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The Role Of NGOs In Environmental Conservation

By

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THE ROLE OF NGOS IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Text of a presentation

by

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THE ROLE OF NGOS IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

by Nalaka Gunawardene

This discussion paper is presented in two parts: Part I discusses general concepts, while Part II cites specific examples, case studies, constraints and issues related to the Sri Lankan environmental NGO sector.

Since this is a workshop concerned with communication, it is important that we get our definitions right. Some of the terms and concepts referred to in this paper have several definitions, and we have tried to adopt what seem to be more universally accepted versions.

The "public" is taken here to mean the populace at large, male and female, as distinct from the organizational structure of government. It includes parliamentarians and other representative of the people, religious leaders, the media, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and industries outside the state sector. This is based on a definition suggested by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in its "State of the Environment Report" for 1988.

The term "conservation" is also taken in a broader context. It is used here to mean not only the mere protection or safeguarding of natural resources and the environment, but also their proper management and rational and sustainable utilization. Conservation in this sense is not anti-development; it enhances the base for socio-economic development.
PART 1

01. Introduction:

Classifying Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is as difficult as defining what an NGO is. There seem to be as many types of NGOs as there are issues and causes to champion. The past few decades have seen a rapid proliferation of NGOs in almost all spheres of public life, that they have now become an integral part of community life.

Broadly speaking, the number of NGOs operating in a country, the degree of independence and respect they enjoy, and the magnitude of their contribution to the well-being of the society are indicative of that society's social responsibility, political freedom and democratic pluralism. However, numbers alone do not mean much, and can be deceptive. One needs to look at the qualitative aspect of inputs made by NGOs when assessing their role in a given community and a given sphere of activity.

I have been associated with NGOs both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in various capacities as an editorial adviser, writer, guest speaker, fund-raiser, project planner or implementor. My work for the NGOs has enabled me to interact with some of the most humble, village-level groups as well as high-profile, sophisticated groups operating out of key world capitals. I have seen, first-hand, the disparity between southern and northern NGOs, and the relative scales of their operations (for instance, the cost of flying in one expatriate consultant for a week exceeds the total annual budget of many southern NGOs!). The thoughts and reflections I share with you in this paper are based on these interactions and diverse associations.

While this "insider perspective" of NGO operations is certainly useful for a discussion of this nature, I am also conscious of the fact that I have been an active "player" in the NGO arena even while being an environmental journalist. Hence I shall not attempt to project this paper as an objective or critical assessment of NGOs, although you may find that it is critical of certain aspects of NGOs at times.

02. Understanding Non-Governmental Organizations:

Trying to understand NGOs can be as difficult as trying to understand the vastly diverse human society. As we noted earlier, there are many types of NGOs. Their scope and nature are enormously diverse and dissimilar. They range from essentially one-man outfits operating out of backyards or basement rooms to massive international organizations with offices and operations in many countries. The only common factor between these diverse groups is that they are - or at least supposed to be - organically and functionally separate from national or local governments.
However, even this basic distinction is no longer as sharp and clear as it used to be. Realizing the potential of the NGO sector, some governments have established quasi-governmental institutions which are sometimes projected as NGOs. Some have labeled these Government-organized NGOs as "GONGOs".

In the same terminological order, big NGOs are sometimes called "BINGOs" while international NGOs are labeled as "INGOs". For the purpose of this discussion, however, we shall concern ourselves with GONGOs, or INGOs; let us instead look at national level NGOs and their village-level counterparts, the so-called "grassroots" organizations.

How does one recognize an NGO when one sees it? Some tend to take a rather authoritarian view of defining NGOs, and insist that only those that are registered with some organ of the establishment be considered as proper NGOs. To my mind, this qualification, if insisted upon, can really compromise the non-governmental status of an NGO. While it is necessary to have some form of registration for NGOs for purposes of ascertaining the genuine ones from the bogus ones, this exercise has to be carried out in a careful and delicate manner.

In a generous definition not governed by restrictions, NGOs will include the whole gamut of people's organizations, such as cooperatives, mothers clubs, suburban ground water committees, peasant farming unions, religious study groups, neighbourhood action federations, collective aid societies, tribal nations and innumerable others. The shared characteristics include the capacities to tap local knowledge and resources, to respond to problems rapidly and creatively, and to maintain the flexibility needed in changing circumstances. In addition, although few groups use the term sustainable development, their agendas often embody this ideal. They want economic prosperity without sacrificing their health or the future prospects for their children.

There is a certain risk involved in generalizing about entities as diverse as NGOs. Yet, for the purpose of this discussion, we need to agree on a working definition of NGOs, and more specifically, environmental NGOs. We can safely assume that the central purpose of development NGOs, including environmental NGOs, is to advocate, facilitate and ensure effective public participation in development on the one hand, and in pragmatic environmental conservation on the other.

In other words, people everywhere are becoming increasingly concerned and frustrated that decisions and actions pertaining to their well-being and socio-economic development have, for too long, been taken by those outside the community. Such decisions by outsiders have often proved to be ill-conceived, and such actions, counterproductive.
Communities now want to take charge of their own development and assume control of their destinies. They also want to have a say in who does what, and how, in the development game. They consider this an inalienable right, since such development efforts are supposed to uplift their own living conditions. Since existing structures in government offer only very limited opportunities for the expression and fulfilling of these aspirations of the people, and NGOs have emerged to fill that void.

