

CHAPTER 20

WASTE MANAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF NON- GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOs)

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Introduction

Industrialisation and its consequences helped to increase knowledge in natural sciences about the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on natural systems (McCormick 1995). Testimony to this development is manifest in the fact that concern about environmental issues were first raised by the industrial world of Europe and North America. The greatest lessons that organisations based in the developing world can learn from the experience of the industrial world is that there is a number of possibilities through which environmental pressure can be exerted on society to raise environmental awareness. For example, Western environmental movements adopted three directions (Feenstra, Hoogebom, and Vellinga 1995). Two of these directions sought societal change such as (1) action oriented activities aimed at transforming societal values through public mobilisation and awakening and (2) a reformism approach aimed at influencing government policy. The latter sought to bring about public awareness through education. A third direction emphasised personal transformation that would promote individual stewardship toward environmental conservation. This chapter takes the position that a holistic approach to waste management that draws on the strengths of the different approaches holds the greatest potential for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to influence development particularly if they can bring on board the larger public. It reviews the evolution of the environmental movement in the west and shows how the experience from the west can help strengthen the work of organisations in the south.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) *are those organisations that act independently outside formal government sectors. They may include groups with wide interests such as conservation, religions, human rights, and research. NGOs may adopt a national or a local character, by operating at the national or local level, respectively.* In industrial countries some of the NGOs are so rich that they operate on international terrain. This is largely a legacy of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) that called for NGOs to be more active at the international arena. In the developing world, NGOs tend to be small and use as their domain of operation local communities. They concentrate on the well being of the poor who are struggling against the destruction of their land and culture. This chapter focuses on NGOs that act on environmental issues and that so without link to governmental structures or political affiliations. History shows that environmental NGOs in the North have had great influence in changing public and political attitudes towards environmental problems by placing environmental issues high on government agendas.

The Evolution of the Western Environmental Movement

An account of the development of NGOs in the industrial countries reveals that they went through fluctuating periods of successes and lows that spanned nearly two centuries from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century (Feenstra, Hoozeboom, and Vellinga 1995). The first period of environmental awareness was, according to this source, characterised by a cultural shift in the upper class when *an idealised view of nature became the norm and nature became romanticised*. It was in vogue for the upper class people of this period to go out to the countryside in order to enjoy nature. It was on the basis of these newly founded environmental values that nature conservation groups were founded in Europe and North America. *The first of these movements aimed at protecting biologically valuable areas in terms of specific flora and fauna*. Two types of conservation groups emerged from this development. The first conservation groups focussed on the conservation of wildlife especially birds as exemplified by the formation of the Dutch Association of Bird Protection (1899), the Audubon Society in America (1886), and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK (1904). *The second group lobbied for the preservation of areas of natural significance*. This group is characterised by the likes of the Sierra Club in the USA that sought public support for the preservation of forests and other features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Association for the preservation of Natural Monuments in the Netherlands (1906).

The most important achievements of these early conservation efforts was that they succeeded in getting many countries to develop national legislation on wildlife protection. In the USA, several national parks and wildlife refuges were established. Following this period of success the activities of the environmental movements slowed down. In addition to this success, the lapse in the activities of the movements is explained by the emergence of World War I and the Great World Depression of the 1930's (Feenstra, Hoozeboom, and Vellinga 1995) that drew peoples' attention away from environmental concerns.

The environmental movement experienced another resurgence in the period following the two World Wars. In particular, the 1960s were very important for this development due to a combination of factors. During this period, there was a general shift of attitude toward modernity as people began questioning the association between industrialisation and good life. The post world war period brought about unprecedented peace and prosperity that enabled society to focus on non-material factors of well being. *At the end of the 1960's people started questioning the assumption that linked well being to material prosperity. Concern on such issues as pollution, destruction of nature, loss of environmental amenity and depletion were raised*. On the basis of these new concerns the then accepted superiority of economics was challenged.

Several factors were instrumental in encouraging the development of the environmental movement at this particular juncture in time. Scientific writings such as *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962) and many others were important and are credited with transferring environmental concerns from academic debates into the public arena. Of particular importance were the hazardous events in raising public conscience about environmental problems. Some of the important hazardous events at the time included the oil spills in the English Channel (1967) that killed large numbers of birds and wild life and the spill of toxic chemicals into the Rhine River that led to massive fish destruction. Another event is related to the Minimata disease in Japan that was associated with the dumping of mercury in the area by a chemical company. These events were important in that they demonstrated that environmental problems affected the quality of life.

