

## In Brief

# Young EcoMinds show strong undercurrents of opinion



Australian and New Zealand delegates were made more aware of the difficulties facing the Asia-Pacific region. Left to right: Kim Markwell (Aus), Leyla Acaroglu (Aus), Soriya Em, Alison Hamilton (Aus), Carl Cheney, Kristy Swan (Aus), and Anne Molineux. Marilyn Head

Delegates to a United Nations Youth Forum in the Philippines, held during November, have surprised organisers with fervent and sometimes unexpected views of their nations' place in the emerging sustainable practice challenge.

Part of a global partnership between international company Bayer and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), *EcoMinds* brought together young scientists and environmentalists from nine countries in the Asia-Pacific region to discuss pathways to achieving the seventh UN World Millennium Development Goal: sustainable development.

One of the first actions by Australian youth representatives, endorsed by their colleagues from New Zealand, was a symbolic signing of the Kyoto Protocol on behalf of Australian youth; a reflection of the urgency felt for joint action and cooperation on climate change.

Although this gesture had the approval of the organisers (Bayer's long-term voluntary commitment to the Kyoto Protocol has apparently resulted in the company exceeding the recommended reduction in emission levels, while UNEP's director Klaus Toepfer sees the Protocol as a critical international instrument for addressing global warming), it was not something that resonated strongly with Asian delegates.

General confusion about which countries had agreed to the Protocol, or why some were exempted, as well as ambiva-

lence about the public nature of the protest isolated the gesture rather than making it unanimous, underlining quite stark differences in perspective between Asia and Australasia.

Foremost was the inevitable contrast between the type and scale of the environmental problems that developing Asian countries face – overpopulation, poverty, foreign debt, preventable disease, access to affordable water, power and transport and sustainable waste management – compared with those Australasia faces.

The Chinese delegates, for example, were disturbed by the frequent portrayal of China as the 'great polluter', in spite of the extraordinary steps they say their country has taken to reduce overpopulation, arguably the world's biggest environmental threat.

'We have made a great sacrifice,' said one delegate. 'We live without brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts, but our sacrifice is unacknowledged.'

Another, commenting on the toxic waste from North America and Europe that China, like many developing nations, contends with, asked, 'How can we be expected to find solutions to these problems when countries with far greater resources are not behaving responsibly?'

In a similar vein, both the charismatic US environmentalist Jeffrey Sachs, who spoke to the forum by video link, and Dr Cielito Habito, former Chairman of the

UN Commission on Sustainable Development, gave compelling accounts of how the crippling foreign debt that most developing countries face contributes to global economic instability and environmental degradation. Nine-tenths of the Philippines' income goes towards servicing foreign debt, according to Dr Habito.

Whilst Australia and New Zealand are clearly small players in terms of population and world finance, *EcoMinds* highlighted areas where their influence looms large. Australia's significant deposits and export of coal and uranium, which inevitably implicate it in global climate change, was a matter of acute concern.

Equally, New Zealand delegates questioned whether the meat, dairy and forestry produce, which constitutes 60 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product, was sustainable.

'In spite of our clean green image, New Zealand has the world's fourth largest "ecological footprint"', said law student Anne Molineux.

Australia's is not much better, mainly because of the resource-intensive nature of animal agriculture, and the high energy costs of exporting to distant markets.

There was a surprising unanimity among delegates' commitment to decentralised renewable energy technologies and organic farming methods. Organisers, however, were surprised at the concern over 'technology for technology's sake', and the total rejection of genetic engineering and nuclear energy, unexpected in such a 'scientifically savvy' group.

Delegates saw science and technology as a way of understanding and working with nature, rather than using it to support inherently inequitable and unsustainable production.

Despite socio-economic differences, there were obvious opportunities for Australia and New Zealand to contribute expertise, particularly in family planning, small geothermal and wind energy technology, waste management, biosecurity, and the protection of indigenous and threatened species.

As New Zealand delegate Soriya Em said, 'We can't pretend inequality doesn't exist. We need to be modelling our ecosystems and using science and technology to design the future we want.'

● Marilyn Head

More information  
*EcoMinds* background: [www.eco-minds.com](http://www.eco-minds.com)