03. The Process of Public Participation:

It is necessary that we understand what "public participation" really means. Like many other catch phrases, this too is being used rather too liberally these days, and one wonders if the true meaning of this phrase is conveyed.

Unfortunately, there is no universal definition of "Public Participation". A wide range of ambiguous terms used in literature, such as "self-help", "self-reliance", "community involvement", "people's participation" and "co-operation" have added to the complexity of defining it.

However, from a practical point of view, public participation is basically concerned with the involving, informing and consulting the public in planning, management and other decision-making activities which can be considered part of the political process. It is that part of the process which provides opportunities and encouragement for the public to express their views.

Public participation tries to ensure that due consideration will be given to public values, concerns and preferences when decisions are made. Effective public participation requires the availability of adequate information in public inputs. This involves various values, critiques, questions, information, suggestions and other inputs which are expressed by individuals, groups or organizations among the general public in efforts to influence decision-making. Such inputs may be made through formal or non-formal public participation processes, and may be solicited or unsolicited.

Public participation is not an altogether new phenomenon. Historically, participation and co-operative actions have taken place, especially in areas such as rural development. Community participation was a way of life in rural societies in many parts of Asia, and formed a vital part of their cultural traditions.

In spite of the fact that Governments exist, at least in theory, to facilitate the needs and aspirations of the people who elect them, those in authority are not always in touch with the public.
Most governmental institutions have a history or tradition of being unwilling, hesitant or indifferent to working cooperatively and responsibly with the ordinary people. Some studies have found that the planners, administrators and technicians view the ordinary people somehow as "the problem," and regard themselves as embodying "the solution." The World Bank's 1985 publication Putting People First noted that "most government agencies have a legacy of paternalistic or technocratic, if not authoritarian, relations with their publics."

Fortunately, however, things are changing—albeit slowly. Government agencies are becoming increasingly receptive, sensitive and responsive to the idea of true public participation in the development process. International development support agencies are also sharpening their focus on NGOs, people's organizations and other grassroot level alliances.

Such changes of attitude and focus come a moment not too soon. In their landmark report Our Common Future, the World Commission on Environment and Development wrote: "The pursuit of sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making," and they outlined components of an approach to governance that promotes citizen action. Enforcing the common interest requires:

"Greater public participation in the decisions that affect the environment. This is best secured by decentralizing the management of resources upon which local communities depend, and giving these communities an effective say over the use of these resources. It will also require promoting citizens' initiatives, empowering people's organizations, and strengthening local democracy.

"Some large scale project, however, will require participation on a different basis. Public inquiries and hearings on the development and environment impacts can help greatly... Fre access to relevant information and the availability of alternative sources of technical expertise can provide an informed basis for public discussion. When environmental impact of a proposed project is particularly high, public scrutiny of the case should be mandatory and whenever possible, the decision should be subject to prior public approval, perhaps by referendum."
03.1 Basic Functions in Public Participation:

There have been a number of attempts to outline the essential ingredients for effective public participation in development, and as can be expected, these have produced varied interpretations. UNEP in 1988 identified five basic functions necessary to ensure effective public participation, viz:-

a. Identification: one needs to identify groups or individuals who may be interested in, or affected by, a given action.

b. Outreach: Citizens can contribute effectively only if they have access to accurate, understandable, pertinent and timely information on issues, alternatives and decisions. This information should be non-technical, and value-based, and should state clearly the social, economic and environmental consequences of proposed decisions, actions and alternatives. This is where formal and non-formal media can play a critical role.

c. Dialogue: this should be carried out openly between the parties responsible for a forthcoming action and those who are interested in, or are likely to be affected by it. Dialogue may be in the form of seminars, workshops, public hearings, personal contact/correspondence, or special study groups/committees/task forces, etc.

d. Assimilation: This means incorporating the results of the "outreach" and "dialogue" phases into final conclusions.

e. Feedback: This should include a statement of the action that was finally taken, and show the effect the public's comments had on that action.

Thus, we see that meaningful public participation cannot be achieved in isolation. It depends on the co-operation and co-ordination of NGOs and citizens groups, the media, academics - and Government institutions and officials. If any one of these integral components is lacking or unwilling, there cannot be true public participation in development, or in conservation.
04. The rise of environmental NGOs:

In recent years, public awareness of environmental issues and concern about the quality of the environment have triggered several forms of public participation to safeguard/protect the environment and also to manage natural resources in a sustainable manner. Perhaps the most important and widespread form of public participation is through the activities of Non-Governmental environmental groups.

Scientific groups and NGOs have played a major role in the environmental movement from the very beginning. Interactions between scientists, citizen groups, NGOs, and the media created an increasing public awareness of environmental issues. This, in turn, created political pressures that stimulated Governments to act. There are examples, both in the developed countries of the "North" and also from developing countries in the "South", where NGO and public pressure has brought about radical changes in environmental legislation, policy and development plans.

