

Peace Keeper

IF WE ARE TO EMBRACE AFRICA'S RENEWED VISION OF GROWTH, THEN LEADERSHIP MUST COME FROM THE DEVELOPING WORLD, SAYS GREENPEACE INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR KUMI NAIDOO

BY KERRY DIMMER

Kumi Naidoo has been fighting for the greater good for most of his life. He has embraced Mahatma Gandhi's concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) throughout his struggles.

As a young man he fought Apartheid in his homeland, determined to see SA's first democratic elections; he's acted as convener of the National Men's March against Violence on Women and Children and has been the secretary-general of the World Alliance for Citizen Participation; and he fought for good as the founding chair for the Global Call to Action against Poverty and as a board member of the Association for Women's Rights in Development.

Naidoo has also been active with the UN's Civil Society Relations organisation, and has chaired the Global Campaign for Climate Action (GCCA). With his veins now pumping green blood, Naidoo's energy and passionate vision is focused on climate change. This is, he believes, not just the biggest threat to the future of Africa but for all the poverty-stricken regions of our world.

'To avoid catastrophic climate change,' he says, 'governments must begin to invest in renewable energy and a clean future. The next frontier will require people to understand the issue of climate change and to become environmental activists both in their homes and the streets. Coal and nuclear energy are not needed and it is up to the people of SA to deliver this message to the government.'

As the most effective agents of change are governments and politicians, it is a pity that their desire for votes during election cycles seems to guide them, rather than policies that may result in long-term change and future investment. This is a pattern Greenpeace hopes to change by promoting the education of individuals to modify their own behaviour. And where better to start than with the youth of the country?

'Governments, perhaps together with NGOs, need to develop tools educators can use to get the message across that climate change is the greatest challenge of our time,' says Naidoo. 'It would also be helpful to integrate climate change into other areas of instruction so that there is a holistic approach to understanding how this threat affects almost every facet of our lives.'

He has many ideas about how this can be incorporated into school syllabuses: 'History classes could include lessons about wars fought over resource scarcity caused by climate change. Case in point is the tragic conflict we see in Darfur. Health classes can focus on the effects of nuclear radiation or coal mining, science studies can look at renewable power, business classes can calculate the cost to industry of polluted rivers ... the list is endless.'

The creativity of working around an education curriculum that does not include environmental studies specifically is typical of both Naidoo's and Greenpeace's approach.

The strength of the organisation lies in its ability to talk to a global audience through creative media strategies and actions that have been courageous, unique and sometimes even funny. 'However, we do not organise actions to draw random attention but rather to place a spotlight on an environmental crime that might otherwise go unnoticed.'

The first step is to engage corporations and governments in the hope that there will be a commitment to address an environmental issue. It's also not just a matter of throwing money at a problem, it's about having the will to change and if that's not there, then Greenpeace is quite adept at calling on civil society to help push its cause. 'Often it takes all of our areas of strength and expertise for us to score a huge victory.'

Having Naidoo at the helm of Greenpeace is strategic as Greenpeace International intends placing more of its resources in the Southern Hemisphere.

'This is something of a new frontier when it comes to international organisations that tend to be based in rich parts of the world and composed of people who come from there,' Naidoo elaborates. 'Given the growing power, the political importance and – most important in my mind – the great potential of this area, I am dedicated to helping increase the space for those from the global and political south, in international discourse.'

In ticking his personal achievement boxes, Naidoo returns to the climate change issue. 'During my tenure, I want to lead the GCCA and the Greenpeace delegations at the UN climate talks in Durban in November, when governments from around the world finally agree to sign a binding treaty laying out a fair and balanced programme for curbing climate emissions and stopping catastrophic climate change.'

More importantly, Naidoo wants to be at the forefront of motivating civil society in the struggle against climate change. 'Although our individual causes may look different at first glance – education, women's rights, access to medicines and so on – I believe they are all related because in the end what we are all asking for is a better distribution of wealth, natural resources, jobs and medicine.'

'By working together we can become stronger, we can grow smarter and we can be more efficient. If someone tells me we can't curb catastrophic climate change because governments and corporations are happy with the status quo, I know from personal experience that this need not be the case.'

'I know that if honest men and women around the world are mobilised in this campaign, then civil society can change the way those in power behave. Perhaps it takes an African to know that anything is possible.' 🌍