



WORKING PAPER 8

Sustainable Development: The Role Of NGOs

by

Norman Myers

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Forestry For Sustainable Development Program
Department of Forest Resources
College of Natural Resources
University of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota 55108

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PREFACE

The author of this paper, Dr. Norman Myers, is an associate in the Forestry For Sustainable Development (FFSD) Program at the University of Minnesota. He originally prepared this paper for a FFSD Program seminar, "Forestry For Sustainable Development: The Role of Citizens and Non-Governmental Organizations", University of Minnesota, March 2, 1989. It is the eighth in a series of working papers produced for the Forestry For Sustainable Development FFSD Program that represent work in progress. Their purpose is to stimulate discussion among individuals interested in forestry for sustainable development.

The major objectives of the FFSD Program are to:

1. Improve the availability and usefulness of existing technical knowledge related to forestry for sustainable development - translate state-of-the-art scientific and technical information into practical and easily usable management guides and training materials that can be used effectively in planning and implementing development projects that will contribute to sustainable development; and
2. Improve the policy and organizational environment to encourage application of sustainability strategies - identify and develop effective institutional mechanisms, both at the policy and project levels, for introducing sustainability strategies into the development planning process at an early enough stage to influence project or program design.

The focus of the Program is on social forestry and related strategies within a watershed management framework as an integrating mechanism for moving toward sustainability in land use and in natural resource-based development projects. It involves an interdisciplinary group of faculty from the University of Minnesota, and associates at the University of Arizona, Yale University, Oxford University, the InterAmerican Development Bank, and other development groups. The FFSD Program is part of the University of Minnesota's Center for Natural Resource Policy and Management in the College of Natural Resources.

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For further information regarding the FFSD Program, contact:

Dr. Allen L. Lundgren, Program Director (612) 624-1277, or
Dr. Hans M. Gregersen, Professor (612) 624-6298
Department of Forest Resources
115 Green Hall
University of Minnesota
1530 North Cleveland Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55108, U.S.A. Fax: (612) 625-5212

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF NGOs

by
Norman Myers¹

INTRODUCTION

The imperative of sustainable development is widely recognized, at least in principle (see, for example, World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). What is far from clear is how to translate the concept into practice. Moreover this raises a parallel problem, that of the institutions to mobilize in support of sustainable development. There are growing questions about the capacities of governmental bodies and traditional systems of authority to handle a challenge of this character and scale: a case of the familiar limitations of "big government," plus the bureaucratic inertia it often engenders. In light of this constrained situation, should we not seek to devise some alternative modes to achieve the same goal, notably through what is sometimes known as "better governance"?--governance being defined as the aggregate of processes, systems, relationships and arrangements, both governmental and nongovernmental, by which human communities interact (Cleveland 1986, see also Groom and Taylor 1989, Myers 1987, Soroos 1986).

This paper asserts that for the most part many current approaches, at least those grounded in traditional governments and international agencies, are inherently incapable of doing the job (an occasional success notwithstanding, such as the recent Ozone Layer Protocol). Similarly international institutions, notably United Nations agencies, are basically intergovernmental committees writ large; hence they tend to reflect the nation-state system with its overly competitive (rather than cooperative) inclinations (Fromuth 1986, the Stanley Foundation 1987, Williams 1986). In any case they were mostly established in the mid-century era, when interdependence had not yet made much of an entry upon the global stage. Constitutionally they reflect the needs and opportunities of a by-gone age.

So this paper proposes that we investigate some innovative modes to manage the complex challenges of sustainable development. It further proposes that we have some powerful options already available for the required strategy of better governance--options that are little acknowledged to date, but that offer much promise if they are exploited to better effect.

BETTER GOVERNANCE: THE ROLE OF NGOs

A promising mode of better governance lies with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These proliferating bodies represent one of our best portents for the future. By their very nature, NGOs reflect the views of citizenry at large; and by their global-scale networks, they transcend the restricted structures of national governments. Above all, by their flexibility they can adapt super-swiftly to new opportunities: they do not suffer from hardening of the categories, in contrast to the bureaucratic inertia, vested interests and sheer lack of vision displayed by many governments.

¹Consultant in Environment and Development, Oxford, England.

