the need for a paradigm shift from destructive development to sustainable development was agreed at the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals summit;
- ◆ Observing that world leaders agreed in Paris at UNFCCC COP21 in December 2015, to avoid emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and to keep global warming far below 2 degrees against pre-industrial levels;
- ◆ Highlighting the science recommendations of 100% shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy well before 2050 by all countries;
- ◆ Insisting on toxin-free agriculture and elimination of persistent pollutants worldwide;
- ◆ Noting that we are wasting time and money without achieving a binding decision or sufficient actions to address the causes of this crisis;
- ◆ Envisioning sustainable systems that will be universally accepted, protecting life, agro-biodiversity, diverse ecosystems, as well as human dignity and well-being;
- ◆ Understanding the need to change the way we govern the planet, to grow a culture of solidarity, and to transform selfish negotiations into generous cooperation within a new global social contract;
- ◆ Stressing the need for a set of universal common values to which human beings as one family can subscribe within our great culture diversity;
- ◆ Noting that all spiritual traditions hold that greed and accumulation are unjust and unwholesome; and that happiness arises through wholesome generous co-existence, in accordance to our scriptures and collective wisdom.

We call on all world leaders, faith leaders and all peoples of this planet:

- ◆ To unite for our common good, to collectively embrace a new paradigm where economics and politics serve life and sustainability; where our differences enrich us to live as one human family, mindful of what is needed now and those generations yet to be born.
- ◆ To abandon growth-based economics; to commit to the Great Turning towards sustainability, total elimination of fossil fuels, healthy and toxin-free agriculture, moral and physical wellness, and a life-centered approach to sustainability.

May we be rigorous in our efforts, respecting all life-forms and embrace the opportunity of this Ecological Conversion. Let us be guardians and champions of these changes; let us have faith in our common destiny.