04.1 A diversity of NGO functions:

Even within the sub-sector of NGOs concerned with environmental conservation and sustainable development, one can see a great diversity. Some NGOs have the environment as their sole focus. Others have integrated the environment as one of their major concerns/areas of activity. Whatever their specific focus and mandate maybe, NGOs engage in a few basic categories of activities. They:

- raise public awareness of environmental issues,
- advocate the rights and interests of those affected by environmental issues,
- provide technical advice to policy makers
- conduct scientific and public policy research
- promote citizen involvement in local environmental matters.

While some of the bigger and more organized NGOs are engaged in all of the above functions, others tend to concentrate on one or two. At whatever level of activity or participation, they constitute a vital and integral part of the people-environment-Government matrix.
04.2 Socio-economic background to the NGO movement:

Environmental NGOs have brought issue-oriented environmental activism to many Third World countries. The past few years have witnessed the rise of environmental movements in Third World societies whose principal agitators or agents were NGOs. No longer content with merely reacting to adverse environmental situations and conditions, these NGOs are now attempting to redesign the pattern and extent of natural resources utilization to ensure social equity and ecological sustainability. In this process, ecology movements have questioned the validity of the dominant concepts and indicators of economic development whose ideology is thus faced with a major foundational challenge.

This tendency to challenge accepted development concepts and practices stems from a long history of inequity in access to, and utilization of, natural resources. The root of the problem lies in the mismatch between limited natural resources and unlimited human aspirations. To compound matters, it has become increasingly clear that the utilization of these resources is fuelling growth and prosperity to a small section of the society while a large majority is left out to bear the brunt of adverse consequences.

Thus has arisen the all-too-important question: development for whom?

In the past few decades, especially after the end of the Second World War, the exploitation of natural resources to feed the process of "development" has gone up in extent and intensity. This process has been characterized by the huge expansion in energy and resource intensive industrial activity and major projects like big dams, forest exploitation, mining, energy and chemical intensive agriculture, etc. The resource demand of development has led to the narrowing down of the natural resource base for the survival of the economically poor and powerless, either by direct transfer of resources away from basic needs, or by destruction of the essential ecological processes that ensure renewability of the life-supporting natural resources.

Against this backdrop, the ecology movements came up as people's response to this new threat to their survival and as a demand for the ecological conservation of the vital life-support systems. The most significant life support systems beyond clean air are the common property resources of water, forests and land on which the majority of the poor people in the South depend for their survival. It is the threat to these resources that has been at the centre of ecology movements in the last few decades.

As journalists, we need to be acutely conscious of these underlying processes. These disparities between the rich and the poor, the urban and rural people, are clearly and remarkably manifest in many localities in all our countries. To cite but just one example, I have often been struck by the profound
contrast portrayed by the sight of massive steel pylons which carry high-tension electricity lines over and above the heads of hundreds of poor people and their homes. These lines carry electricity to feed the greedy city which consumes a disproportionately large slice of a country's resources. The little mud houses lying immediately underneath these power transmission lines have no access to that electricity; they have to collect fuel wood for their lighting purposes.

One can go on and on with other examples which illustrate this disparity, but I think the point is very clear. Those of us who are also into photography and video can keep a look out for such visuals and scenes which depict this resource disparity.

As if the physical removal or legal denial of common property resources was not enough, hundreds of thousands of rural people are being driven out of their traditional homelands to pave the way for "development" projects. Governments prefer to call this by benign terms such as "resettlement" or "translocation" but on many occasions, it ends by making the people concerned near destitute or refugees. Entire cultural patterns are changed, and traditional ways of life disrupted. NGOs working in development and environment fields have been taking up the cause of some of these affected peoples, but as can be imagined, such initiatives have not endeared them to the governments or international agencies who zealously pursue the "development" projects concerned.

Vandana Shiva, the famous Indian environmental activist and thinker, notes that though ecology movements relate to issues that are geographically localized, like forests or water pollution, their reverberations are national and even global in impact.

She adds:

"The ecology movements can no longer be considered merely as specific and particular happenings. They are an expression of the universal socio-economic impacts of a narrowly conceived development, based only on short-term commercial criteria....The impact of ecology movements, in the final analysis, is on the very fundamental categories of politics, economics, science and technology which together have created the classical paradigm of development and resource use."

Shiva is not alone in her assessment of the situation. Alan B. Durning, vice president of the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington-based independent research organization studying global problems, notes:
"As deterioration of the resource base pushes environmental issues to the fore of many communities' concerns, the foundations of a new international environmental movement are in place. Local and national groups are extending tentative feelers around the world, establishing relationships on issues of common interest...."

From the foregoing, we see that the emergence of environmental NGOs and their evolution into ecology movements in various parts of the world is a social response to ongoing development trends and conditions. There is no doubt that this response was warranted by circumstances. However, it is not so easy to determine whether NGOs offer adequate and appropriate solutions the problems they claim to champion.

05. Strengths and weaknesses of NGOs:

NGOs can play a vital role in environmental conservation because of certain characteristics. Once again, generalizations can be misleading, but on the whole, most NGOs at national and local level can be seen to have the following characteristics:

- They are relatively small, and do not have massive infrastructures or overheads, as many government establishments do. This makes them more cost-effective.

