

Personal Reflections on the NGO Dialogue on Transformation

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Lessons, Opportunities and Way Forward

The phrase “Great Transformation” is intimidating in many different ways, and finding a relevance of this concept in our own life and work can be challenging. However, the faith in doing something transformative or at least sowing seeds for such a transformation can be thrilling and challenging.

I went to Bonn to attend the three day meeting filled with skepticism and not knowing what to expect. Having spent first half of the day in the workshop, I came in contact with issues with totally different perspectives. For example the fact that the impact of climate changes will not only lead to accelerating environmental degradation and species loss, but will jeopardize human rights and socio-economic inequities. This binding theme is critical amongst various sectors like agriculture, climate and energy to come up with a common vision and collective strategy to make this world a just and equal place for everyone. The main impediment for such a step is what we have been working in our own silos with a blurry and narrow vision for quite a long time. The meeting in Bonn was a wake-up call for all of us to start looking at the “transformation” with a fresh vision, and to start hearing and talking to each other more often.

Climate, Energy and Agriculture: Need for a Rainbow Coalition

There is no denying that the climate change is intensifying the risks and vulnerabilities that poor people are currently facing and that this process is placing further stress on already over-stretched coping mechanisms. The livelihoods of many of the members of this group are highly dependent upon climate sensitive sectors for their survival, such as farming, forestry, and fisheries. While these issues are connected in a complicated way, we as CSOs have worked in more or less separated fields and have not been communicating our challenges, issues, and hopes. This sectoral divide needs to be eradicated, and in Bonn we learnt a lot about other sectors and individuals, working on agriculture and energy issues on

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the ground with the same passion, but hardly crossing path with each other. Such multi-sectoral conversations are extremely important, as it gives us a chance to think out of our own comfort zone, and familiarize ourselves with other areas of work.

The Missing Link

While this “Dialogue” was a very good start, there are still some missing links, which are actually critical for our common agenda. There are groups like union members, seeking alternative employment opportunities within a growing green economy, and young people concerned about their future. Even groups like progressive faith based communities are a critical part in solving these challenges. The issues we face due to climate change are not just technical, but also ethical, and having an understanding of our ethical obligation is equally important in this “transformative conversation”. Having worked with unions and faith based groups during Eskom campaign (South Africa coal power project), my personal determination in forming a broad base coalition has immensely increased. We cannot talk about changing the wheels of growth towards a greener future without involving workers and union members, where jobs are at stake. We cannot challenge our consumption based lifestyle without questioning our moral obligation towards vulnerable communities.

A Window of Opportunity: Let's not pull the shade

The “NGO Dialogue on Transformation” has provided a good opportunity to promote a deeper understanding within and amongst various sectors. This conference should not be a onetime occurrence, but rather a fertile ground to sow seeds of common understanding and collective action to raise our voices louder on devastation caused by climate change. This dialogue should have a stronger focus and has to be taken to next level, where we can come up with a cross-sectoral agenda and action plan. We should make this even broader based by inviting other members of society to take part in this conversation.

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A Way Forward: Beginning a new journey

Although the conversation was very enriching and broad, we still managed to reach some conclusive and concrete efforts. One such issue where I became involved in this “Dialogue” was on fossil fuel subsidies. This issue has plagued both the developed and developing countries equally. This is a common thread in developed and developing countries, and we all know that these subsidies don’t support poor communities. The largest subsidies are in developing countries, which spend more than \$400 billion annually shielding their populations from high fuel prices. But oil industry tax breaks and other government measures in developed nations also subsidize fossil fuels, to the tune of \$45 billion to \$75 billion per year. Subsidies are an extremely inefficient means of assisting the poor: only 8% of the \$409 billion spent on fossil-fuel subsidies in 2010 went to the poorest 20% of the population. Without further reform, spending on fossil-fuel consumption subsidies is set to reach \$660 billion in 2020, or 0.7% of global GDP. Phasing-out fossil-fuel consumptions subsidies by 2020 would:

- Slash growth in energy demand by 4.1%
- Reduce growth in oil demand by 3.7mb/d cut growth in CO2 emissions by 1.7 Gt

Many countries have started or planned reforms since early-2010:

- Key driver has been fiscal pressure on government budgets
- G20 & APEC commitments have also underpinned many reform efforts
- Much more remains to be done to realize full extent of benefits

Given the above scenarios we developed a workable action in Bonn to strategize our work on fossil fuel subsidies:

- Create educational material to understand the impacts of fossil fuel subsidies, especially breaking the myth that “subsidies help poor people”
- Create a common understanding amongst climate and agriculture communities on FFS to bridge the gap on this contentious issue. For example there is an apparent belief that FFS help small scale farmers in developing countries, and it’ll hurt poor people disproportionately.

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- Collaborate with German groups in analyzing various apparent and hidden subsidies in at least three countries: India, China and South Africa due to their heavy reliance on coal and other fossil fuels.
- Create a collective platform to monitor fossil fuel subsidies pledges made in G-20 Forum by major developed and emerging economies.
- Monitor subsidies by German corporations and banks for overseas investment in fossil fuel e.g. KfW, Siemens, etc.
- Find ways to work on domestic campaigns in India, China and South Africa to build up political pressure to reform fossil fuel subsidies.

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