

Report to UN Environment

Major Groups and Stakeholders, Region of North America

Peter Denton, MGS Regional Representative for RONA

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Dear Colleagues:

I am pleased to offer you a brief report and some personal observations, following the 16th Global Major Groups and Stakeholders' Forum (May 21-22) (GMGSF) and the second United Nations Environment Assembly (May 23-27) (UNEA-2). This is a reprise of the report I submitted to the Ottawa Consultation in December 2016.

Because of budgetary constraints, as there was no regional consultation in our region in 2015, I continued in my role as MGS Regional Representative for RONA to which I was elected (with Maggie Comstock, USA) at the Regional Consultation Meeting in Washington, D.C., in December 2013. As Maggie was unable to attend UNEA-2 due to conflicting meetings in Bonn, Kate White (CA) (who was elected second alternate in December 2013) attended in her place. Due to more strict enforcement of rules around accreditation of MGS delegates, however, because she was with an organization not accredited to UNEP/UN Environment, Kate was unable to gain access to the plenary sessions and the Committee of the Whole.

A shortened UNEA-3 (and the 17th GMGSF) will take place in early December 2017, in order that future meetings will happen every two years in alignment with the UN budgetary cycle. Because of this one-time adjustment, most of the current members of the Major Group Facilitating Committee (two representatives elected from each of the nine Major Groups, with Regional Representatives as observers) will extend their terms to cover UNEA-3. With several changes made or in the offing (such as the new name for UNEP, which is now UN Environment, and the change of the Major Groups and Stakeholders Branch to UN Environment Civil Society), there will likely be significant rearrangements of pathways for civil society engagement as well by UNEA-4 in 2019.

16th Global Major Groups and Stakeholders' Forum

I was privileged to be part of the planning team for the 16th GMGSF, which had much more participation than the previous one and a program that offered a variety of opportunities for Major Groups and Stakeholders (MGS) to learn about and share insights on significant issues.

It was intended to do the following:

- Provide a briefing for first time participants on what was at stake at UNEA-2 and how MGS could inform the discussions and be part of a successful outcome.
- Facilitate preparations of Major Groups and Stakeholders to discuss the main UNEA themes in a multi-stakeholder setting and to prepare their input to UNEA-2.
- Foster multi-stakeholder partnerships and cooperation. The Forum is self-organized by Major Groups and Stakeholders, with the assistance of UNEP.

It was divided into the following main sections:

1. UNEA, Status of Negotiations and Expected Outcome. UNEP staff and experts from MGS gave updates and background information on main UNEA resolutions and decisions and on opportunities for Major Groups and Stakeholders to participate and intervene in UNEA session. Furthermore, a special session for “UNEA newcomers” explained how to contribute to the intergovernmental process.
2. Multi-stakeholder interaction on main UNEA themes and the role of MGS in multi-stakeholder partnerships, policy making and the application of the rule of law, in implementing the SDGs. In interactive panels, representatives of all Major Groups and member states discussed main UNEA themes.
3. MGS coordination and Preparation of UNEA 2 input
MGS gathered in working groups to coordinate their input into UNEA.
4. The future vision for UNEA and GMGSF
A special session on how future GMGSF can echo the increased importance of UNEA, making the GMGSF a true and unique global multi-stakeholder forum.

As one of the more experienced GMGSF participants, I co-facilitated the brown-bag orientation session for first-time delegates on the first day, and participated in a panel on “How can Major Groups’ Technical Expertise and Research, Citizen Science and Indigenous Knowledge Contribute to Advance the Monitoring of SDG Implementation, including GEO 6.”

The GMGSF was highly successful and enabled more effective participation in UNEA-2, especially given the high percentage of newcomers to the intergovernmental process. We were pleased at the government representatives from Canada and from the USA who (with some others) made time to participate in our sessions, meet civil society members, and discuss what lay ahead in UNEA-2. Our Regional Director, Patricia Beneke, was often the only UNEP Regional Director in the plenary sessions, something that was noticed and appreciated by the delegates.

