

Grist > Commentary > Dispatches

DISPATCHES First-hand accounts from the field

Liza Grandia, anthropologist

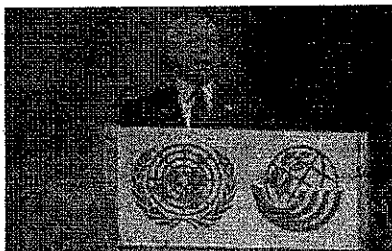


Liza Grandia is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley. She serves on the board of ProPeten, a Guatemalan nongovernmental organization with which she founded Remedios, an integrated health, population, and environment program, in 1997. She is a fellow of the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

Day One | Day Two | **Day Three**

Thursday, 05 Sep 2002
JOHANNESBURG, South Africa

Yesterday morning, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell waltzed into the Sandton convention center almost an hour late for his designated five minutes at the plenary podium. Powell's tardiness was fittingly symbolic, I thought, of the disrespect that the U.S. had shown throughout the WSSD for the other nations of the world -- for example, constantly stalling negotiations until they heard back from Dubya (and/or Vice President Dick Cheney, who is the one we all suspect is *really* in charge). In fact, as late as 4:00 p.m. on the last day of the summit, I saw U.N. head Kofi Annan having to make a humiliating explanation to the press that things were behind schedule with the final action plan because the U.S. had not yet approved certain parts of the document. To say the least, there was a lot of pent up rage and disgust at the U.S. government's behavior throughout the conference by the time Powell arrived to speak.



Colin Powell speaks to an angry crowd.

Photo: IIDS.

When Powell approached the podium, I noted an eerie silence in the convention hall. He received absolutely no introductory applause. I vaguely knew that some U.S. NGOs had made plans to unfurl banners from the stadium seats that had been given to civil society delegates at the back of the hall. Little did I know that official delegates and others would

spontaneously join the chanting and booing that the U.S. NGOs began -- which lasted throughout Powell's entire speech. I, myself, had not anticipated how angry I would feel -- particularly after Powell dared to tout some hypocritical propaganda about U.S. support for the summit's water and sanitation goals, when it was well known that the U.S. had been holding out all week on these particular health agreements as bargaining chips against the poorer nations in the more controversial negotiations on corporate accountability, climate change, and energy. To bargain with the lives of millions of children who will die of diarrhea because of inadequate water and sanitation is, to me, beyond reprehensible. (Gro Brundtland, the director-general of the World Health Organization, reported at the WSSD that one-third of the 13,000 children who die every day succumb to preventable environmental causes -- the equivalent of a jumbo jet filled with children crashing every 45 minutes).

Powell was visibly shaken by the negative response to his presence; many of us walked out during his speech as a final statement of



Sign up for free environmental news by email.

Your email

ARTICLE TOOLS

PRINT this story

EMAIL this story

WRITE to the editor

NEW IN GRIST ...

A Mandate for All Seasons, in Ask Umbra. Should Umbra answer health-related questions?

Oh Say, Can You Sze?, in InterActivist. Send a question to enviro-justice scholar Julie Sze.

It Takes a Value Village, in Muckraker. Post-election, enviros are thinking about values -- and praying for a better outcome next time.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Thomas Brendler, National Network of Forest Practitioners.

Tom Turner, Earthjustice.

Catherine Fedorsky, WSSD Green Energy Project.

Dispatches Archives

Search Grist

Advanced Search

NEWS & ANALYSIS

- Main Dish
- Daily Grist
- Muckraker
- Powers That Be
- Counter Culture

COMMENTARY

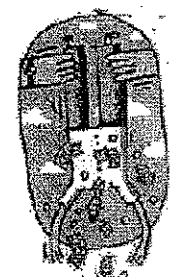
- The Gist
- Soapbox
- InterActivist
- Dispatches
- Ha.

ADVICE & REVIEWS

- Ask Umbra
- Earthly Possessions
- Books Unbound

ETC.

- Gristmill
- Letters



Support nonprofit, independent environmental journalism.
Donate to Grist.

dissent. From outside the convention hall, I could hear that he barely received a few seconds of less-than-polite applause. The media swarmed around those of us who had walked out or been removed by security guards. Throughout the day, people from other countries expressed their appreciation and congratulated us for having stood up to our government.

All in all, it was a terrifically successful action. Or was it? I found myself pondering the question on the T-shirt a good friend helped me procure here that read: "What are we going to do about the U.S.?" This question was apparently asked by a high-level summit leader at the final preparatory meeting for the WSSD (held earlier this year in Bali, Indonesia) who did not realize his microphone was on. It remains a good question. What *are* we going to do as U.S. citizens about our government's tendency to act as a rogue superpower?