Until a couple of decades ago, NGOs were largely a First World phenomenon. Fortunately there has been an outburst of NGOs in the Third World too. In Asia alone their number grew by 54 percent between 1966 and 1977, and by a further 57 percent between 1977 and 1982. Those in Africa grew by 60 percent in both periods together, to total 280 in 1988. The Environment Liaison Centre in Nairobi maintains a network of 7000 environmental NGOs around the world.

It is often supposed that NGOs, lacking conventional political muscle, cannot generate much impact. But let us remember the recent experience of the United States, where a series of key causes--not only environmentalism, but civil rights, women's liberation, the anti-Vietnam movement and consumers' rights--have transformed the political landscape. The initiatives all originated with citizen activists, who made such decisive running that eventually the government had no choice but to follow on behind.

As a measure of the fast-growing power of NGOs outside the United States, and particularly at the international level, note their successful campaign to persuade the giant corporation Nestles to highlight the virtues of mother's milk as well as baby-food formulas in the Third World (Chetley 1986)--with all that means for reduced fertility and limitations on population growth.

Equally promising is the Pesticides Action Network International (PAN), now spanning 300 organizations in more than 50 countries, and with a membership in millions (Goldernman and Rengam 1987). PAN includes not only environmental bodies, but consumer, farm worker, union and church bodies, making common cause to reduce the spread of dangerous toxins.

So although NGOs may lack political power in the everyday sense, they possess a "moral authority" that cannot easily be disregarded. Translated into action terms, this means they possess a responsibility "to alert the public to the global predicament; to educate its members on the significance of environmental problems for their lives and those of their children; to mobilize opinion in support of environmentally sound policies; to develop new policy ideas; and to act directly in the political arena as in the environment to secure a sustainable future" (Environmental NGOs 1982).

CAN NGOs MEET THEIR GOALS?

These are fine goals. But how should NGOs plan to attain them? There are various ways, of which the following is a selection.

- NGOs blow the hooter on undiscovered problems, such as the fuelwood crisis; they monitor the environmental performance of governments, agencies, corporations and institutions.
- They educate the public, the media and opinion leaders.
- They work at grassroots levels with local government authorities, in order to express their strategy of "thinking globally, acting locally;" for instance, they help develop

local community models of ecological stability by encouraging efficient use of resources and by bringing production and consumption patterns closer together.

- They establish dialogues with private enterprise, not only with giant corporations but with all manner of commercial and industrial bodies, persuading them that it is in their economic self-interest to maintain the natural-resource base that sustains everybody; for instance, NGOs promote "environmental audits" of corporations' activities.
- They seek to work with labor organizations, on the grounds that trade unions express a growing interest in all aspects of lifestyles, including the environmental dimension; for example, NGOs help trade unions formulate policies of environmentally acceptable technologies and products.
- They build close relationships with the media, persuading television, newspapers, etc., to highlight environmental issues.
- They supply much material, in the way of information and analyses of environmental issues, that the media can readily use.

NGOs likewise link up with intergovernmental organizations, such as the European Community and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in order to integrate environmental concerns into every field of activity. For instance, NGOs help to shape "blueprint responses" to problems such as transfrontier pollution. And most important of all, NGOs play a watchdog role vis-a-vis governments, pressing them to undertake environmental legislation and to enforce regulations already on the statute books; to re-examine concepts of development; and to support international bodies in the environmental field (for instance, if it were not for the lobbying of NGOs the U.S. government's funding for UNEP might have been cut still more severely).

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

If, then, NGOs can prove an effective force, what specifically can we expect them to achieve in the future? The following two strategies appear to offer much mileage:

1. In countries where there is a hearing for their organized voice, they can do much to influence their national governments toward enlightened policies. Governmental bureaucracies sometimes welcome insights, not to say "pressure," from citizen lobbyists, provided it is offered in a constructive spirit. The environmental records of the United States, Indonesia, Malaysia, Costa Rica, and Kenya, among many other countries, would be far poorer had the NGOs not made their informed contributions during the past two decades. In the United States, a consortium of NGOs pressured the government to extend the provisions of its excellent National Environment Protection Act to those federal agencies that operate beyond the territorial domain of the United States, notably the Agency for International Development: without the NGOs' sustained effort, finally pressing the government as far as the courtroom, it is unlikely that the U.S. Administration would have

adopted such a splendid leadership role in environmental affairs among the community of nations throughout the 1970s.

