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Boiling Point: Multiple Crises and the Democratic Deficit

An Interview with Kumi Naidoo

Kumi Naidoo, the International Executive Director of Greenpeace, has been a leader in human rights, social justice, and environmental activism for over three decades. Allen White of the Tellus Institute interviews Naidoo about how to fix the current democratic deficit and the role of civil society in pushing for system change and system innovation.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos earlier this year, you criticized WEF for being wedded to the concept of “system maintenance” as opposed to necessary “system change.” What inspired that critique?

The current historical moment has been described variously as the perfect storm or the boiling point. Over the last few years, we have seen the convergence of multiple crises: an ongoing poverty crisis, a financial crisis, and a climate crisis, among others. Our response to these crises has been incremental tinkering, at best trying to make a broken system work better. Maintaining and protecting the current system dominates debates when what we need is system redesign, system transformation, and dramatic system innovation.

Those with power in the political and business sectors suffer from deep cognitive dissonance. The facts speak for themselves. We are approaching planetary boundaries even faster than some of the scientific opinion had suggested. In the last decade, we have seen an increase in extreme weather events. According to the Kofi Annan Foundation, we are already losing hundreds of thousands of lives each year from global warming. And if we take the findings of

the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change seriously, then between 60 and 80 percent of known fossil fuel reserves need to stay in the ground if we are to have a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change.

However, our politicians are far removed from this reality. At the Copenhagen climate negotiations in 2009, it was widely said that we needed a fair, ambitious, and legally binding treaty. What we got was a non-binding deal full of loopholes, and politicians keep pushing back the deadlines. In 2009, we said we needed to reduce emissions in absolute terms by 2015. Now, we believe the best achievable treaty in Paris in 2015 is the one we advocated in 2009, which countries would not even start implementing until 2020.

This disconnect was visible at Davos this year. The most prominent theme, purportedly, was structural inequality. However, not one session actually looked at the systemic near-term actions that would reduce such inequality on issues like CEO compensation, the culture of bonuses, the huge gaps between the highest-paid and lowest-paid employees, and tax avoidance. The will was just not there.

What do you see as the underlying driver of these converging crises?

You have to start back at the basics. A core tenet of democracy is balancing wallets with ballots, equalizing the voices of ordinary people with the voices of the powerful. In reality, though, we are witnessing the increasing capture of real power by a handful of very powerful economic interests. I would describe the United States, for instance, as an oligarchy, the best democracy money can buy. There are between three and eight full-time fossil fuel industry lobbyists for every member of Congress, virtually assuring that progressive climate legislation will never pass.

Let's take another example. The multinational bank HSBC engaged in illegal money laundering for drug cartels in Mexico. The consequences? A penalty equivalent to only one month's profits. At the same time, young people, mainly of color and of working-class background, are languishing in prison because of the drug war.

Protests worldwide are increasing, ranging from Greenpeace's work in the Russian Arctic to the Occupy movement, the student movement in Chile, the *indignados* in Spain, and citizen demonstrations in Brazil. Do you see this as a manifestation of the loss of democratic possibilities for societies?

I think we have a very deep democratic deficit. With few exceptions, women are still underrepresented in the highest levels of politics and business. Money pollutes the system. I jokingly say there are three types of people who can run successfully for national political office in the United States: the rich, the very rich, and the obscenely rich. I am using the US as an example because, unlike a country like China, it claims to be a democracy. If you look at the way the US operates, it is "Do as we say, not as we do." People are told "Don't do torture," but then the US practices torture. The list goes on.

Concentration of power among the few leaves citizens cynical about the value of participating in democracy. Many are looking for alternative ways of expressing their outrage with the current system that is not working for them or for future generations. Young people are becoming more involved with climate activism, driven by panic over the failure of the current adult generation to act. The youth of today will be the ones to pay the price of such inaction. Current leaders govern with no sense of intergenerational solidarity.

In my 2010 book *Boiling Point: Can Citizen Action Save the World?*, I argued that people are reaching a figurative and a literal boiling point. Climate change and other pressures are building, and those in power ignore the ferment at their own peril. And then in December 2010, Tunisia happened. Egypt soon followed. Then Occupy. Increasing gaps between those in power and those who are not are undermining democracy, development, and equity. The emergence of such citizen movements are giving voice to the voiceless and are thus helping to create—or restore—true democracy.

Democracy should not be reduced to voting every four or five years. Participating in democracy, especially between elections, is a critical part of giving it meaning. Too many of our political leaders take a victory at the ballot box, however marginal and however corrupt, as a blank check to rule without any meaningful engagement with the people they govern.

What is the role of the formal civil society sector, such as Greenpeace, in such activism versus the more spontaneous citizen protests?

I think this question is the most critical question for organizations like Greenpeace and for all international NGOs. Unless the more conventional NGOs develop a better way to engage with these informal expressions of civil society, then I think that conventional NGOs run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

Firstly, I think formal, organized civil society needs to engage more closely with looser social movements.

Secondly, CSOs must do more to ensure that they are people-centered organizations, working and campaigning more closely with the citizenry. For example, Greenpeace was involved in the Occupy movement from the outset. The media truck in Zuccotti Park in New York was powered by solar panels provided by Greenpeace. But we said to our volunteers and activists, “We don’t want to go there with our big brand and swamp the spontaneity and diversity of the protests. Something new and different is happening. We should be willing to be led by this movement, not seek to lead it.”

In virtually all the Occupy actions around the world, Greenpeace activists were present but very low-profile. They did not wear Greenpeace T-shirts in order to avoid self-promotion and be respectful of the energy coming from multiple sources. And that is the way we need to move forward. We need a respectful relationship between the NGO movement and these looser, networked movements like the Landless People’s movement, the Indigenous People’s movement, the women’s movement, or any other. Unless formal NGOs are able to do that better, they run the risk of irrelevance and illegitimacy.