Unfortunately, our actions at the WSSD as U.S. citizens and NGOs were too little, too late. We were shamefully unprepared and disorganized compared with NGO delegations from other countries. On Sunday, by sheer luck, I heard about a meeting between U.S. NGOs and four congressional representatives who were honorary members of the official delegation. The meeting turned out to be an extraordinarily substantive dialogue led by Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.) -- the best civic moment I've personally witnessed, ever. What was alarming, however, was that the four congressional members said they had no power in the official U.S. delegation; all decisions were apparently coming straight down through the State Department. Yet, had the U.S. government published their list of delegates (in a historically unprecedented move, the U.S. managed to keep its full delegate list secret from NGOs until the last few days of the conference), and had we been more prepared in briefing them ahead of time on our priorities, these congressional representatives could have been much greater allies for us. They appeared to enjoy the Sunday meeting as much as we all did. In the headiness of the moment, someone suggested that they organize a congressional hearing about the WSSD when we all got back. We must make them keep their promise to act upon this splendid idea; please write Shays and encourage him to follow up.

Beyond pressing for this congressional hearing and being more prepared the next time around, I think there are other lessons to be learned by U.S. NGOs from this WSSD experience. First, we should always remember how excluded we felt from the official decision-making process -- and should take care not to do the same in our own community work. It's ironic that communities often make the same complaints about NGOs that NGOs make about the U.N. "Community participation" does not mean asking people's opinions once decisions are already made, but rather letting those affected by decisions lead their own decision-making process.

Beyond deepening our commitment to community participation, I hope that U.S. NGOs will also take seriously the challenge of strengthening our ties and alliances across international boundaries. Unfortunately, at the WSSD we essentially divided and conquered ourselves. The civil society forum at NASREC was located an hour south of the official summit at the Sandton convention center. I don't know how and why this decision was made; perhaps there were no other sites to hold all of us. Yet, to make matters worse, many other NGOs chose to organize separate forums all over town -- at two different universities, at the Waterdome, at the IUCN Environment Center, and so forth. This presented serious logistical constraints for civil society participants who wanted to create or participate in forums as well as lobby at the government meetings.

The end result was that the wealthier, mostly northern NGOs involved in lobbying did not participate in the civil society forum at NASREC. Their absence was duly noted in plenaries held by the mostly southern NGOs

at NASREC. Indeed, throughout these past two weeks, I was often embarrassed to be the only U.S. citizen riding the bus to many of the civil society forums at NASREC (whose building facilities were rather humble and where most of the participants ate cheap hamburgers and snack foods), and then to return to the luxurious Sandton convention center and see all the "inside" NGO representatives with their cell phones and Internet access, holding meetings over fancy dinner.

When I first learned that the environmental NGOs (the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, the Nature Conservancy, and the like) had set up a forum near the Sandton convention center, I asked an employee of one of these organizations why they had separated themselves from the civil society forum at NASREC. He replied that he had already spent an afternoon at NASREC and felt that the forum wasn't really addressing environmental issues anyhow. That, to me, seemed a bit like blaming the victim. But I think there are larger structural factors that may be creating an unfortunate schism between the northern environmental NGOs and the rest of international civil society. At Rio, all NGOs were on the outside, and so these international alliances were easier to maintain. As a result of the spectacular NGO lobbying at Rio, the U.N. opened its doors a little, and a few organizations have gotten inside access. That's good. But it remains important for those inside to work to open the door still further.

I know from experience that these North/South, rich/poor NGO divisions are not inevitable, because I had the privilege of being involved with the youth caucus organizing for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Although we were at least 30,000 women strong, the NGO forum in Beijing was far better organized and more consolidated than its counterpart here in Johannesburg -- even though the WSSD attendance (around 20,000) was more manageable. In Beijing, all the NGO participants decided to be in the same place, and so even though we were placed 40 kilometers away from the government forum, transportation back and forth was smoother. Moreover, the women's NGO forum was radically participatory, beginning with meetings at the village, district, country, and regional level on every continent. Young women were included in virtually every event I attended at the women's conference; not a single youth was included in any of the WSSD events I attended here in Johannesburg. From those and other experiences in Beijing, I know that we can do better as a community of NGOs.

To close, I'd like to share a quote by Nelson Mandela that I saw this morning at the entrance of the new Apartheid Museum: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

My fellow U.S. citizens, we have much work to do to make our government leaders accountable to the freedom of other nations.

[Day One](#) | [Day Two](#) | **[Day Three](#)**

[< Previous](#) | [Next >](#)

[Archives](#) | [Special Editions](#) | [Support Grist](#) | [About Grist](#) | [Grist by Email](#) | [Search](#) | [Main Dish](#) | [Daily Grist](#) | [Muckraker](#) | [Powers that Be](#) | [Counter Culture](#) | [The Gist](#) | [Soapbox](#) | [InterActivist](#) | [Dispatches](#) | [Ha.](#) | [Ask Umbra](#) | [Earthy Possessions](#) | [Books Unbound](#) | [Gristmill](#) | [Letters](#)

Grist Magazine: Environmental News and Commentary