- They are not bound by numerous rules and regulations or a rigid bureaucratic system. This makes them more flexible, and gives them a ready response capacity to emerging situations and problems.

- They are manned, in most instances, by men and women who have a good understanding of the ordinary people's needs, problems and aspirations. They are in touch with the grassroots on a regular basis. This makes NGOs a preferred channel to access the grassroots.

- Because their resource base is limited, NGOs prefer to work in cooperation and collaboration with others, which makes partnerships and networking easier.

- Most NGOs have a system of electing office bearers and holding them accountable for their actions. This system ensures that poor performance is soon corrected, and that more opportunities for leadership are created.

The above are some of the characteristics that make NGOs attractive. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Having been an NGO-watcher for several years, I am very much aware that some NGOs do not possess some of these qualities. There are many errant NGOs, as there are errant human beings. As I have mentioned in Part II of this paper under the Sri Lankan NGO
scenario, the Government has appointed a commission of inquiry to look into the alleged malpractices by NGOs. In other countries of South Asia, NGOs frequently come under fire, with or without good reason. This, I believe, is an integral part of being an NGO. When certain certainties in society are questioned, challenged or rivaled, there is bound to be opposition, resentment or criticism. The real test for any NGO is to withstand this counterwave and continue its work.

The performance of NGOs is constrained by several factors. Some are of internal nature and can be corrected with adequate inputs of resources and expertise, while others are external factors which relate to the wider socio-economic structure and cannot be adjusted without major transformations in society.

Some of the constraints faced by conservation NGOs are:

- A lack of finances, which in turn inhibits the operational capacity and scope for growth of an NGO; from this stems most other constraints.

- A lack of expertise, i.e. full-time administrative staff, individuals who have specialized in certain fields, etc.

- A lack of opportunities for staff development and training; most NGOs cannot retain competent and skilled staff members for too long owing to the poor salaries and facilities they can offer.

- Some NGOs also lack focus and cohesiveness; they have not defined their specific mandate and find it difficult to play a more useful role.

- NGOs are only as effective as their mass support base is. Some NGOs lack a people-based support structure, which makes their goals unrealistic and their targets unachievable.

- Some NGOs are reluctant to improve their professional standards, and are destined to remain loose associations of well-meaning but ineffective individuals.

- There is a widespread character of territoriality among NGOs, which limits opportunities for cooperation, and close down channels of communication among NGOs.

- In many communities, NGOs are under pressure to accommodate the interests and concerns of privileged classes of people. If and when NGOs yield to this pressure, they compromise their ideals.
By far the biggest constraint is the lack of finances, and the resulting shortage of equipment, skilled staff and expertise. Most NGOs in the Third World are compelled to seek financial and material assistance from well-wishers within their communities and bi-lateral or multi-lateral donor agencies from developed countries. This places them in a particularly vulnerable position, and leaves room for possible manipulation by outside parties.

In the present point in time, NGOs cannot do without donors. However, such donor assistance will not last forever. NGOs need to devise and implement creative ways of generating income and becoming more self-reliant and self-financing. Difficult as it may seem, there are many examples of Third World NGOs achieving this status. Some NGOs have been so successful in this art of self-reliance that they are considered as models for both the industrialized countries and for the emerging nations of the former eastern bloc and the Soviet Union, where interest in forming new NGOs is growing day by day.

NGOs also need to address those constraints that are not strictly related to finances or resources. Some of these are beyond their control, but others can be overcome through competent leadership and dedication to the cause.

06. A few NGO issues:

At this point, I would like to address a few specific trends and issues which are fairly common in the NGO sector, with special reference to development and environmental NGOs.

06.1 The resource dilemma:

As we all know, most NGOs operate on low budgets, and are always looking for ways of generating more funds and securing external support. Their argument is that if they have more resources, they can enhance their on-going operations, undertake more new projects, and improve the quality of their services. However, more (resource inputs) do not always mean better (output). When more resources and external inputs come in, some NGOs tend to lose the very characteristics that make them attractive. For instance, with an influx of more money, they tend to become more top-heavy, more bureaucratic and less cost effective. Even worse, they sometimes lose their grassroots touch, and become alienated.

Now, I do not wish to categorize all NGOs in this group. There are NGOs whose phenomenal growth has not changed their initial character. But there are others which can no longer be identified with the qualities that endeared them to donors and the local communities. I think all NGO leaders and workers need to pay more attention to this real possibility, and guard against it happening.
06.2 Elites and idealists:

Another criticism frequently leveled against NGOs, including those working on development or environment issues, is that they are dominated by a small group of elites. This is a valid observation for NGOs in many countries of South Asia. However, it is my belief that the elites can play a constructive role in the NGO movement in southern countries. (Here, I am inclined to define "elites" as those who occupy the upper echelons of a given structure, may it be in professional, academic or societal circles. In this definition, if one is a top class journalist, he/she can be regarded as an elite in those circles. Likewise, the elite do not always come from urban backgrounds; an erudite grassroots worker with a mass following is an elite in his environment.)