UNEA-2

One thorny topic, still left unresolved by the end of UNEA-2, was the new Stakeholder Engagement Policy that had been under discussion since the UNEP 27th Governing Council meetings in 2013. Despite many formal and informal efforts, the meetings ended with a continued deadlock, focused on the People's Republic of China objections around the issue of accreditation of organizations to UNEP/UN Environment. This means that the previously existing stakeholder engagement policies, including those concerning accreditation, remain in effect. It also means that civil society organizations (including those of Regional Representatives) must be fully accredited with UN Environment in order to participate in UNEA-3 or related events (other than the 17th GMGSF). Both Canada and the USA were very strong, vocal and open supporters of the principle of non-regression on the Stakeholder Policy, though the fact this was necessary (given that Paragraph 88 of the Rio+ 20 Outcome Document mandated an improved policy) remains a troubling sign of problems for future civil society engagement.

The theme for UNEA-2, focusing on the environmental dimensions of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, obviously concerned all sectors and covered a lot of ground, so not surprisingly there were significantly more resolutions passed at this meeting than at previous ones. (The final list of these 25 resolutions is on the UNEA-2 website.) It was disappointing not to present a final MGS statement to close UNEA-2, as was planned, but conflict over a resolution concerning Palestine extended the meetings until 4 a.m., when a vote finally concluded the proceedings in an assembly room from which many delegations had already departed.

I very much appreciated the efforts of the members of the American delegation, especially the representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency, who were actively engaged in so many constructive ways throughout the Assembly.

The cluster of events surrounding UNEA-2 and over-lapping with it made for a busy two weeks. Through my involvement with GEO-6, I was a MGS (Scientific and Technological Community) representative to the Science Policy Forum (May 19-20). There was a Sustainable Innovation Expo concurrent with UNEA-2, along with 25 side events. As a delegate from the United Church of Canada (along with Brahma Kumaris and the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNES)), I co-facilitated a Green Room Side Event on the role played by Faith-Based Organizations in sustainable development. We were delighted to have more than 75 people present. I also published an issue of UNEP's *Perspectives* journal ("The World We Want and the Faith We Share") (http://www.unep.org/civil-society/Portals/24105/documents/perspectives/PERSPECTIVE%2021_003.pdf) on this topic in time for distribution at UNEA-2.

Closing Thoughts

Serious challenges lie ahead for us in civil society engagement worldwide, especially in North America. I remain troubled at the budgetary constraints that meant I had to pay my own way to the pre-UNEA-2 consultation in Ottawa in May 2016 and that have prevented me from joining in either this consultation in Ottawa or the one to be held in Washington in 2017 to provide my Regional Representative's report, as has been past practice. While it was wonderful to see so many representatives of Canadian government departments at the consultation last May, I was also concerned to find so few civil society representatives, with no one from outside the Ottawa area. This represents a major shift away from the bi-lateral, broader (and larger) RONA meetings of early times. It would be a serious blow to civil society engagement in the North American region if we became two solitudes, focused only on organizations in the respective national capital regions. The time lines of only a few weeks notice also do not allow organizations outside those areas to arrange to send delegates – in the past, meetings were arranged months ahead of time.

Since my first election as Alternate MGS Regional Representative in December 2012, I have been honoured and humbled by the opportunities with which this role has provided me to move out of the canola fields of St. Andrews, Manitoba, into conversations important to the future of the Earth with which we live. It has been a privilege to meet so many talented, dedicated and fine people from around the world who are doing what they can to make that difference on the ground too many others only contemplate.

Since our first meeting in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, I have very much appreciated the UNEP RONA staff over these past four years for the ways they have enabled my participation. To past RONA Regional Representatives Vanessa Timmer, Diallo Shabazz and Maggie Comstock, I owe special thanks for their ongoing camaraderie, support and friendship.

I continue to be the United Church of Canada representative to UN Environment (which received accreditation in 2013, renewed in 2016) and hope to find other pathways to engage on environmental issues, especially those concerning sustainable development and ecological justice.

With best wishes,

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Denton

Peter Denton, Ph.D.
MGS Regional Representative to UNEP for RONA