

UNA-Westchester Global Connection



United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA)-Westchester Chapter
<http://www.unawestchester.org> October 2012

United Nations Day 2012

Help UNA Celebrate the UN's 67th Anniversary!

"Sustainable Energy for All: Solutions for a Prosperous World"

Community Unitarian Church, 468 Rosedale Avenue, White Plains, NY 10605*

Sunday, October 21, 2012, 4:00–6:00 P.M.

Registration: 3:30–4:00 P.M.

Please register: <http://unawestchesterunday2012.eventbrite.com/#>



Featured Speakers:

Keynote presentation by **Nikhil Seth**,
Director, United Nations
Division for Sustainable Development



Presentation by **Elizabeth Silleck**
Regional Coordinator
Energy Smart Communities, NYSERDA

Program Highlights:

- Exhibitions of sustainable local energy solutions: Clean Cookstoves, Green Mountain Energy, NYSERDA's Energy Smart Communities Program, Science Barge, and student projects.
- Presentations followed by Q and A
- Entertainment provided by eco-rock band Solar Punch.
- *A reception will follow the program.*

For information, contact
unawestchester@gmail.com.

***Directions:** The church is located near **Exit 25 of the Hutchinson River Parkway**: Take the Hutchinson River Parkway to Exit 25 for North St. Follow the sign to White Plains (LEFT if you are traveling NORTH; RIGHT if you are traveling SOUTH) onto North St. At first light, turn LEFT onto Rosedale Ave. Go one block and look for sign. Turn RIGHT onto Sycamore Lane.

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Letter from the President



Dear Friends,

A lot has happened since our last newsletter in April. We had an exciting annual meeting on April 29 this year, with inspiring speakers (Environmental Judge Merideth Wright and Hudson Riverkeeper Paul Gallay) and a wide-ranging discussion and reception at the Community Unitarian Church in White Plains. First-place awards were presented to two students who won the high school essay contest, Nadia Floyd and Anne-Marcelle Ngabirano, both from Mt. Vernon High School. We also recognized the Riverkeeper organization for its outstanding work in protecting the Hudson River and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., for its commitment to empowerment, resource conservation and environmental justice in the spirit of the United Nations. Detailed information and photos can be found on our Web site: www.unawestchester.org.

We adopted our new by-laws under the alliance with the United Nations Foundation (UNF), and elected officers. Our officers include: Marcia Brewster, president; Claire Heskestad, vice president; Scott Monje, secretary; David Finch, treasurer; and Marcia Wallace, chair, nominations committee. We elected three new members of our board: Mr. J. Yuhanna Edwards, Mt. Vernon city councilman, who assists with education and advocacy; Ms. Lilli Schindler, who works in the UN Department of Public Information, is now cochair of the program committee; and Ms. Robina Singh, program director at the National Association of Asian MBAs (NAAMBA), is now chair of the Young Professionals program and of the communications committee. Other members of our board were reelected at the meeting, and I am gratified to have such a committed

and cooperative group of people to work with. The full list of directors and committee chairs can be found on page 7 of the newsletter. Other chapter members are encouraged to stand for election or join one of the committees.

Robina Singh and I attended the annual meeting of UNA-USA in Washington in June. We met the chapter and national leaders from UNA-USA and our colleagues from the UNF. The relationship between the UNA-USA and the UNF has matured, and we could see the advantages of the alliance, especially in terms of access to people and resources in Washington, D.C. We are still fighting for a more prominent UNA-USA presence in New York, and are pushing for the next annual meeting to be held there.

The prospects for an improved US relationship with the UN are limited right now. There is little motivation for congressional representatives to fight for the UN, when the budget is being cut all around. They also do not want to stir up disputes before the election. Thus, very little legislation will get passed before November's election. For example, none of the representatives whose staff we met was willing to push for a waiver on the law prohibiting the U.S. from funding UN organizations that have admitted the Palestinian Authority as a member. A report on the annual meeting is on our Web site.

Our United Nations Day event this year (on October 21) has as its theme "Sustainable Energy for All: Solutions for a Prosperous World." The program features excellent speakers, some outstanding exhibits, awards to students who have demonstrated their dedication to sustainable development, and a great eco-rock band. Please show your support for their efforts and of your UNA by attending and bringing a friend. Come and enjoy the day.