International acceptance of environmental problems and increase in environmental deterioration led to increased public consciousness about the environment. The emergence of the environmental movement thus resulted from the conservationist movement. Although the conservationist movement raised public conscience about environmental problems they did not feel obligated to deal with them. On their part the environmentalists took it upon themselves to see to it that society acts on causes to reduce environmental problems as exemplified by earlier writings. There were protests for example about nuclear fallout that led to the partial ban on nuclear tests. The success of the environmental movement at this time came about because there was consensus with the public thus indicating the strengths a consensus movement. According to Feenstra, Hoogeboom, and Vellinga (1995) such a broad consensus was possible because of a number of reasons such as declining confidence in political institutions. Environmental problems were seen as a failure of the system. Another reason is that there was no opposition against environmental lobby. Most of the effort in the industrial countries aimed at reducing consumerism and associated pollution at a time of abundance and plenty.

The slow progress in the 1960s gave way to rapid changes in the 1970s when a breakthrough in environmental awareness was realised. For the first time the environment became a political problem. Political parties incorporated environmental issues in their party programmes. It was for this reason that the 1970s saw changes through the development of new environmental policies in such countries as the United States of America. The National Environmental Policy Act was enacted and required environmental impact statements for all federal projects. An Environmental Protection Agency was established as an independent pollution control agency with responsibility to enforce and regulate programmes on pollution, wastes, pesticides and environmental radiation. In Europe the Council of Europe declared 1970 the year of conservation in order to stimulate environmental awareness. Consequently many European countries formulated environmental laws. The formation of environmental NGOs

flourished over the industrial world in the 1970s because of the environmental ideas that arose in the 1960s. Among some of the organisations that came into existence by the 1970s are Friends of the Earth in the USA (1969) and Green Peace in Canada (1970). Some of them developed political ideas through which they sought to achieve political influence. Hence, NGOs were part of the Stockholm Conference and for the first were given a greater involvement in the discussions about political, social, and economic questions. The NGOs were relieved that they had at last managed to attract government attention.

Despite this seemingly obvious success reflected in the sense that public concern was increasingly being recognised in public policy NGOs felt that there were still a number of issues that were not addressed by existing regulatory agencies and laws. This was because signs began to emerge that showed that the environment was deteriorating. Some of the NGOs started calling for a fundamental change in society. This resulted in a conflict because the values espoused by the new environmental movement contradicted the social values of this time. Effectively, the environmental movement had changed from a consensual approach to a confrontational one. As the 1970s progressed, the environmental movement lost momentum due to changing economic conditions. Unlike the 1960s, the global economy of the 1970s started experiencing problems of depression, especially following the oil crisis in the early seventies. This event forced governments to concentrate on economic problems because they were more urgent vis-a-vis environmental quality, which was a long-term goal. For the first time some scientists and politicians were challenging the doomsday predictions of the environmentalists. Victim to this new challenge was the non-growth approach (McCormick 1995) which was attacked by economists and the developing world on the basis that it lacked scientific grounding.

Attacks on the environmental movement gave governments a leverage on which to temporarily withdraw from environmental reform. General withdrawal of government support seemed to point to the demise of the environmental movement. However, this was not to be, for the activities of the 1970s had adequately raised public awareness about environmental issues. Never the less the attitude of the environmental movement changed due to the declining economic conditions of the 1980s. People and government thought the creation of employment was more important than environmental problems. The public started seeing the environmental movements as concentrating on single issues rather than addressing all factors that affect their well being. In other words they lacked a comprehensive political programme that would address environmental issues in a broader social framework. This led to the formation of green parties in several countries. The success of these parties took the initiative from the environmental movements. The movement also weakened as the membership could not agree on acceptable strategies of actions. Part of the membership supported confrontation, which led to violence particularly at

nuclear installations while others sought a peaceful approach to the problem. Thus the movement was divided: the radical wing reached a deadlock while the reformism took part in consultative bodies and became part of the decision making process.

Despite the weakening of the environmental movement in this period, environmental problems remained impressed in the public conscience for a number of reasons: (1) Action against nuclear energy attracted more and more attention and support. (2) Electoral success of green parties forced other parties to address environmental issues, and (3) the persistence of environmental disasters supported the claims of the environmental movement and undercut government efforts to underplay the importance of environmental problems (Feenstra, Hoogeboom, and Vellinga 1995). Events such as the dumping of toxic chemical wastes at Love Canal (USA), massive destruction of forests in Europe due to acidification, and several industrial disasters (nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (USA), Bhopal (India), and the Chernobyl nuclear accident in the Ukraine once more placed environmental threat on the international agenda.