There is nothing inherently despicable in being an elite; the world needs them, and so do NGOs. In this complex world, NGOs need articulate spokesmen and good thinkers. If the elite can offer these inputs, NGOs ought to make use of them. However, there needs to be a system of checks and balances so that the elite would not have a level of influence disproportionately greater than their inputs into NGOs. In the current global context, when the future development and conservation options of the Third World countries are being debated and determined, southern NGOs badly need to have articulate, vocal representatives who can define and defend southern positions on behalf of millions of people in our countries.

The challenge for national level development and conservation NGOs is to achieve a judicious blend of elites and other elements. This is a delicate balance, and some NGOs fail to sustain this balance. But it is worth trying. In fact, many NGOs are trying this out. Alan Durning of the Worldwatch Institute notes that the more influential NGOs build their support base from urban educated classes, and form links with grassroots self-help movements and varied international actors such as the World Wide Fund for Nature, Friends of the Earth and the Pesticide Action Network.

Most NGOs are also characterized by a quest for idealism. This is true for environmental NGOs as well. Once again, there is nothing wrong in being idealistic. The world needs idealists, and the ideals they set for humanity. However, certain NGOs take this idealism too far. For instance, it is environmentally benign and perfectly desirable that all of us start using bicycles instead of motor vehicles which burn up fossil fuels, polluting the atmosphere and contributing to global warming. But when an NGO starts advocating a position where all other modes of transport have to be abandoned in favour of the good old bicycle, that is taking matters a little too far. Such propositions are simply not practical in modern times.
The challenge before NGOs is to strike a balance between idealism and practicability. In other words, NGOs may have their head in the clouds as long as they have their feet firmly on the ground.

06.3 Who speaks for the people?

The question "who speaks for the people?" is perhaps as old as representative democracy itself! This question also relates to a fundamental concern raised about NGOs: do they, and can they, truly represent the views, problems and aspirations of the people?

There are no easy answers to this. In fact, the answer will vary from situation to situation, and from one locality to another. In Sri Lanka right now, serious questions are being raised about the legitimacy of NGOs and their right to articulate people's concerns. I am sure this is one of the most common questions that NGOs everywhere have to face.

As I have noted earlier, NGOs come in all shapes, sizes and colours, and in this assortment of groups, one finds the good, the bad and the ugly. The good ones strive to represent the concerns and aspirations of the oppressed masses as sincerely and authentically as possible. The bad ones - alas, there seem to be many - turn it into a profitable business to speak on behalf of the "voiceless" people. The ugly ones go one step further, and start "selling" the people's woes and views to interested third parties!

There are no quick fixes to this problem. In the long run, improved literacy, educational standards and enhanced political awareness among the people could serve as an insurance against NGOs deviating from their declared objectives of serving the interests of the disadvantaged and oppressed people.

06.4 Regulatory mechanisms:

The question then arises as to whether some sort of regulatory mechanism ought to be introduced, so that only the genuine NGOs can operate. This is certainly an ideal state, but is virtually impossible to achieve. Any attempt by national governments to control and regulate NGOs immediately leads to a serious erosion of democratic rights and a loss of independence for the NGOs in that country concerned. On the other hand, if NGOs are allowed to operate in any manner their workers or leaders prefer, the entire NGO movement can come into disrepute and lost credibility.
In the end, the situation is somewhat similar to what prevails in the media sector. Do we allow governments to regulate the media, or, as responsible professionals, do we adopt a code of conduct ourselves? I think the overwhelming preference everywhere is to opt for the latter. Likewise, NGOs in all communities and countries need to work out a self-regulatory mechanism. They need to define, adopt and follow a code of conduct which embodies the desired ideals and practical aspects for NGOs.

This is easier said than done. NGOs, almost by nature, are very conscious of territoriality. Although their declared objectives cite working in collaboration with other NGOs, there is frequent rivalry and competition among NGOs. Against such a backdrop, it is difficult to bring all NGOs concerned to one negotiating table and work out a common code of conduct.

I, for one, believe that such difficulties can be overcome when it is pointed out that the alternative can be much worse. The reluctance to adopt and adhere to a code of conduct can result in government intervention to regulate NGOs. No NGO needs to surrender its independence or integrity in the process of adopting a code of conduct. It is an insurance policy against the possible excesses and drawbacks in the system.

07. NGOs and the Media: A Curious Relationship:

Finally, in this section, let us take a quick look at the curious relationship between the NGOs and the mass media.

Both NGOs and journalists have played a major role in bringing environmental issues to the forefront of public debate in the Third World. They have helped push environmental-friendly legislation, advocated national policies for sustainable development, and campaigned to avert what they perceived as threat to the common property resources and the environmental integrity of their nations and communities.

There is little doubt that NGOs need the media to articulate their struggles and reach the masses; likewise, the media needs NGOs as a source of information, opinion and news stories. Yet, in many communities, journalists and NGOs appear to be distrustful of each other.

Both parties have some legitimate complaints. NGOs maintain that the media often overlook them. NGOs perceive state controlled radio and television stations as "mouthpieces" of those in power. Even newspapers are seen as either government-controlled or establishment-oriented.

Donatus de Silva, a media expert who has worked with a large number of Third World NGOs, sees this as a real problem. He says: "In centrally controlled countries, the media are usually viewed as tools of state repression."
Sometimes NGOs admit that the print press is free of state regulation but is instead subjected to commercial or industrial pressures and control. The end result is the same.