—*Marcia Brewster*

Advocacy Corner

Many of us who support the United Nations and its work are often confronted by those who ask, “What does the UN do anyway?” Here is a ready response to cut out from this publication and keep in our pockets to use when faced with such a question.

1. The UN provides food to 90 million people in 73 countries;
2. Vaccinates 58% of the world’s children—saving 2.5 million lives a year;
3. Assists over 36 million refugees and people fleeing war, famine or persecution;
4. Combats climate change, heads a campaign to end leaded fuel use in over 100 nations;
5. Keeps peace with 120,000 peacekeepers in 16 operations on 4 continents;
6. Fights poverty—helped 370 million rural poor achieve better lives in the last 30 years.
7. Protects and promotes human rights on site and through some 80 treaties and declarations;
8. Mobilizes US\$124 billion in humanitarian aid to help people affected by emergencies;
9. Advocates democracy, assisting some 30 countries a year with their elections;
10. Promotes maternal health, saving the lives of 30 million women a year.

The United Nations is a vital organization. Thank you all for supporting it.

--Joan Katen

The Rio+20 Conference

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), or Rio+20 as it is popularly known, was the biggest UN conference ever held, with the participation of world leaders from numerous countries, business, and civil society as well as academics and journalists. More than 100 heads of state and government attended the conference, which was held in Rio de

Janeiro, June 20–22, 2012. The main conference was preceded by the third meeting of the Preparatory Committee (June 13–15, 2012) and the intervening four days devoted to the Sustainable Development Dialogues, conducted primarily for and by civil society.

Rio+20 had three objectives and two themes. The three objectives were: (i) to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development; (ii) to assess the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development; and (iii) to address new and emerging challenges. The two themes were: (i) green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and (ii) the institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD).

On June 22, 2012, the conference adopted a 53-page outcome document entitled *The Future We Want*. It reaffirmed what had been agreed to at the 1992 Earth Summit, which produced Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles, and at the 2002 Johannesburg Conference, which produced the Plan of Implementation, renewing political commitment to sustainable development.

The theme of “green economy” had protracted discussions. It still lacks specifics. There was much mistrust of the concept from the developing countries who viewed it as a Northern paradigm for environmental protectionism being foisted upon them. Nevertheless, the conference did finally recognize the concept of “green economy” as an important tool for achieving sustainable development. As one delegate from a developing country said, “Green economy has changed from something that is being imposed, to something we own.”

On the IFSD, the need for a high-level political forum to replace the Commission

on Sustainable Development has been established. This, it is hoped, will lead to greater coherence and efficiency in sustainable development efforts. There was also agreement to strengthen the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as the leading global environmental authority, and to establish universal membership in UNEP's Governing Council.

Another positive outcome was the decision to establish action-oriented, universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), although the specific themes have yet to be identified. A 30-member intergovernmental group of experts will be established soon to take the process further. The SDGs should be an evolution of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and be able to generate a multi-stakeholder dialogue.

It was recognized that the concept of gross domestic product (GDP) was not necessarily the best tool and that a better measure of progress needed to be devised.

Some of the other positive outcomes and recommendations were:

- Emphasis on the importance of partnerships.
- Women and youth to be empowered as partners in decision making.
- Population problem to be attacked through the empowerment of women (though women's reproductive rights were overlooked in the outcome document).
- Designation of a body to operationalize a 10-year framework for sustainable consumption and production programs.
- Promotion of the science-policy interface through evidence-based and transparent scientific assessments.

Another positive aspect was the participation of civil society and various stakeholders. The Brazilian government had organized the Sustainable Development

Dialogues with a view to seeking the views of civil society. The dialogues focused on ten subjects, including poverty eradication, food and nutrition, the economic and financial crisis, unemployment, forestry, energy and water, among others.

It was recognized that commitments made at the Earth Summit in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002 as means of implementation in support of sustainable development were indispensable, and that commitments related to the goal of setting aside 0.7% of GDP for official development assistance (ODA) was crucial in order to achieve sustainable development.