Do you believe that one asset that the formal civil society organizations offer the more loosely structured social movements is organizational know-how—passion and vibrancy hand in hand with professionalism?

That is an excellent question, and my answer is both yes and no.

Some NGOs provide funding and capacity-building training. However, I hesitate to give an absolute yes because some of the skills visible in the Arab Spring, in Occupy, in the *indignados*,

and in Brazil are far more impressive than what NGOs offer. In all honesty, NGOs do not have a good track record for turning out large numbers of people in mobilization cells.

What is needed is a visible expression of resistance to the current trajectory toward which our political and business leaders are driving us. The most fundamental skill right now is to be able to peacefully mobilize significant public support to give—or force upon—political and business leaders the moral courage they need to make the challenging decisions that they need to make. And in that sense, I actually think we, as formal NGOs, have much to learn from the informal movements about how to act quickly and how avoid the drag and inertia of budgetary debates, bureaucracy, and interminable meetings.

So in that sense, while I agree NGOs have something to offer, it must occur in a respectful, non-arrogant way. And the opposite also is true: NGOs have a lot to learn from citizen activists.

Almost all of the largest NGOs collaborate or partner in some form with business in addition to campaign activities. Is this a good thing?

At Greenpeace, we have an approach of “no permanent allies, no permanent enemies.” It works well as an organizational principle for us, but we don’t recommend that people use it in their personal lives. In practice, this means that we do not take any money from government or business so that we have complete financial independence. That allows us to walk into the boardroom of the company and say, “We support what you’ve done on Issue X, and we are going to encourage other companies in your industry to do that.”

I would not use the word partnership because that is a frequently abused word. The word partnership assumes a certain level of equality in power, and as an NGO leader, you would have to be delusional to think if you are sitting across the table from the CEO of one of the Fortune 500 companies, you are equally powerful as the person you are facing.

However, the difficulty for an organization like Greenpeace is that we see absolutely no way to achieve a climate solution in the time frame we face without urgent action on the part of the business community. I would say 10 percent of business leaders get it. They know we have to make big changes. They want to do so but are frustrated at the absence of political will and a

clear regulatory direction, such as putting a price on carbon. At the other extreme, about 10 percent, mainly in the fossil fuel industry, are spending huge amounts of money to advocate climate denialism.

In the middle, you have about 80 percent who want to do the right thing, whether for PR or genuinely altruistic reasons, but who believe we can manage the climate problem with incremental, adaptive measures and tweaks to their business models. They refuse to admit that the business model itself is the problem.

You might be surprised to hear that I do have some sympathy for the dilemma facing business leaders. Behaving responsibly in the face of inadequate regulation and the tyranny of quarterly returns is no small challenge.

So the difficulty of NGO engagement with business is that good activism requires you to start with the reality you face. And the reality is that business is the dominant force in society. Many of our governments are in the pockets of big business. And it is not going to change any time soon. I believe that we do have to deal with this reality. We have to look at whether there are points of leverage to move business in a positive direction. Unfortunately, we may inadvertently provide business with the effective language to obstruct change and continue treating symptoms of the problem rather than the disease.

In the future, if business is not able to show greater ambition and urgency, it will be really difficult for organizations like Greenpeace to continue to engage with them in the way that we are now. We are still giving companies the benefit of the doubt that their behavior can change. But if I look at investment of time and energy in trying to engage the business community, I would say, on balance, the return has been negative.

As you well know being from South Africa, divestment was a major issue in the anti-apartheid movement. Is divestment a useful instrument for spurring the move toward green fuels, green energy and, ultimately, climate stability?

Yes. We have worked with Bill McKibben of 350.org from the early days, including rallies in London and Amsterdam. This campaign, on its own, will not deliver the solution that we need.

But the beauty of it is the capacity to energize broader climate action, especially amongst a constituency of people who tend to be very informed and concerned: youth.

There are now 400 campuses in the US alone that have divestment groups. This is a potentially powerful contribution to the climate struggle because it signals to investors in oil, coal, and gas that they may face a future of massive stranded assets leading to serious financial losses. Slowly, investors are beginning to look at climate as a financial risk. The divestment campaign has real potential to bring in a new constituency of heretofore silent parties—investors—to exercise substantial pressure on the fossil fuel industry. Already, some US foundations have committed to divestment. Hopefully, many more, especially institutional investors, will soon follow.

What is your central, takeaway message to the scholars, activists, and concerned citizens who will be reading the transcript of this interview?

My message to everyone reading this, from CEOs of big companies to policymakers and concerned citizens, is this: get out of your boardrooms, step down from your ivory towers, find the antidote to apathy, and join us. The environmental struggle is about the future of generations to come. The time for contemplation and reflection is gone, and for the environmental movement to reach critical mass, all sectors of society need to get involved, in big and small ways. This struggle is about ensuring that our children and children's children will be able to thrive and succeed on this planet.

Kumi, we are very grateful for your time. Your wisdom and leadership in advancing global justice are truly exemplary.

About the Interviewee



Kumi Naidoo is a South African human rights activist and the International Executive Director of the international environmental group Greenpeace, the first African to head the organization. After battling apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s through the Helping Hands Youth Organisation, Naidoo led global campaigns to end poverty and protect human rights. He has served as the Secretary-General of both the Global Call to Action Against Poverty and Civicus, an international alliance for citizen participation. Recently, he has led the Global Call for Climate Action, which has organized mass demonstrations around climate negotiations and has brought together environmental, aid, religious, and human rights groups; labor unions; scientists; and many others.

About the Publication

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