

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE PARALLEL AND SIDE EVENTS
Dr. Suzanne Hanchett, PAC Partner, March 25, 2018

While attending 23 of the hundreds of Side- and Parallel-Events held during the two week meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women, I took notes that were as detailed as possible. These notes are simply a record of what was said. Writing down these statements does not mean that I agree with everything that people said. I wanted the notes to reflect proceedings as clearly as possible, so that readers could know how it felt to be in those rooms.

My own wish to understand what approaches do or do not work for rural women's social development influenced my selection of panels. I am very interested in socially marginalized people and their struggles to improve their lot, so I emphasized the sessions on indigenous people too. I did not follow other threads: child marriage or domestic violence, for example.

Of course, just *saying* that an organization or approach is working does not mean that it *is* working. The stakes are high at this type of meeting. NGOs and others need to look as good as they can. Their reputations are affected by these presentations. And in the fundraising business, reputation is very important.

Certain common themes were repeated in many of these sessions. Rural women's need to learn about their legal rights was one. The importance of girls' and women's education/training and skill development was stressed over and over again. Speakers talked about organizational strategies. Specific governments' actions/inaction relative to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) was another one.

Ominous trends, such as state-backed takeovers of land by investors, were mentioned by several speakers. These trends are related to the spread of agribusiness and monocropping, which challenge (even may criminalize) local people's use of their own seeds, mining interests and other large-scale businesses with environmental impacts. Small-holder women and their leaders were trying to find a way to express their alarm about these trends at this meeting. Meanwhile, the UN is trying to bring in the "private sector," to make it part of the solution to women's rights and other international labor problems.

Women in exile, whose lives were in danger, expressed hope that "the international community" would come to the aid of human rights defenders. Some of the people who spoke at this meeting – people who have not left -- have had their lives threatened by agents of their own governments.

My notes cover some of the questions asked by audience members. Not all of these questions were answered. At the March 16 meetings in support of agricultural cooperatives, for example, one person pointed out that in her African country cooperatives are not working properly. This question deserves attention. Just saying that they work does not mean they work exactly the same, or exactly as well, under all conditions.

Another unanswered question was asked at the March 23 panel hosted by the International Women's Anthropology Conference. It concerned the long-term viability of NGOs. Many NGO leaders, the questioner said, are themselves economically insecure. She sought ideas about how grassroots groups, or coalitions, can achieve the financial stability they need to keep up their work. There was not enough time in the panel to give this question the time it deserves.

There is a lot to think about in these notes. I hope that they are read and shared.