The Role of NGOs in the Developing World

Until recently, NGOs here were not primarily concerned with environmental issues. But they were concerned about water, land/soil erosion, and forest destruction and related issues. Environmental action is generally tied to people's survival needs and activities; a lot of effort targets the promotion of community development and empowerment. *The environmental movement in the South emerged (Feenstra, Hoogeboom, and Vellinga 1995) mainly as a motivation and/or protest against development projects, that generally tend: (i) to displace people from their lands, causing an inevitable destruction of traditional ways of life; and (ii) to result in the exploitation of resources by multi-national organisations.*

It should be noted that the success of NGOs depends to a large extent on a democratic system of government. The fact that the environmental movements made more headway in Western Europe and North America than say in Eastern Europe testifies to this fact. Given the autocratic nature of governments in the developing world, NGOs have to be extra cautious in choosing their environmental campaigns lest they find themselves in conflict with governments (Potter and Taylor 1996). *The demise of the radical environmental movement in industrial countries during the last two decades is a good example of what may happen where values espoused by radicalism may bring division in society.* Furthermore, non-democratic government may not feel comfortable with NGOs if some of them are too radical. *The fact that the majority of NGOs in the developing world call for community empowerment and the improvement of the well being of the poor people not only challenges the policies of current*

governments but also the interest of rich and powerful people. For example, these NGOs often challenge private resource ownership. This may lead government to suppress NGOs and force them to adopt illegal actions. On the basis of this, it would seem that the best approach for NGOs in developing countries should be reformist in nature. In other words they should seek to be part of the system in order to change it from inside. It is through information exchange that NGOs here can succeed because that way they can change the attitudes of the existing powers without antagonising larger societal values.

The potential for what NGOs in the developing world can do for the environment is not in doubt. They have a strong local base and can mobilise local support. Local NGOs are also better placed to make a better judgement on the need to meet the short-term survival needs of the people and long-term environmental quality requirements for sustainable resource management. This brings up the fundamental difference between the environmental movement in the North and that in the South. While the former questions unbridled economic growth, the latter see it as a prerequisite for the development of an effective environmental movement (McCormick 1995).

The Case of *Somarelang Tikologo* (Environment Watch Botswana)

One of the first environmental movements to directly address the question of waste management in Botswana is *Somarelang Tikologo* (Environment Watch). The emergence of this organisation was largely, if not solely, influenced by the desire to address environmental problems in the country. *Somarelang Tikologo* adopted a multi-pronged approach to the problem of waste management. At the lower level it is a grass root organisation that organises community activities such as cleaning campaigns and tree planting activities in the greater Gaborone area. This is normally done in conjunction with community leaders. Environmental issues of public interest are occasionally set up for public scrutiny through public lectures or debates. A newsletter is published to maintain regular contact with the membership.

At another level *Somarelang Tikologo* deals with the business community and engages them in discussions about environmental problems related to their business activities. For example, regular contacts were kept with a local brewery and a can recycling company to make them aware of the need to raise the deposit system for soft drinks and beer cans to encourage the public to collect them and sell them to the can recycling company. This campaign has proven to be a success.

At yet another level the organisation has applied varying strategies to the city authorities (workshops, media releases, direct involvement in environmental

health meetings of the city council) to encourage a change of approach in waste management. Such efforts partially contributed to the closure of the old landfill in Gaborone. The organisation also manage to bring into the government agenda, the issue of used oil as exemplified by workshops on used oil hosted by the Ministry of local government and lands in the early 1990s. Collection of relevant information was instrumental in enabling the organisation to adopt an agenda that was at least partially acceptable to all concerned. For example, the study carried by Segosebe and Vanderpost (1990) provided a basis for the campaign on waste management reforms in Botswana. It would therefore seem that much of the success of this organisation was due to its ability to deploy the many strategies it adopted to the different publics that constitute our society.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the evolution on the environmental movement in the North and the beliefs behind strategies adopted thereof. It has shown that pointed to some of the pitfalls that environmental NGOs in the developing world must avoid if they are to survive. The case of *Somarelang Tikologo* has demonstrated how applying different strategies to the different publics (particularly reformisms, can bring fruition to efforts of the environmental movement in the developing world where governments do not take well to criticism. It is, however, acknowledged that unique conditions existing in different countries would need to be treated based on conditions prevailing locally.

References

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