These perceptions are sometimes exaggerated, but are generally based on valid observations. The problems NGOs have in accessing the media are real, although their explanations may not always be true. NGOs find it difficult to gain access to these channels to air their views.

De Silva sees another disturbing trend in NGO-media relations:

"Small but effective community groups working in areas off the beaten track are sensitive to 'elitism' among the media - the tendency among journalists to report only about the activities of major, city-based NGOs."

Journalists, in turn, counter such allegations by saying that NGOs are naive and unprofessional when dealing with the press.

Smaller NGOs, they say, have high expectations to have their activities and achievements given prominent media coverage. They fail to view their role in a wider, national perspective, which the newspapers and magazines have to take into account.

Sometimes journalists find the bigger NGOs having the same "establishment tendencies" as government departments and institutions do. It is difficult to obtain reliable, accurate information and opinions quickly. Besides, some NGOs have their favourite journalists and are not willing to part with information when approached by other journalists.

De Silva recalls how, in Dhaka, a Bangladesh journalist described his experiences reporting NGO relief efforts during the several floods that hit Bangladesh in 1988. He quotes this journalist as saying:

"Many NGOs did useful work and provided much needed food, clothing and blankets to the poor. But when it came to informing the media about their work, and their views on the floods, they briefed the foreign journalists first and the local ones the following day. NGOs have more time for foreign media representatives. They are keen to make an impact in foreign countries."
One can cite other examples from Sri Lanka and other countries, where NGOs have mishandled the press, and then complained that the press was ignoring their work. The media expects professional, authentic and reliable information, opinions and views from NGOs. NGOs are not always good at providing these to the media. They almost expect the media to dig up the stories on their own. It was not too long ago that a leading Sri Lankan environmental NGO leader remarked to a journalist: "We are doing so much work. We have neither the time nor the inclination to do your job!"

No journalist expects NGOs to write up their stories. But in issues, debates and controversies where NGOs have been playing a prominent role, the media need NGOs to help clarify issues, and to gauge public opinion.

There is also no consensus among journalists as to whether the media should actively support NGOs in their struggles for environmental conservation. This relates to the whole question of advocacy journalism, i.e. whether journalists should take a personal stand when reporting on the environment. This issue will have been discussed during this workshop, so we shall not enter that debate here.

In the belief of many NGOs, the media needs to play a more involved, active role than that of passive reporting. Lalananath de Silva, founder chairman of Sri Lanka’s Environmental Foundation, argues that the media have to take a more positive role in conservation. He goes on to say:

"No longer can we say that the media must provide an independent, unbiased report of facts and leave it at that...The environmental journalist is someone more than a mere reporter. He or she must be someone who can assimilate the facts and perceive in them the impact on the environment."

Unfortunately, while the media and NGOs exchange insults and complaints, many opportunities for collaboration are being missed. There is some hope, however. In many countries, both the media and NGOs have realized the folly of operating in watertight compartments. Donatus de Silva cites a study supported by the Panos Institute in London and co-ordinated in Bangladesh by the NGO monthly Lokejan. In this exercise, a team of four Bangladeshi journalists and NGOs cooperated for an investigative study on the environmental impact of the multi-million dollar irrigation and flood control project at the confluence of the Meghna and Dhomagoda rivers. He adds:
"The Bangladeshi experiences show that media and NGOs need each other, and that a collaborative relationship pays off. NGOs are sources of controversial stories, but these must be supported by well-researched facts. If these are provided, the media will do the rest, and an impact will surely be achieved."

In Sri Lanka, an NGO-Media Forum has been established by the Sri Lanka Environment Congress, an umbrella organization of many grassroot level environmental NGOs. The objective is to bring journalists and NGO workers together for an exchange of ideas and information. These Forum sessions have so far been held in several areas where acute environmental problems prevail, and results have been encouraging.
PART II

08. Environmental NGOs in the Sri Lankan context:

This section is included by way of illustrating the different roles played by NGOs in environmental conservation. It will highlight instances where NGO interventions have played a major role shaping national policy or specific executive actions, as well as instances where NGOs have been found lacking.

For a country of 17 million people, Sri Lanka can be said to have a thriving NGO community. A recent NGO Directory compiled by IRED (Development Alternatives and Networks) estimated that there were over 25,000 people's organizations (POs) in Sri Lanka. These POs, however, have a very limited geographical area of operation, and therefore cannot be categorized under national-level NGOs. They operate on shoe-string budgets, and have little or no institutional base.

The Sri Lanka Environmental Congress (SLEC) estimated in the late 1980s that there were around 800 community-based NGOs (POs) which were concerned principally with environmental protection and conservation.

Standing one step above the village-based NGOs are several hundred provincial NGOs. They too have a modest funding base. They are effective in their chosen specialities, and in their respective regions, districts or provinces.

Then there are larger NGOs which have distinguished themselves in a particular field of activity and developed a national profile, particularly over the past decade. Over 40 such NGOs can be listed, but a dozen of them clearly stand out as national leaders in this field.

