

Vienna: ‘all human rights for all’

Pat Walsh, June 2013

(Part 2 of a two part retrospective on the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights)

Despite the reality check of our meetings in Bangkok, Asia-Pacific NGOs arrived in Vienna full of expectations and keen to make our mark in what was the largest ever gathering on human rights. Coming in the heady aftermath of the Cold War and at the dawn of the 21st century, the conference was an historic opportunity to revitalise the UN’s work on human rights, close the yawning gap between rhetoric and reality, mainstream human rights across disparate UN and government structures, and create a positive political environment for the benefit of suffering humanity. The romantics amongst us also felt Vienna’s reputation for music and the finer things of life made it the perfect place to create something inspiring and lasting.

The battle cry adopted by the 4000 NGO representatives present was ‘all human rights for all’. It sounded militant, even naïve given the grim reality of widespread human rights abuse. A fact sheet distributed by the UN Human Rights Centre said it had already received over 125,000 human rights complaints that year, believed to be a fraction of the total and up sharply from the 43,000 in all of 1992, and that at least half the world’s people suffered from some serious violation or deprivation of their basic economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights.

NGOs held a three-day forum before the main conference. Substantial work was done by working groups on issues ranging from the effectiveness of the UN system, the rights of indigenous peoples, women, children and the disabled through to forced evictions, racism and militarisation. The resulting comprehensive report was presented to the main conference drafting committee and circulated as an official conference document.

This achievement was a minor miracle because the forum was beset with organisational problems. NGOs split along North-South lines over several issues including the lack of adequate south representation on the steering committee which was initially dominated by established Western NGOs. The committee’s credibility was further damaged when, inter alia, it accepted a Secretariat ruling on excluding the Dalai Lama, allowed Jimmy Carter to speak despite strong opposition by Latin American NGOs, and tried (in vain) to uphold a Secretariat request to refrain from addressing country specific issues. In the end, the Committee was ousted in a bloodless, but noisy, coup and replaced by a large and representative New Liaison Committee.

I served on the new committee. Indicative of confusion about Australia’s place in the world, however, I represented the Western European and Other Group (known as WEOG) rather than the Asia-Pacific region we had worked so closely with in Bangkok. This time, I am pleased to say, the Pacific had its own representation thanks to the Australian Government which funded five NGOs from the region. John Ondawame, a West Papuan living in exile in Sweden, had the distinction of being disinvited. After being invited by the UN Centre he received a second letter saying the invitation was invalid and had been sent ‘due to an administrative oversight’ (presumably a euphemism for the Indonesian Government).

NGOs are not called activist for nothing. Nearly two kilometres of displays were mounted on the walls of the NGO section of the Austria Centre where the conference was held. Many depicted gross violations from some of the world’s hell-holes such as

Bosnia, Peru, Burma, Tibet, Kurdistan and Northern Ireland. An anti-death penalty group set up an electric chair with a man strapped in. Jose Ramos-Horta and I did our bit for East Timor by placing small stickers calling for the release of Xanana Gusmao on the sides of escalators and the back of toilet doors. Indonesia surprised us with their response. They had a former Timorese guerrilla fighter address the official conference (at a plenary no less and on behalf of a fictitious body called the Justice and Peace Commission), condemn Fretilin as terrorists and claim that 98% of East Timorese loved Indonesia.

After two weeks, the official conference delivered a 26-page Vienna Declaration and Programme for Action. NGOs declared it was 'above our fears but below our hopes'. Gareth Evans, Australia's Foreign Minister, agreed. 'Nothing of importance was lost', he said, 'but nor were dramatic changes made'. India and France, on the other hand, waxed lyrical. The Vienna Declaration constituted a 'human rights revolution' and was 'a triumphant 20th century legacy to the 21st century', they declared. At the very least everyone welcomed it with relief. On the last morning I met an Australian diplomat on the train to the centre. She was wearing dark glasses having been up till 5.30 am with the drafting committee. She said the coffee bar was kept open all night and that when things got too much for the Brazilian chairperson he would call a 10 minute break to calm down.

Some gains were made in Vienna. The universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights was affirmed, with a clear rejection of cultural differences as an excuse for derogation. The rights of women, indigenous peoples, children and the disabled were recognised. The idea of national action plans, proposed by Australia, was supported. The need to devote more UN resources (without new money) to human rights was acknowledged as was the vital role of NGOs and that human rights are the legitimate concern of the international community. These represented indirect rebuffs to the revisionist states Asia-Pacific NGOs had confronted in Bangkok.

But the Declaration was also flawed. It failed to address north-south inequality, debt and the democratisation of development. No undertakings were made to ensure universal ratification of key human rights instruments. The idea of earmarking 0.5% of donor aid budgets for human rights was dropped. Proposals for a High Commissioner for Human Rights and International Criminal Court were referred to the UN General Assembly and International Law Commission respectively. Cynics now have to admit, however, that both ideas have been implemented in the 20 years since Vienna and aid donors are putting more resources into human rights.

As delegates dispersed, including some gutsy NGOs risking returning home to deal with seriously repressive governments, I learned that Austrian TV had prepared a short video of the conference. It was dedicated to the NGOs who had fought the good fight. 'You are the conscience of the world', it said. They were right.

But converting this responsibility into coordinated follow-up to Vienna proved too big a challenge. An NGO Liaison Committee was formed, based on the recommendations of a Beyond Vienna NGO working group, and mandated to coordinate follow-up and encourage regional action. Meetings were held but the centrifugal forces of demands at home, finances and long distance entropy prevailed. That was another good idea whose time had not yet come.

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