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DISPATCHES First-hand accounts from the field

Liza Grandia, anthropologist



Liza Grandia is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley. She serves on the board of ProPetén, a Guatemalan nongovernmental organization with which she founded Remedios, an integrated health, population, and environment program, in 1997. She is a fellow of the Environmental Leadership Program.

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Tuesday, 03 Sep 2002
JOHANNESBURG, South Africa

My second morning at the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development, I read in the Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, that, "South Africa's security establishment is bracing itself for its biggest challenge as it seeks to prevent legal demonstrations at the world summit from being infiltrated by anarchists, anti-globalization hardliners, land rights activists, and even Zimbabwean war veterans." A Danish activist and I chuckled at this odd juxtaposition of social categories, especially since we reckoned that we'd fit under a couple of them ourselves.

A week later, I found myself in the middle of Alexandra, one of Johannesburg's poorest townships, marching with about 15,000 people from the African Landless People's Movement, the Anti-Privatization Forum, and other groups around the world opposed to corporate globalization. It was one of two legal marches held that day to protest the exclusion of grassroots organizations and civil society in general from the official U.N. government forum.



Protesters make a human chain.
Photo: IISD.

I came to the WSSD as an anthropologist, to observe the rituals of global summitry and to learn about efforts around the world to implement Agenda 21, the document crafted 10 years ago at the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. I have been disappointed to find that the same civil society organizations which had been celebrated during UNCED as the hope of the future are being systematically excluded from the WSSD through both direct means (only a tiny fraction of us are allowed into the official plenary halls for "security reasons") and indirect means (the civil society forum is strategically located at the other end of town). To make matters worse, the U.S. delegation seems determined to hijack the conference by relentlessly pushing a self-interested "free" trade agenda. For these and other reasons, I felt compelled to take to the streets with a group of U.S. citizens unhappy with our government's bully tactics at the conference.

As we waited early Saturday morning on a street corner near the Sandton convention center for vans to drive us to Alexandra, one veteran protester nonchalantly inquired if anyone had brought rags and bottles of water in case we got tear gassed. I began to get worried. My adrenaline really began to pump as we drove into the township past

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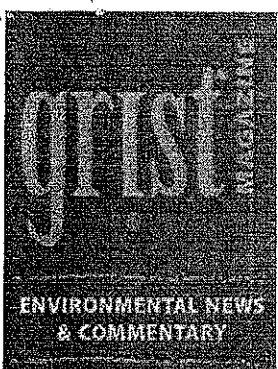
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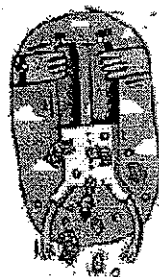
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dozens of tanks and police in full riot gear. My friends and I double-checked our contact lists, discussed escape plans, and laughed nervously that we ought to spare our mothers these details once we got home.

By 9 a.m. a sizeable crowd had gathered at a high school in the Alexandra east bank. Small groups began to sing and dance while the police systematically filmed us from atop their tanks (so as to identify us later through facial recognition technology, I suppose, adding a few more pages to all our files!). The demonstration was primarily composed of South African groups under the umbrella of the Social Movements Indaba, but marching in solidarity with them were many hundreds of WSSD delegates from all around the world -- the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Palestine, Nigeria, and Mexico, to name a few of the places of origin of people I met that day. As we waited to begin, I prayed that there were not any provocateurs planted among us.

The mood was jubilant and peaceful as we slowly began our march to the Sandton convention center. The oldest marchers boarded buses to ride behind the march -- but in terms of energy expenditure, they could just as well have been walking with us, given the way the buses literally swayed up and down to the rhythm of dancing and freedom songs inside. Residents of Alexandra lined the entire route to wish us well and join in song. The crowd swelled as we wove our way through streets lined with open sewage ditches. Police and tanks also lined the streets, along with the occasional ambulance (leading me to worry that the police were expecting people to get hurt). The newspapers reported the next day that 8,000 police had been on duty -- practically one for every two protestors.

The banners of my compatriots said things like, "WTO out of WSSD," "Wild Summit on Sustainable Destruction," "Argentina: Neoliberal Success Story ... Next Customer Please," "Our World is Not for Sale," and my favorite sign from a South African marcher, "The Privatization Man is a Very Bad Man." Interested marchers stopped me every few yards to read the placard I made for myself, which read, "The U.S. government spends 46 cents on every \$1 of our taxes on the military. Fund Agenda 21, not more war!" (see www.warresisters.org for more information). I was struck by their grateful surprise that U.S. citizens were willing to march with them to criticize our superpower government. And I delighted in the "small world" connections that emerged from conversations along the route. I even met a young Nigerian man who knows one of my dissertation committee members!



Newspapers were used as placards during this march.
Photo: IISD.

As the miles went by, it became clear that the march was going to remain peaceful: the police visibly relaxed behind their riot gear. Although initially overwhelmed by the surrounding poverty in the township, I began to observe signs of a vibrant informal economy evidenced by dozens of small businesses run out of people's homes. Any money that entered this township was recirculated many times over -- in complete contrast to my own suburban neighborhood in the U.S., where our consumer dollars immediately escape from the community into the bank accounts of corporate chain store executives.

When we finally arrived at Sandton, the contrast between the luxurious convention center and the extreme poverty of Alexandra seemed a microcosm of the global disparities of wealth that the WSSD is supposed to address. The tired crowd filed into a huge square to hear rousing

speeches while helicopters continued to circle menacingly overhead. I'm grateful and proud that the march remained nonviolent to the end. Yet, I feel sad, indeed appalled, that we live in a system in which poor women, men, and children are met by police intimidation tactics whenever they march on the streets for the chance to be heard by world leaders, while the real planetary criminals -- the corporations -- are welcomed through the front door of the United Nations as "partners" in sustainable development.

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