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Laura Kelly

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE UNCED PROCESS: THE POTENTIAL FOR ENHANCED COOPERATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT*

Abstract

The comparative advantage of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the fields of environment and development is increasingly being acknowledged by the international community. The 1992 UNCED offers a unique opportunity for exploring the ways NGO complementarity can assist in tackling the problems of moving toward more sustainable lifestyles. This paper looks at how NGOs can contribute to the debate on sustainable development, what they can actually do to coordinate ways of achieving greater sustainability, and the potential for this within the UNCED process.

Introduction

The forthcoming United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) is aiming to build on the public prominence afforded to environmental issues, largely through the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and secure a more sustainable form of development in both industrialized and developing countries (Porritt 1991, Tapper 1991).¹ The issues involved in attaining such objectives are complex and multi-sectoral in their nature. Environmental degradation operates at the global, regional, national and local levels, requiring international coordination of national policies and practices to effectively address the problem. For such an approach to have even the slightest chance of success it needs the commitment and participation of all those who "use" the environment, in effect the whole of humankind. This requires overcoming North-South polarization of views and providing a mechanism to facilitate the public taking an active part in the decision making process.

Non-governmental organisations have been recognised by many groups (Koh 1991, Sand 1990), including the UNCED secretariat (UNCED 1990b), as important actors in attaining sustainable development goals. This role is acknowledged by their involvement in the negotiating process for the Earth Summit, which was formalised at the second session of the preparatory meetings in Geneva. The International Facilitating Committee of the Independent Sectors (IFC) and the International NGO

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Steering Committee have also been established to coordinate and strengthen NGO activities for the Rio conference.

This paper seeks to examine what, and how, NGOs can contribute to achieving sustainable development goals, and the implications of this for their participation in the UNCED process.

I. Moving toward sustainability

Environmental degradation is largely recognised as a product of our patterns of economic development (Strong 1991a), and underdevelopment. It cannot be attributed to specific "faults" resulting from the development models pursued, rather it is an integrated process involving poverty, inequitable distribution of wealth, wasteful lifestyles and population growth (Wheeler 1990). However, deriving a new social paradigm that reconciles human choice, equity and community ethics with the natural world and the rights of future generations, is a difficult and contentious step to make (Engel 1990). Adapting to such changes in thinking, in both North and South, is unlikely to come easily. At the public level, transformations of human activity to help protect the environment are necessary, whether imposed legally or sought voluntarily (WCED 1987). Unfortunately, much of the preparatory debate for the Earth Summit, involving representatives of governments, industry and international bodies continues to reaffirm the conventional wisdom on conservation and development (Korten 1991).

The UNCED process offers a unique opportunity to set a new agenda for governments, international organisations and NGO's to move towards overcoming these barriers. However, the negotiators are faced with a formidable task if they are to produce global accords that do not simply reaffirm the conventional conflict between conservation and development (Korten 1991), but that promote truly sustainable development in the 21st century. Central to this process, both within the UNCED negotiations and beyond are: increasing international awareness; enhancing the flow of information for decision making; setting realistic standards and action plans to protect the environment; and promoting cooperation to allow all nations access to the means to implement any UNCED accords (UNCED 1990b). NGOs can play a vital role in achieving these objectives, drawing on their strengths in advocacy, and capacities for innovation, model building and experimentation (Annis 1990).

II. NGO advocated initiatives for sustainability

Accepting a broad-based definition of sustainability; that development should meet human needs, allow continued economic growth and preserve the environment (Redclift 1991), necessitates a series of changes to enable the translation of UNCED's objectives into operational reality. NGOs have important roles to play in contributing to these changes.

Independent institutions have built-up considerable experience and knowledge in the areas of environment and development (Koh 1991). As much NGO research has

been shaped by local level needs (Muntemba 1989), it represents a particularly valuable resource for governments and international bodies seeking to understand and implement sustainable development initiatives.

As was mentioned in the beginning of this article NGOs have also been instrumental in bringing environmental issues to the centre of the political agenda (Koh 1991). Advocacy activities of groups, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, have raised both public and political awareness of the inequities in today's world, and the changes required for greater sustainability.

The first of these is a just international economic system (ICVA 1991). This requires major world trade reform (ELCI 1991), including the reduction of protectionism and improved terms of trade for raw materials (Averous 1991, Long 1991). However, these measures need to be tempered by the concerns of environmental conservation. For example, national trade measures to preserve ecosystems or species should be allowed, as in the case of the US ban on importing tuna caught by drift net fishing (Vidal 1991).² This, in conjunction with the implementation of a pricing system that reflects the true scarcity of natural resources, would encourage exporting nations to manage their natural resources for long-term sustainability (Wheeler 1991).