In Indonesia, where NGO bodies have proliferated to an extraordinary total of over 400, the Minister for Population and Environment, Emil Salim, makes no secret of the help he receives from citizen activists, who help to pressure the government into a more sensitive stance on environmental issues. In Malaysia, the Consumers Association of Penang, working in conjunction with Friends of the Earth Malaysia, have persuaded the government to be more stringent in its regulation of mining impacts, pollution of rivers and other water bodies, and over-use of tropical hardwood forests. In Costa Rica, a bevy of NGOs have supported the conservation efforts of successive presidents with the result that Costa Rica now has a larger percentage of land under protected status (parks, reserves and the like) than any other country in Latin America. In Kenya a coalition of NGOs interested in energy, known as KENGO, accomplished far more tree planting during the first year of their existence than the government achieved during the previous five years. In India there have been the salient success-stories of the Chipko Movement and Silent Valley, where local citizen bodies saved sizeable tracts of forest from inappropriate exploitation. In Sri Lanka a coalition of NGOs have been instrumental in persuading the Forestry Department to safeguard the Sinharaja Forest with its unique values.

2. Furthermore, NGOs can engage in a host of on-the-ground projects. Certain leading NGOs in related fields, notably large networking bodies such as the Red Cross and Oxfam, serve in certain cases as semi-surrogates for UN agencies. The Red Cross performs many functions similar to the work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN Disaster Relief Organization, while Oxfam offers a speedier response to field emergencies than can entrenched bureaucracies such as the United Nations Development Program. These super-scale NGOs can often do a more substantive job, and do it more cost-effectively, than the major UN agencies. Equally to the point, they offer an important "demonstration effect" for officialdom; and environmental NGOs can well follow this path (as witness the record of KENGO).

While they cannot deploy institutional resources, notably professional skills and funds, on a scale to match the big agencies, NGOs need not feel that they must thereby work with less productive capacity. Indeed it is the virtue of the NGO movement that their individual organizations are often localized in nature and scope—precisely the factor that offers them flexibility in their operations. To this extent, NGOs serve as a paradigm of the "social architecture" that we need if we are to address many of the emerging environmental problems of the future: the mega-problems of supranational order that may prove (in the immediate future at least) to lie beyond the capacities of governments but that may often prove amenable to grass-roots responses.

FURTHER EXAMPLES OF NGO INITIATIVES

Instances abound of the creative capacities of environmental NGOs. We have already noted some illustrative examples: the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya, plus parallel tree-planting initiatives in Colombia and elsewhere; and the Chipko and Silent Valley campaigns in India to stem deforestation. In addition, let's note the Kuala Juru villagers in Malaysia and their campaign to protect fisheries from industrial pollution and habitat destruction; the Integrated System for Recycling Organic Wastes in Mexico; the Lusaka Squatter Upgrading Programme in Zambia; and the Acao Democratica Feminina Gaucha to combat hazardous chemicals in Brazil (Roggeri 1986). In other Third World countries there are dozens of such success stories (Schneider 1988).

In light of this record in both developed and developing countries, we can surely look forward to a continuing outburst of citizen activism. What can we not hope for as the NGO movement becomes established in many other countries and many other sectors, especially at international level? With their direct appeal to transfrontier constituencies, NGOs can do an "end run" around government structures; and through their sensitivity to grass-roots opinion, they can work better on the ground than out-of-touch bureaucracies (Lowe and Goyder 1983, Massoni 1985, Porritt 1984, Willetts 1982). Thus a leading American NGO, CARE is being funded by the Canadian International Development Agency to help run a tree planting campaign in Mali; by the U.S. State Department's Refugee Relief Program to employ refugees in Sudan and Somalia for reforestation projects; and by the Dutch government to help establish women's cooperatives for tree growing in Lesotho (Vukasin 1985).

As a further instance of the creative capacities of NGOs, consider the recent initiative with regard to debt in conjunction with tropical forests. Private banks of the developed world are owed \$400 billion by developing countries, and they increasingly realize they are little likely to see their loans paid back with interest as long as debtor countries' economies suffer from decline of the natural-resource base (soil, water, vegetation) that ultimately sustains much economic activity in the form of agriculture, forestry, fisheries and the like. In just the past year or so, the debt crisis has spawned an ingenious plan in the form of debt-equity transfers, with benefit to environmental concerns (Hansen 1988).

