

Reflections on PP21 process, and how to move on

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Re-reading Muto Ichiyo's Keynote Speech "For an Alliance of Hope", which he delivered at the 1989 PP21 Gathering in Japan, I found every word touch my heart. The speech, as Muto explained, was a collective effort of the members of the preparatory committee in 1988-89. How relevant the analysis is for our understanding of the situation we are in today, because nothing much has changed in the capitalist logic of destruction and violence in the last 32 years. Muto's keynote speech started by referring to Minamata as a place in the world which symbolizes to all of us development at its most murderous. He named three disasters – Minamata, Bhopal and Chernobyl – as benchmarks of our time. Yesterday, at the SSFS8 Forum, Fukushima was the focus of discussion. How many more names should be added to this list of "benchmarks of our time"? The nature of the deadly damages that humanity faces now, 32 years after the 1989 PP21 Gathering, has not changed; only that the deadly damages have so much extended and intensified. But, amidst these unbearable situations suffered by more and more people in the world today, the call is to build an Alliance of Hope. Muto referred to a term, *Janakashaba* – a world that does not stand like this. "Another world is possible", the slogan of the World Social Forum which came a decade later, resonates in the same spirit. Muto talked of this other, exciting world: "there can be a quantum leap, a break, from what we are, what we have, what we are resigned to accept as our fate". This is the subjective dimension, in spite of, or because of, the objective unbearable circumstances. That is what the PP21 is about: what can be done? The hope can only lie in a refusal to resign to accepting our fate, and to change "what we are". Is this quantum leap possible? No, and Yes. No, if we are resigned to the status quo. Yes, but that demands a spirit of what is often referred to as a revolutionary spirit, and that demands resilience and resistance by the people organized in communities, managing their commons and their livelihood.

The many gatherings in 1989, and subsequently in 1992 and 1996, are part of these efforts. It is not enough to say how bad, greedy, criminal and inhuman the hegemonic elites in political, economic, social or cultural arenas are, and how, while amassing obscene wealth and power, intensifying destruction and violence, they are taking the entire human species and human civilizations to leap from a cliff to the abyss of annihilation and oblivion, including themselves! The Minamata Declaration of 1989 reiterates the spirit that Muto outlined in his keynote speech, calling for a new internationalism and a democracy retrieved by the people. The Rajchadamnoen Pledge of 1992, celebrating the people's moral courage and reassertion

of dignity, called for south-south and south-north alliance building, as well as intercultural alliance building. The Sagarmatha Declaration of 1996, apart from going along with the previous pledges for social and economic justice, placed emphasis on biodiversity, life-centred values of compassion, caring, nurturing and sharing, as well as the regeneration of local production and economies based on indigenous and traditional knowledge. The three declarations were collective efforts to articulate the analyses and aspirations of hundreds of organizations and tens of thousands of people that participated in the gatherings. I remember, as one of the members of the drafting committee of the Sagarmatha Declaration, how we went through 19 drafts through email communication in the three months after the Kathmandu gathering, consulting the many participating groups, so that the Declaration could articulate different focus but also consensus.

After 1996, when networking had covered all East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, the emphasis fell on promoting a People's Charter – going beyond PP21 as a space where primarily NGOs and intellectuals speak, to a space where grassroots communities and various movements have their experiences crystallized and cross-fertilized. For this process, NGOs and intellectuals have a necessary role to play, as mediators facilitating the alliances in the crossing of language, national, sectoral and other borders. It is the people's plan, it is the people's process, as Muto already stressed in his 1989 keynote speech: for *peopleness*, for *inter-people autonomy*, for *inter-movement autonomy*, “an arena and network where people's movements from different concerns and backgrounds meet and recognize each other's peopleness, and enter into a dynamic process of interaction.”

I think the three declarations embody the spirit of hope, and orient us in building an alliance of hope. There is certainly a need to look at the strategies of the PP21 collective after 1996, especially with the formal announcement of an end to Phase One, and a beginning of Phase Two, in 2002. This deserves a serious reflection by everyone involved in the last 32 years in the PP21 process. Muto and I had a long chat in Hainan Island, discussing how Phase Two could take off. While I began to be engaged in (and maybe too preoccupied with) the rural reconstruction movement in China with the establishment of the James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute (JYRRI) in 2003, we had modest attempts to connect the Chinese grassroots peasants communities with people from outside. Vinod Raina and MP Parameswaran were invited to JYRRI to introduce the experience of the People's Science Movement in India, and Muto came to JYRRI with a dozen Japanese scholars and activists in 2007 to exchange with the Chinese villagers. Mutual exchange of scholars to stay for over a year between movements of China and Brazil was also undertaken. People to people exchanges, with us being facilitators. These were small scale exchanges, as we did not seek any funding from governments or corporations in an attempt to go for self-reliance and self-

sufficiency. These then necessarily are constrained.

In retrospect, I would mention one point where I think we could have done better. As the idea was for the PP21 process to merge into the World Social Forum (WSF) process that started in 2001, the momentum of physical convergences for intra-Asia exchanges gradually dissipated. Apart from the initial years when there was funding for Asian groups to attend the WSF, and apart from the 4th WSF in Mumbai in 2004, and the polycentric WSF in Karachi in 2006, there was less and less participation from Asia in the WSF process. A self-financed delegation from China had attended almost all WSFs, and organized at least one panel each time to present issues on China. Yet Asian faces were difficult to spot in these large-scale WSF gatherings.

I am grateful to ACFOD for initiating PP21 online meetings in the last few months, and we now have a regular PP21 online meeting on the 26th of each month, open to anyone from Asia, and beyond, who cares to participate. There is also a PP21 website for archiving PP21 materials, and for promoting discussions. As a Mexican WSF is planned for May 2022, there is now an effort to mobilize Asian groups and networks to participate in the Mexican WSF, whether physically or online. This will be the focus of discussion at the July 26 PP21 online meeting. The process leading up to May 2022 would be an opportunity for intra-Asia dialogues and exchanges. It could be, in a real sense, the unfolding of Phase Two of the PP21 Process.

PP21 website: <https://pp21alliance478022979.wordpress.com/>

Registration link for PP21 online meetings:

https://lingnan.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_s5M8MnF1S3WPbOY98mAJsg