In direct contrast to this, however, the current Uruguay round of the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) is advocating free-trade legislation that would overrule such 'environmental protectionism' (Arden-Clarke 1991). This potential international policy contradiction has been brought onto the environmental agenda, almost solely, through concerted lobbying by NGO groups (Arden-Clark 1991, Vidal 1991).

A second pre-requisite for sustainability is the adaptation of lifestyles in the industrialized nations, as well as those of the South (de Zoysa 1991, Strong 1991b). Many Northern governments, the US and UK being prime examples (Ghazi 1991, Porritt 1991), remain skeptical as to the threats posed by overconsumption of resources, and high levels of pollution, in their own countries. The primacy of economic considerations discourages governments making any real commitment to preserving the environment for future generations (Porritt 1991). As a result they appear reluctant to introduce pricing policies (such as energy taxes, for example) or legislation to change domestic patterns of resource use to protect the global commons (Summers 1992).

In terms of public influencing policy makers, NGO's have been important conduits for public opinion, presenting alternatives to the government view (Koh 1991).

A third measure to ensure that development is likely to be sustainable is that it must also be participatory. This requires local access to, and control of, resources (Korten 1991, Redclift 1991). Accompanying legal requirements, such as secure land tenure, in many developing countries, and independent public bodies to enforce control measures in industrialized countries (Averous 1991), are also important. "Primary environmental care",³ highlighting prevention and local action on environmental issues, offers a potentially effective strategy for achieving these aims (ICVA 1991). It centers on grassroots initiatives with local actors integrating health and socio-economic needs, utilizing and expanding local knowledge (Wheeler 1990). Although having a developing country focus the principles of PEC would be applicable in any area requiring a preventative and participatory approach.

Traditionally NGOs have experienced the greatest successes with this type of development project (Annis 1990). Developing community based-capacity for organisation, promoting popular participation and determining the needs of the poorest sectors of society are areas in which NGOs have developed a comparative advantage over the government in many countries (Fowler 1991).

III. NGO actions for sustainable development

Despite receiving only \$4.5bn in official development assistance in 1989 (Annis 1990) — about 1/10th of the total OECD aid in that year — Southern NGOs are gaining increased recognition for their environment and development activities (Beckmann 1991). Along with many, more established Northern, and international groups, this has led to the growth in importance of the independent sector (Muntemba 1989).

The sector may be diverse in its range of geographical representation, activities (e.g. research, advocacy, etc.), form of organisation (i.e. popular or non-popular membership), and sectoral representation (e.g. development, indigenous peoples, etc.), but its members all share an emphasis on ideas. Networking, grassroots support, information exchange and lobbying skills equip the independent sector to make significant contributions to sustainable development within the UNCED process (ICVA 1991), and beyond.

A. NGO networking

Creating linkages, both horizontal, to widen the scope of individual groups efforts, and vertical, to raise public concerns with governments and international bodies is perhaps one of the key roles of NGOs (ICVA 1991).

The independent sector has organised a whole range of networking activities, complementary to the UNCED process, as well as participating in the actual preps. NGOs have collaborated on various undertakings, including: the establishment of the IFC; organising a conference to put forward the ideas and practical experiences of NGOs as a position paper for the Earth Summit, and; arranging the Global Forum, a series of events to run in parallel to the Rio meetings in June. There have also been many individual NGO initiatives on networking.

The IFC fulfils horizontal and vertical networking roles, acting as a forum for independent sector dialogue. It serves as a 'clearing house' for information on the diverse range of NGO activities for UNCED, producing the Network '92 newsletter, in conjunction with The Centre for our Common Future, to disseminate information. Its vertical networking includes a mandate to foster the "fair and effective participation" of NGOs in the UNCED process (Network '92, 1991).

Similarly, the "Roots of the Future" conference, organised by the NGO International Steering Committee in Paris in mid-December 1991, gave NGO representatives (around 1000 delegates attended) the opportunity to determine their major contributions to the UNCED debate on sustainable development. It also enabled the creation of links between Northern and Southern groups, stimulating a dialogue and interchan-

ge of ideas that has often eluded these groups at the governmental level (Bayon 1991).

It remains to be seen if such a process of productive debate can be replicated within UNCED itself, through the participation of NGO representatives, and the acceptance of their more holistic appreciation of the problems of environmental degradation and poverty. Given the importance of the NGO community in relation to governments and international bodies, this hope may seem rather unlikely. However, two factors may change this situation. Firstly, there is currently deadlock between North and South over key issues, such as climate change and forest protection (Brown 1991b). Secondly, there is also an increasing recognition of the comparative advantage of NGOs in addressing environmental and development problems, by governments and organisations such as the World Bank (Beckmann 1991, Fowler 1991).

