

Massoumeh Ebtekar, Iran's first female vice-president and an advocate of cleaner production, was named by UNEP as a 2006 Champion of the Earth. The award is given annually to seven outstanding environmental leaders who have significantly influenced the protection and sustainable management of the planet's environment.

Each issue of Our Planet features the views of one of UNEP's Champions. For more information on the UNEP Champions of the Earth award see <http://www.unep.org/champions/>.



market messengers

by Massoumeh Ebtekar

In our globalizing world, economic, social and — above all — political policies determine the fate of our environment. Such issues as global climate, biodiversity, the ozone layer, and pollution have arisen as a result of international decision making processes, as well as local policies.

Much has been done, but what has been achieved is much less than what is needed and has been promised. A seemingly endless string of reports on global indices demonstrate an ongoing and, at times, alarming trend of unsustainability. People ask whether global leaders are prepared to mend their ways and bring about serious change in their policies and actions, affecting their lifestyles, attitudes and behaviours — and those of their nations.

A Persian proverb says: "Someone was sitting on the end of a branch while cutting the branch's stem!". We are living on the blessings of nature. The wealth of biodiversity and its services are life support systems upon which we rely. But we have used every opportunity to damage these treasures under the pretext of want or need. Our existence depends on nature, yet we take every action to undermine it.

The globalization process has irreversibly transformed the social, political and economic landscape of each continent, bringing in its train all its merits, shortcomings and challenges. The printed and audio-visual media, and the internet, are central themes. Democratization brings opportunities for freedom of expression, vital for the social, political and economic development of societies — yet, in practice, this may transgress moral and ethical norms and fall prey to the materialistic aspirations of the market.

Never before have we been able so profoundly to shape not just local attitudes but to reach into the homes of billions: MTV alone claims to attract 700 million viewers daily. Interconnected information highways facilitate exchange of news, information and knowledge between citizens and societies — though the digital divide makes developing nations subordinate, with less access and virtually no control.

More importantly, the ubiquitous media and their enchanting performers are instrumental in shaping the mentality of societies, and thus the global community. Ominously, their policies are guided and shaped not by cultural and social norms but by market values and business preferences. No institution of the learned and wise can begin to estimate the harm this is doing daily to human society.

Their products are blatantly consumerist and materialist. In the mega-industry of commercial cinema everything is overshadowed by the dazzling Hollywood silver screen. Local attempts to create high-quality alternative images have emerged, but market-oriented policies still dominate culture. The root causes of insecurity and restlessness may lie in our cultural approach and in how we deal with peoples' hearts and minds.

Alarming rates of cinema violence, explicit scenes and allusions, the irresponsible behaviour they portray — and the agitated messages of restlessness emanating from pop culture — shape the thoughts and behaviour of future generations. Democratization is expressed in many societies only as a variant of social freedom, while political freedoms are repressed. The western model of democracy is marked more definitively by this kind of freedom of expression than by genuine participatory political freedoms.

What percentage of messages in the film industry encourage environmental protection? What percentage encourage families to take an unwavering interest in the intellectual and moral upbringing of children? What percentage encourage peace making, conflict resolution, understanding and altruism? Do we get a sense of collective understanding — or a sense of insatiable personal lust and desire — from the messages coming from the television and big screen? According to all research, this is the most effective and profound means of communication ever devised. As with the natural environment, our tendency runs towards self-destruction.

It is naïve to expect change in unsustainable trends in the global community without change in cultural and educational policies. Public opinion and general knowledge on the importance of environmental protection cannot be promoted by governments while the media market their irresponsibly attractive products instigating violence, hatred and disrespect for nature.



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The globalization process has awakened many to the stark realities of our age. Environmental degradation, recurring armed conflict and war, and the excesses of consumerist societies cannot subsist if humanity is to survive. Dramatic changes in policy and practice have been urged in international documents produced by a broad consensus. Some world leaders agree: others do not. Some agree, but claim they do not possess the resources. Others agree, but do not possess the will. And yet another set of leaders do not have the democratic processes which can make such transformations possible.

Among world leaders in disagreement are those who stubbornly cling to the belief they are living on an isolated island of stability. They dismiss the idea that global warming, biodiversity loss, contamination by persistent organic pollutants, and ozone destruction are undermining the future of 'their' society. Their narrow vision completely misses the seriousness of our circumstances.

International decision making systems should rely on the collective rationale — stemming from the collective consciousness which, in theory, should decide for the good, if given proper information and freedom from outside pressure. Yet, in reality, the driving power lies in the hand of the market, the media and the military. Greed — not the logic or rationalism that we profess — guides our decisions and our actions. Greed and selfishness have taken the reins of global decision making.

UNEP and relevant international, regional and local NGOs should launch an imperative global campaign for media leaders and members to join, to change course, to direct their affairs on the basis of cultural and ethical values and to promote responsible behaviour and love for nature and human kind as their main message.

This will require extensive effort and changes in media and educational policies. It is not possible to deify freedom of expression and yet protect the rights of children and youth. The young are the easiest target for opportunists aiming to market their products and transform their customers' thoughts and behaviour — tailor-fitting them for their commodities but making them unfit for the role of responsible, psychologically and intellectually balanced, environmentally friendly global citizens who cherish life and the dignity of fellow humans and are prepared to see beyond their egos and selfishness into the future, towards eternity.

As a religious democracy, The Islamic Republic of Iran sees religion as a means of mobilizing people to take responsible environmental action. The reform government of President Mohammad Khatami embarked on a cultural campaign to transform attitudes on environmental issues. Hundreds of NGOs were grown. The film industry responded to a biannual international Green Film Festival, with hundreds of films of all kinds. Most interestingly of all, 1,100 sites in more than 500 cities and towns were part of a nationwide environment festival in 2005, which brought a wave of cultural change: everyone began speaking and thinking about and for the environment.

We are all champions of the earth if we rein in our excesses and collectively work to promote a culture of responsibility and accountability — one of ethical and moral respect for fellow-humans, nature and life. This ethic may be found in religious teachings or in the treasures of civilizations, or discovered in the pure hearts and minds of youth where conscience, a divine spirit and an urge for perfection still lives. We may discover these treasures in dialogue and understanding. This may be our only recourse — the only option left. 