The above-mentioned IRED directory, published in mid-1991, covered 293 development NGOs which have a fairly broad national outlook, including several environmental NGOs. However, the role of NGOs in the Sri Lankan environment-development situation is yet to be studied in depth. What follows is an initial attempt to place some thoughts and examples in a meaningful order.
Socio-economic background:

NGOs do not operate in a social vacuum. They operate on, and respond to, the contemporary societal needs and trends. Any study of the role of NGOs has to take this into account in order to provide the correct perspective.

The agenda awaiting a well-organized and articulate NGO movement in Sri Lanka is daunting. Like many Asian nations, Sri Lanka's economic development is dependent on activities that deplete its finite natural resources. While exploitation of the resource base has contributed to significant economic growth in recent years, it has also led to environmental degradation. In the short term, the economic livelihood and physical health of the people is at risk. In the long term, if the present rate of resource depletion and environmental deterioration continue, the finite resource base and delicate environmental balance will eventually be unable to support further economic growth.

Sri Lanka and other developing countries face difficult choices in achieving a proper balance between the closely linked objectives of economic development and environmental conservation.

Over the past ten years, the Government of Sri Lanka has taken positive steps to develop resource management and environmental conservation policies. The National Environmental Act of 1980 established the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) as the primary decision-making and coordinating agency with regard to the environment. In 1984, Sri Lanka became one of the first developing nations to introduce a mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure for reviewing all development projects. A sophisticated legislative and administrative infrastructure has been established that includes more than 90 statutes and a number of environment-related state agencies. In early 1990, a Cabinet Ministry and a Project Ministry were also established for the first time.

In spite of this sound legislative base and infrastructure, however, the results cannot be said to be fully impressive. Although several factors have contributed to this situation (not the least of them being the inadequacy of finances and skilled manpower for enforcement and monitoring) one of the most significant constraints has been a low level of public participation in environmental policy development and decision-making.

The average Sri Lankan has only recently begun to appreciate the true scope and implications of environmental issues. Many still don't fully understand their legal rights with respect to the environment, and are not fully aware of various preventive and remedial measures that can be taken to address environmental problems at household, community, or village levels.
08.2 The role of NGOs

The role of people's organizations and NGOs has to be viewed in this light. Environmental NGOs in Sri Lanka have begun to perform with much enthusiasm what is expected of them. They have demonstrated an ability to promote public participation in environmental policy development and decision-making through their public awareness, advocacy, technical advisory, research and citizen action activities. Their impact in recent years has been such that it can be argued that environmental NGOs have demonstrated a greater potential for promoting democratic pluralism and people's participation than NGOs operating in most other spheres of public life in Sri Lanka.

08.3 Limitations and excesses of NGOs:

Of course, there is still room for improvement. A number of institutional and other constraints also need to be resolved. But on the whole, it is generally agreed that the NGO movement has become a key player in sustainable development and environmental conservation in Sri Lanka.

This general acknowledgment has not, however, prevented the Government from being occasionally critical of NGOs. In late 1990, the Government appointed a Commission of Inquiry to probe activities of local and foreign NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. Among other things, it was to inquire into and obtain information "whether any of the funds received from foreign sources as well as generated locally have been misappropriated and/or are being used for activities prejudicial to national security, public order and/or economic interests and for activities detrimental to the maintenance of ethnic, religious and cultural harmony among the people of Sri Lanka."

This Commission is still continuing its public sittings, and has unfortunately been used by some persons as a forum to condemn specific NGOs or NGO leaders and to discredit individuals and organizations. Both the NGO community and civic rights campaigners have expressed their concern that the Commission's findings may precede the introduction of greater restrictions and regulation of NGOs by the Government. It is still hoped, however, that the Commission's Report will strike a balance between the anti-NGO rhetoric and the valuable, moderate observations.

NGOs themselves have to bear part of the blame for the criticism they face; there are a few known instances of NGO excesses and malpractices. But no generalizations are possible in matters like this -- an impartial, methodical assessment has not been carried out to date to determine how prevalent any malpractices are among NGOs. (And even the detected excesses can be dealt with under the normal laws of the land; they do not warrant a specific framework for regulating NGO activities.)
09. Case studies and illustrative examples:

At this point, I would like to briefly refer to a few specific NGOs and their programme activities which further illustrate the five functions mentioned under 04.1 above. These examples are mentioned because they are representative; needless to say, there are many other examples of equal merit which I have not been able to cite due to the limitations of this time and space.

09.1 Public awareness:

Public awareness activities provide the practical knowledge necessary to enable citizens to assume a more active role in improving the quality of the environment in their own area. Sri Lankan NGOs use a variety of methods to promote public awareness. Examples:

- The Sri Lanka Environmental Journalists Forum (SLEJF), established in 1988 as the national chapter of AFEJ, has been encouraging the formal mass media to create environmental awareness in the country. The SLEJF has an on-going journalists training programme on environmental reporting, and conducts schools educational programmes and media campaigns on environmental issues.

- March for Conservation (MFC) organizes public rallies and marches in support of environmental conservation and prepares educational material for distribution through the schools system.

- The Environmental Foundation Limited (EFL) conducts education programmes on environmental laws for specific audiences, including officials of the Central Environmental Authority and the Department of Wildlife Conservation.

- The Sri Lanka Environment Congress (SLEC) has launched a programme to educate farmers on safe practices in using hazardous agro-chemicals, in particular pesticides.