B. Grassroots approaches

The approach of NGOs working at the grassroots level has done much to foster the popular participation necessary to sustain project benefits over time (Fowler 1991). Many groups have sought to learn from what is actually happening in a community; what works, and what does not, and what are the problems, as perceived by local people (Annis 1990). This close working relationship also facilitates a more efficient and effective delivery of necessary external resources (Fowler 1991). The information generated in this way, from direct users, can then be channelled upwards to policy makers, allowing them to make decisions more appropriate to the local reality (Muntemba 1989).

To achieve sustainability at the global level also requires participation at the local level, and decisions based on local reality. The example of grassroots development highlights the importance of public participation in the UNCED process, and NGO's role in stimulating it (ICVA 1991). To set realistic standards and derive appropriate plans of action to protect the environment requires a knowledge and understanding of public opinion and behaviour (Clark 1989). Traditional 'top-down' decision making does not facilitate this approach to policy formulation (Prins 1990). The 'bottom-up' style of decision making, pioneered by many grassroots NGOs, gives people a say in decisions that will influence their lives and encourages a global outlook (Korten 1990). It thus has a potentially important role to play in the UNCED process.

The challenge for such NGOs, however, is to remain accountable to their constituencies and to avoid the bureaucracy associated with larger bodies operating on the international stage (Brown, L. D. 1991).

C. Information collection and dissemination

NGO's have been instrumental in raising awareness of environmental problems by gathering and distributing information to the general public, governments and international bodies. It is also increasingly acknowledged that governments neither

have all the answers (Koh 1991), nor do they have sufficient funds to determine public responses to policies in many developing countries (Fowler 1991).

It has been identified above that the independent sector plays a central role in information exchange on environment and development issues. For example, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has developed a vast environmental knowledge base, representing a valuable resource for the groups working on the Earth Charter and Agenda 21 documents for the Earth Summit.

Within the UNCED process there has also been NGO involvement in several areas of the national reports submitted to the secretariat. For the most part, NGOs have brought the popular perspective to the discussions. For example, by holding public enquiries (Network '92, 1991). This has been particularly valuable in countries with limited resources to devote to assessing the state of their national environment.

An emerging role for the information gathering activities of NGOs is in overseeing any environmental directives that may emerge from the Earth Summit. This would require that the knowledge base be sustained and expanded, particularly in the South, to enable independent groups to take an active part in monitoring and evaluating international and national accords (Sand 1990).

D. Lobbying

The information gathering and research activities of NGOs has enabled them to become very effective in advocacy for sustainable development goals (Yap 1990). By mobilizing public opinion and lobbying politicians, industry and international bodies, NGO activists have achieved progress towards sustainable management of natural resources. This includes action on the protection of tropical forests, promotion of energy conservation, displacement of indigenous peoples and the importance of environmental impact assessments (Guest 1991a). For example, groups such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and Friends of the Earth are thought to have been instrumental in getting the World Bank to change its policy on tropical forestry (Brown, P. 1991a). Pressure exerted directly, as well as through the US congress, has caused the Bank to incorporate environmental concerns into its lending policy (Guest 1991b).

IV. The potential of NGOs to carry out these roles

There has traditionally been only limited cooperation between the different types of NGO, resulting from their mainly sectoral focus (Yap 1990). However, as the NGOs themselves have worked towards sustainable development goals, they have recognised the integrated nature of the problems that they are dealing with, and the need for cooperation to derive appropriate solutions (ICVA 1989). NGOs are now emerging with cohesive policy statements and plans for collaboration on sustainable development. Documents such as "Making Common Cause Internationally", published by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, and events such as the Roots of the Future conference illustrate the advances that are being made.

While NGOs have clearly achieved much in furthering the debate and practice of sustainable development, they remain a diverse collection of largely autonomous

groups. They should not be portrayed of the saviours of the environment, nor can they be seen as a way of by-passing governments (Fowler 1991) to achieve sustainability. What NGOs do have is a complementarity to governments, as illustrated in the above discussion of their activities. If NGOs are to influence the Earth Summit talks, and play effective roles in the adoption of sustainable development at the global level, they must recognise their comparative advantages and build institutional capacity to work in these areas.

NOTES

- ¹ The conference has four main goals. It seeks to: produce an Earth Charter that will set out basic principles for guiding human economic and environmental behaviour; draw up a plan of action, Agenda 21, for the major areas influencing environmental and economic interaction; designate financial and technological resources to implement Agenda 21 globally, and; increase the institutional capacity to implement the decisions taken by the conference (UNCED 1990a).
- ² Drift net fishing endangers dolphins, which tend to swim above the large schools of tuna that commercial fishermen seek.
- ³ This strategic approach to community based-environmental management was submitted to the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) by Italy in 1990. Based on the Italians experience in a range of developing countries it gives priority to the basic needs of the poor, while seeking ways of safeguarding and regenerating natural resources. It is currently being integrated into DAC policy guidelines (Wheeler 1990).

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