

Reflecting on 50 years of environmental work between civil society and UNEP

Concluding statement by Jan-Gustav Strandenaes, at the webinar on the launch of the People's Environment Narrative, October 13, 2022

“50 years ago, in 1972, the UN Environment Programme, UNEP, was established, and the world had finally gotten its own organisation which was going to deal with and work exclusively for the environment.

This year, we have made efforts to celebrate 50 years of environmental work.

Back in 1972, the UN was no stranger to environmental challenges, as several bodies within the UN had been working on elements of the environment for some time. UNESCO, the education and science organisation had for a long time been dealing with elements of the environment,

WMO, the World Meteorological Organisation had been working on atmospheric issues since its inception,

FAO, the world's Food and Agriculture Organisation had been dealing with food and challenges such as drought and pollution, also environmental issues, obviously affecting food production.

And there were others as well within the UN family dealing with environmental issues.

But in 1972 it was the first time the world got an organisation which was going to exclusively work on environmental issues and see all the issues related to environmental challenges in a totality.

As we have heard today, the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 was a first in many cases:

- We finally got an institution to deal exclusively with the environment
- Multilateral environmentalism began
- It was the beginning of environmental governance: It was the first time civil society was allowed to address an official plenary at an intergovernmental conference on a daily basis – this changed the nature of all successive UN meetings
- Environmental law was given an institutional home
- Science and the environment was given an institution and environmental assessments began

- It was in effect also the beginning of environmental diplomacy.

Throughout these 50 years we have seen the legacy of the 1972 Stockholm conference grow and manifest itself in a myriad of issues and policies

All this is covered in the report we are making (the PEN), and as Isis Alvarez said, it will be available soon for all to download, when and if they want to.

But we have heard all these arguments, time and again – so it should be almost unnecessary to state this again in a conclusion.

Allow me therefore to make a postulation –

None of this would have been possible without the active, creative, knowledgeable and engaged participation from civil society and non-state stakeholders. Without civil society, which in effect is the peoples of the world, none of this would have happened in the way it has happened.

Where is the evidence of this postulation?

A few books have tried to catalogue the contribution from civil society, but compared to official archives, documented traces of civil society is hard to find in intergovernmental affairs.

If we try to do research on civil society's contribution in the 1972 conference, we are met with difficulties, because no one took the responsibility to document their massive input despite the fact that there was an impressive presence from civil society in Stockholm then: there were three parallel NGO conferences, some 10 000 participants in total with the majority from civil society, and well over 250 international NGOs were accredited back in 1972 to the conference. Yes, papers have been written about civil society at the 1972 conference, but there is no concise report of and by civil society.

So, for Stockholm+50, we decided to do something about this, and one of the key ideas behind the People's Environment Narrative was to document and give an impression of what civil society accomplished at the Stockholm 2022 conference. More than a thousand people have directly or indirectly contributed to the contents of this report.

Preparatory documents and concept papers are a given with an intergovernmental conference. We wanted to add to the preparatory process for Stockholm+50 and asked 7 globally recognised experts to write what they thought was important within their field of expertise. We identified a theme, a legacy theme, and a basic framework to stay within, but for the rest, the content

was to be theirs. Reflecting on the past, the present and the future of environment is what you will read about in these legacy papers.

And there are also more papers on various themes that relate to the environment, as you have heard today, and which were discussed at Stockholm+50 and found in the PEN.

I have often listened to the introduction by an official chair at an intergovernmental conference introducing and inviting civil society to speak. And more often than not, the introduction usually says that we will now hear from civil society about the need to participate in these conferences.

It is as if members of the global civil society do not have any substance and understanding of the thematic agenda of these conferences and the only thing we can speak about is participation. Yes, we have to address transparency, accountability and participation, because civil society is often barred from actively participating in these conferences. But we also have substantive knowledge, and we have our own way of analysing these themes. The PEN and today's discussion speak to the substantive knowledge that civil society and non-state stakeholders bring to the table.

What about my postulation that we had not come as far as we have today, had it not been for the active and engaged participation from civil society in environmental matters.

Civil society has an annoying way of bringing unwanted truths to the table - and we have done so time and again over the past 50 years, and thus contributed to where we are now. We do not let things slide and be forgotten and remind time and again governments of their commitments. We are not satisfied with present actions, but we are getting there, and we will not give up what we are doing. We have been an impatient driver of environmental issues over the past 50 years; we have brought new issues to the agenda and widened the scope for many others – the development of many of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements have enjoyed our input, governance issues as well, and of late the resolution on banning plastics agreed to at UNEA 5 saw the active participation and contribution from civil society. Some of this can be found in the Report.

We have seen the impatience and frustration of the youth-groups supported by peoples everywhere with the climate issues, the loss of biodiversity, the chemical pollution – what the UN Environment Assembly has named the Three Planetary Crises. The UN offers platforms for civil society to express this frustration in constructive ways, a participation which began in 1972, and which today is being threatened by too many governments that want to shut up and

blindfold civil society. Thus, civil society and UNEP form an important alliance in the global fight for democracy, and to safeguard the planet.

We have tried to document history – and pay tribute to a few key people: Rachel Carlson who is credited with starting the global environmental movement with her courageous book *Silent Spring* in 1962. Barbara Ward, author, economist, researcher and activist, credited with coming up with the three basic dimensions for sustainable development, was the person that made sure civil society could address on a regular basis the plenaries in 1972. Two individuals who fought almost alone, and made a difference, today there are millions fighting for the same. Inspired by 50 years of moving forward we will go further.

Did Stockholm + 50 accomplish what we hoped it would do? There is a debate on that, but if we combine the outcomes from the two commemorative conferences, UNEP@50 and its civil society stakeholder report the “UNEP We Want”, with Stockholm+50, its declaration and our contribution, “the People’s Environment Narrative”, and add the outcome results from UNEA 5 this year, with among 14 resolutions, three momentous ones: one on bringing nature solidly into the development of the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs; one on establishing a scientific body on Chemicals on par with IPBES and IPCC; and the one on a legally binding document banning plastic pollution and then position all this in the framework of the UN General Assembly decision this year stating that the right to a clean environment is a Human Right – well, then we have every reason to say – the outcome from these events in 2022, 50 years after the establishment of UNEP is strong, the outcome is positive and the outcome speaks to an optimistic future despite the horrors and trouble this world is going through today.

Let me finish my conclusion with a quote from a brave and courageous environmentalist who was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work – the great Kenyan Wangari Maathai: She said

“Human rights are not things that are put on the table for people to enjoy. These are things you fight for and then you protect” and she added: “When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and hope.”

This is also the legacy of UNEP, and this is also the legacy of civil society.

Thank you.”

Jan-Gustav Strandenaes,
Knapstad, Norway, October 13, 2022