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The poor got a voice

By Devaki Jain

The best thing that happened to the World Summit on Sustainable Development was that it was held in South Africa. Held at any other place — especially New York or even those glorious places for conferences, Kuala Lumpur or Delhi — it would have been an event without a face. In these times of the staleness of global efforts and the disintegration of traditional "unities", it could only be South Africa, which continues to celebrate its re-birth, its self-discovery and jubilation accompanied by the restlessness of post liberation that could make it a people's event, people in the sense of South African people. They gave it the face, focused it on conflict, not only north and south — global apartheid to use the words of the South African President, Thabo Mbeki — but within the nation, between spaces, methods, State and people.

They had, as usual, made it into their national event — more like a world cup football event would be programmed, say in Brazil. The television networks, the hoardings, even the merchandising of goods and services were branded, but also spiced with the pro-poor, pro-basic facilities. South Africa stole the show and wrapped the uptight conventionists in a scarf of vitality and celebration.

So what happened at the Summit? A clear link between poverty, inequality and planet safety was established; the poor were not demonised but defended as less polluting than the rich. Lifestyle was re-invoked to sharpen the contrast between the rich and the poor in sanitation and water. The poor were using toilets, which were pits of flies and disease, and drinking water dripping from a dirty drain. These images were projected on television and newspapers.

Children were up front — Mr. Mbeki embracing a young boy as he inaugurated the summit, Nelson Mandela helping a child wash his hands after using the toilet and like Jesus then drying the child's hands with a towel.

In the city, expectations were high. "I am praying. I am asking God to make the summit do its job for us to have water, health. All these people must be blessed by God to agree," says Lily Mabena, a shop assistant at a popular super market in Pretoria. "I want to send a request to the leaders. How to do it?" I look helpless. "Write it, and I will give it to one of the officials," I say. She writes: "I am Lily Mabena. Please, we are tired of working 45 hours per week. It's too much for a woman. We are demanding 40 hours per week. I work at Checkers Brooklyn. I need a Saturday break. Casuals can replace us. Let them get jobs. Every house can get food."

Ellen, my woman driver of a U.N. car, says, "But they are saying this sugar is bad? So I should not buy it? But how will I know which is the bad sugar." She like all of us saw the TV story, where an OXFAM person is pouring buckets of sugar on a map of Africa to

demonstrate how subsidised sugar from the EU is displacing the sugar-producing farmers of Mozambique and other countries.

To a suggestion from the group — at a session at the NGO meet on gender and international trade called 'Unmasking the WTO' — that African women could boycott the EU sugar using the technique that had been used by countries other than South Africa in support of the anti-apartheid struggle, a young woman says, "My mother is not educated and lives in the rural areas and does not know WTO. How to explain to her what WTO is doing so she practices the boycott?" The macro issues are so far away from the illiterate rural poor woman. A significant question for mass mobilisation.

"We are in a post-war situation in South Africa but we don't recognise it. It explains everything — the breakdown of codes of conduct, the increase of rapes, the turbulence, the passionate aspirations of the liberated, the unsettledness all round," says Pregs Govender, an African National Congress MP, who has just resigned on the issues of defence expenditure and HIV/AIDS. "The rich are living it up in Sandton — consuming away — while the poor are sleeping on mats, eating porridge. This is all talk. Why is South Africa indulging in pompous events, while the country is suffering from such severe problems — retrenchment, unemployment, AIDS," say the newspapers.

Remember the rhythmic slow running of the people of Soweto with a deep baritone chant during the dark days of apartheid? Awesome containment of anger, soldiers with only voice and solidarity to express powers? Those images returned as the socialist movement, the militant left people's movement moved from Alexandria, notorious for deprivation and crime, into Sandton. "Africa is not for sale" is printed on the t-shirts of the marchers, who see this as one more coup for the WTO. A different stroke from the more centrist alliance of the ANC and the Conference of South African Trade Union (COSATU), and the Global Forum, a worldwide NGO coalition, also led by the slow-dancing, singing South African women. These marches offered an avenue for the frustrated non-South African NGOs to express dissent. The point is what if these currents, provided by South Africa, still fresh from the struggle were not there? It would have been business as usual — the "running in place" activities of the officials, such as those from U.N. agencies trying to establish their legitimacy, the NGOs and academics giving it some colour — but an incestuous affair.

An adolescent girl — who represented children in the first conference at Rio and spoke there of her hopes that the leaders would remember that their commitment could save an earth for her generation to enjoy — is interviewed on the SABC. After these years and seeing the gathering and issues here, what is your message, they ask her? "Personal responsibility. Small local groups to practice all the advice that we preach." She does not see any useful outcomes coming out of the large high-level conferences. They have not generated the change she had hoped Rio would. The bottom line for all of us on sustainable development.