The first initiative has been set up between the government of Bolivia and an American NGO, Conservation International. Much of Bolivia's \$4 billion of external debt is now traded at an 85 percent discount on the secondary market by banks eager to get rid of their largely uncollectible loans. So Conservation International, through Citicorp Bank, has purchased debt with a face value of \$650,000 for only \$100,000; and it has then given a debt note to the Bolivian government in return for an agreement that the Bolivians will declare a 15,000 sq. km. conservation unit in a tract of rainforest in the Beni region.

Parallel initiatives have been undertaken by conservation bodies with respect to Costa Rica, Ecuador and the Philippines, and several more are in the process of being established. In each case the donor receives a greatly enhanced value for the investment, and the recipient saves more of its dollar reserves while putting more funds into conservation. Otherwise stated, this is a strategy to settle accounts in a manner that factors in threatened habitats

as a value to offset the paper value of monetary debt. The upshot is that all parties win more than they otherwise would, and no party loses as much as it otherwise would.

There surely is scope for NGOs to join hands with a host of professional bodies in order to foster the environmental cause. Rotary International, for instance, numbers almost 23,000 clubs with over one million members worldwide, all drawn from professional and business fields. What if the 7,000 clubs in North America alone were to be encouraged by environmental NGOs to engage in cooperative activity with the 8,700 clubs in the Third World, to promote improved forestry, soil conservation, water-supply safeguards or wildlife protection? Indeed, Rotary is considering the prospect of several smallscale projects in the tropical forestry field.

All in all, there is a growing role in the environmental arena for such unlikely-seeming actors as professional associations and academia, service clubs and charity organizations, labour leaders and private entrepreneurs. All of them can play an expanding part in meeting the challenge encapsulated in the first sentence of the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) "The earth is one but the world is not."

A final manifestation of nongovernmental activity emerges in the form of the "outside the system" contributor. An example of what can be achieved is Bob Geldof, with his meshing of pop culture and media in support of a global cause. He has demonstrated what can be achieved by direct appeal, via satellite-linked television, to grassroots opinion in countries of all sizes and complexions. His latest initiative is to prepare a multipart television series on environment and development, with special emphasis on tropical forests.

In summary, then, NGOs are well constituted to build a "citizenry consensus," often of transnational scope--thereby enabling environmental issues to be tackled at a level above the purview of individual nations. Efforts along these lines enable NGOs to avoid the institutional roadblocks that frequently restrict the activities of governments, especially those governments that are overly preoccupied with their individual interests. Not that government leaders are necessarily to be blamed for confining their gaze to issues and objectives that are less than answerable to their own national constituencies. The NGOs, by contrast, can engender a spirit of "global constituency": they can assert what political leaders cannot always afford to proclaim.

But expansive goals of this scope require systematic planning and cohesive campaigns on the part of NGOs. Are they up to the challenge? If the UN "family" is often characterized by discord, the NGO community sometimes shows less solidarity of purpose than lies within its means. Indeed it has occasionally been observed that NGOs are not only more numerous than governments, they are more jealous of their "sovereignty." Furthermore certain NGOs perceive attempts to get them to unite (except for purposes of specific projects) as moves to deny them the very basis of their organizations.

Despite this discouraging view, however, there seems to be little doubt that were NGOs to give a single concerted heave to the "sustainable-development rope," they might be surprised how far they could pull it. This applies especially to the field of tropical forestry, where

there is vast scope for local initiative, and where NGOs have already run up a fine track record.

CONCLUSION

Let us finish off with a quotation from a writer who has given much thought to the way we can shape our collective affairs (Toffler 1975):

"We need to think in terms of the creation not of a single center, or a single world government, but rather in terms of a self-regulator network of transnational institutions, multiple institutions, a polycentric system. Such a transnational network can provide a higher degree of stability for the planet than the centralized model based on a single international governmental organization.... We must first recognize that the UN is only a tiny piece of a swiftly emerging transnational mosaic or network of institutions which are part of the new super-industrial system. This network consists of thousands of organizations and millions of individuals around the world in continually shifting relationships with one another."

Note too a similar statement, this one of more recent vintage (Strong 1984):

"The biggest single challenge facing the world community today is to establish effective mechanisms for governance, or management, at the international level, with workable linkages to the other levels of governance, from national to local."

It is in these myriad and innovative ways that NGOs can best act to promote the cause of sustainable development. In certain respects, moreover, NGOs often prove to be the best agencies for action. Without their creative capacities and operational flexibility, there would surely be less hope that the world will see the degree of sustainable development that it urgently needs.

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