Rio+20 saw almost 700 voluntary commitments from governments, business, civil society groups, and the UN System, among others, reaching some \$513 billion. There were a number of other pledges, including the European Commission's decision to mobilize 400 million Euros to support sustainable energy projects.

The conference had taken place against the very difficult backdrop of world economic crisis, a slow recovery in the United States, and a large number of humanitarian and political conflicts requiring attention and resources. Moreover, it was overshadowed by the G-20 Summit on the Eurozone crisis and other pressing economic issues, which was held in Mexico immediately before it. In that context, it was fortunate that an outcome document was agreed at Rio+20 despite difficult negotiations. It was a "compromise" text that inevitably pleased some and disappointed others. It emphasizes the importance of promoting countries' sustainable development policies, fostering cooperation among countries, building alliances with the private sector, and working closely with the civil society, NGOs, women, and other stakeholders.

Measured against the urgent tasks that confront us today, there may not have been many breakthroughs. But neither was the Summit the failure that many portrayed it to be. Just last year, the Commission on Sustainable Development session held in June 2011 (CSD-19) ended without any outcome document. A gloom descended, and many questioned “whether anything could be salvaged from the wreck” and “whether sustainable development was on life support.” The fact that *The Future We Want* has clearly acknowledged the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels—integrating economic, social, and environmental aspects—is reassuring. Rio+20 is not an end, but a beginning.

—Narinder Kakar

Opinion: The United Nations and the “Paranoid Style”

As historian Richard Hofstadter pointed out in his classic 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” U.S. history has featured recurring waves of conspiracy theories. Sometimes they have become prominent; sometimes they abide below the surface. Nineteenth-century versions saw threats that were vague and ill-defined (Illuminati, Masons, Papists, Monarchists); more recent ones have depicted our own leaders as traitors, stooges controlled by foreign powers or international movements. Senator Joe McCarthy claimed to see within the U.S. government “a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man.” The founder of the John Birch Society denounced President Eisenhower as “a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy.” The imagined adversaries tend to be not only evil, but secretive, unappeasable, and sometimes powerful enough to influence minds and bend history to their will. Hofstadter was not necessarily talking about certifiable lunatics, but: “It is the use of paranoid modes of

expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.”

The United Nations has often been subjected to such theories. Fifty years ago, the John Birch Society called it a known instrument of the Soviet Communist conspiracy. The tradition is continuing on a variety of fronts. One recent subject is the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), currently under consideration at the UN. The arms trade is one of the few aspects of international commerce for which there is no international regulation whatsoever. The purpose of the ATT is to try to establish rules for arms exports that will keep guns out of the hands of criminals, insurgents, warlords, and terrorists. In essence, its goal is to get other countries to adopt export controls comparable to those already used by the U.S. Its implementation will be at the hands of individual countries; it does not grant “UN bureaucrats” powers over the United States or any other country. The draft treaty deals only with the international arms trade; it has no impact on domestic gun sales, laws, or rights. In fact, at the insistence of the U.S., the resolution authorizing the negotiations provides for “the exclusive right of States to regulate internal transfers of arms and national ownership, including through constitutional protections on private ownership.” Yet conspiracy theorists, encouraged by the National Rifle Association, claim that President Obama intends to use the ATT to circumvent Congress and the Constitutional amendment process in order to supersede the Second Amendment and eliminate gun-ownership rights. Whatever you think of gun rights in the United States, nothing in this treaty is going to change them.

A growing topic of conspiracy theorists today is Agenda 21. This was an agreement that came out of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 20 years ago. The document—which was not mandatory and was never intended to be—called on countries to take into

consideration the environmental impact of their land, resources, and transportation development policies. It also called for steering development toward already developed areas in order to preserve open space. The idea, overall, was to promote “sustainable development,” which seeks to promote economic growth, quality of life, and environmental protection in combination so as to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, whether the UN recommends it or not. In recent years, however, some groups in the U.S. have denounced efforts at sustainable development as evidence of conspiracy and an unacceptable encroachment on U.S. sovereignty. Even though the Heritage Foundation, a staunchly conservative research institution opposed to sustainable development policies, acknowledges that such policies are not being imposed on anyone by the UN, activists across the land are besieging local planning and zoning boards and accusing them of curtailing property rights, revoking Constitutional freedoms, and herding people into urban “human habitation zones” at the behest of the UN. Evidently, in their view, if the United Nations talked about it and these officials want to do it, then these officials must be operating under orders from the UN. And if the UN is taking such precautions to operate in complete secrecy through local officials, then they must have the most nefarious of intentions.

The Agenda 21 “skeptics” have not been particularly large in number, but they frequently identify with the Tea Party. Some of them have claimed to see UN conspiracies behind a Florida septic tank inspection law; others, in Maine, successfully stopped plans to reduce traffic on Route 1. Other skeptics have been influential by any definition. One was the *Tampa Bay Examiner*, which called smart-growth principles, including plans for light-

rail and road improvements, “cover for an agenda to transfer American sovereignty to various tentacles of the United Nations.” In 2010 Colorado’s GOP gubernatorial candidate, Dan Maes, accused his opponent, who was then the mayor of Denver, of using a bike-sharing program to convert Denver into a “United Nations community.” (The horror!) Agenda 21 even made it into the Republican platform at this year’s national convention. “We strongly reject the UN Agenda 21 as erosive of American sovereignty, and we oppose any form of UN Global Tax.” (I’m still trying to figure out that last reference.) It is noteworthy that the last two examples make only brief and fleeting references to the supposed conspiracy. We can only presume that this is intended to win the electoral support of the conspiracy-minded, who will certainly recognize the reference, without awakening the curiosity of mainstream voters.

A newer target for conspiracy thinking has been the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the relatively obscure UN specialized agency that deals with information and communication technology. In December, the ITU will host the World Conference on International Telecommunications for the purpose of reviewing and updating the one global treaty that deals with international telecommunications. The treaty dates from 1988; every now and then there are changes in the field that need to be incorporated. Yet newspaper editorials have been appearing around the country to the effect that the UN is trying to seize control of the Internet. Well, if the Internet is going to operate smoothly between countries, then those countries need to get together to agree on the rules governing its operation; otherwise, they will be working at cross-purposes. That is all that is going on. The Internet is and will remain a vast decentralized network. Neither the ITU nor the UN as a whole will be taking control of it, or implementing the

agreed rules. As with the ATT, the countries will implement the rules themselves.

Perhaps the most striking recent instance of the paranoid style, however, involves Tom Head, who has been the county judge in Lubbock, Texas since 1999. (In Texas, a “county judge” is actually the chair of a county’s main administrative body, the Commissioners Court, which combines executive, legislative, and some judicial responsibilities.) In August, Judge Head stated that if President Obama is reelected, he will make the Congress and the Constitution irrelevant by turning the sovereignty of the U.S. over to the UN. Since people won’t like that, he continued, the natural consequences will be “civil unrest, civil disobedience, possibly, possibly civil war. ... I’m not talking about riots here and there. I’m talking Lexington, Concord, take up arms, get rid of the dictator. What do you think he is going to do when that happens? He is going to call in UN troops, personnel carriers, tanks and whatever.” The judge has coordinated with the sheriff to arrange for the militia forces necessary to defend Lubbock County from dictatorship, civil war, and UN occupation. We wish them well, and we hope they don’t get too bored waiting.

Conspiracy theories tend to combine bits of reality (there really is a UN, an ITU, and a document called Agenda 21) with sizable doses of fantasy regarding the meaning and consequences of that reality. The connections seem to be as obvious to the conspiracy theorists as they are inexplicable to others. As such they are also resistant to the persuasive power of logic-based arguments. Needless to say, the UN has no capacity to impose its will on the United States, which is a veto-wielding member of the Security Council. Indeed, the UN does not really have a will apart from that of its members. These tales surely tell us more about the times we live in than about

anything the UN (or President Obama) is actually doing or even has the capacity to do. Conspiracy theories give distressed people someone or something to blame their problems on, someone or something more concrete than impersonal and abstract social forces. They often create a sort of constituency for politicians to pander to, as well, regardless of whether the politicians share the belief. So, perhaps the best we can hope for is that these stressful times will pass and take their conspiracies with them.

—Scott C. Monje

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