- The Sri Lankan country office of Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) in collaboration with the Government's Electricity Board, is popularizing fuel efficient stoves as a means of conserving increasingly rare fuelwood from the forest.
09.2 Public advocacy:

Through their role as public watchdogs, environmental NGOs help to ensure the accountability of public sector agencies and empower ordinary citizens with the knowledge they require to exercise a similar role. Where individual rights or the general public interest are threatened, NGOs have undertaken or helped to initiate legal action on behalf of those affected. This is an area of activity where Sri Lankan NGOs have performed a very significant role. Examples:

- In the mid 1970s, several NGOs led by the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka (WNPS) mobilized a nationwide protest against a state-sponsored move aimed at logging (for producing chipboard and plywood) in the island's prime tropical forest, the Sinharaja. The massive venture, supported at the time by Canadian and Rumanian assistance, was later abandoned, partly as a result of NGO-academic protests, and partly because it turned out to be a commercial failure. In the 1980s, Sinharaja was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO.

- Also in the 1970s, Sri Lankan NGOs protested vociferously against the Government's permitting large-scale potato cultivation in the Horton Plains, a hydrologically important hill-country ecosystem. The Government at that time, which was more concerned with food production than environmental conservation, let the practice continue unchecked; it was finally stopped only when Governments changed in 1977.

- In 1988-9, a group of nine major environmental NGOs successfully opposed the construction of a coal-fired thermal electricity generation plant in the scenic east coast town of Trincomalee. They opposed the plant on the grounds that the EIA was defective, and that no proper pollution prevention measures were being taken. When the site was later changed to the south, NGOs opposed it again on technical points. Finally, the President ordered the Government's Electricity Board, which was pushing for coal, to review all alternative sources of energy before deciding on for coal power as a source of thermal electricity generation in Sri Lanka.

- In October 1988, an attempt was made by the internationally blacklisted cargo ship the Khian Sea (also known as Felicia and Pelicano) to dump several tonnes of suspected toxic waste from the West, passing it off as "harmless landfill". Several Sri Lankan NGOs, spearheaded by EFL and supported by the media, alerted the Government on this attempt. NGO agitation prompted the authorities to deny the ship permission to enter Colombo Port. The NGOs, particularly those with strong media connections, also managed to alert other countries of the region, so that the ship was unwelcome at every subsequent port of call as well. Greenpeace believes it finally dumped its "landfill" in the
international waters of the Indian Ocean.

This incident demonstrated to Sri Lankan NGOs the need for continual vigilance and a ready-response capacity to react fast. Realizing how useful the media was in this connection as well as during the coal power plant protest, some NGOs have now established an informal, yet firm, rapport with the local media.

Sri Lanka has one of the world's highest rates of pesticide poisoning. Six of the "Dirty Dozen" pesticides banned in the West are still available, and farmers have a tendency to overuse agro-chemicals. NGOs have been advocating tougher laws and regulations controlling the importation of not only pesticides, but other industrial and toxic chemicals.

The Society for Environmental Education led a successful campaign in the late 1980s to have the Bellanwila-Attidiya marshes, an urban wetland immediately south of Colombo, declared as a bird sanctuary.

When the National Environmental Act of 1980 was being amended and strengthened in 1988, several NGOs made representations to a Parliamentary select committee, proposing to enhance the existing Act on several counts. While several NGO proposals were accommodated, legislators did not grant the firm NGO request to introduce provisions for 'Citizen Suits' which establish the rights of individuals to seek judicial assistance in protecting their living environment. This request, which has enormous potential for enhancing public participation in environmental conservation, still remains a point for future campaigning.

In 1988-89, WNPS and EFL did a comprehensive critique of Sri Lanka's controversial Forestry Master Plan drawn up by Finnish consultants. The FMP advocated a process of selective logging which, in the opinion of most conservationists and academics, simply meant another "sinharaja-type" debacle, dooming the country's remaining forest cover. This was once instance where NGOs successfully lobbied international donors. Sri Lankan NGO activists, with assistance from US-based NGOs, carried their protest as far as the World Bank headquarters in Washington, which in 1989 insisted on major reforms in the plan, including mandatory environmental management and monitoring components.
09.3 Technical Advisory Services:

Sri Lankan NGOs have demonstrated a potential to influence the process of environmental policy development and decision-making through their role as technical advisers. Where government agencies lack the technical skills or practical experience needed to deal with a particular issue, or wish to obtain a broader perspective, NGOs have willingly assisted. Examples:

- The Wildlife and Nature Protection Society (WNPS) is represented on several public committees and advisory boards, including the statutory Flora and Fauna and Coast Conservation Advisory Committees.

- EFL is regularly consulted by the Government's Central Environmental Authority and other public agencies with respect to the application and effect of present or proposed environmental legislation.

09.4 Research:

Several environmental NGOs engage in scientific and public policy research as part of their regular functions, or at the request of public sector agencies. The results of their research are usually made available to the general public. Independent research can play an important role in policy development and decision-making. Examples:

- MFC has collaborated with several public agencies, including the CEA and the Coast Conservation Department, in the preparation of environmental impact assessment and policy analyses.

- EFL, in collaboration with the Natural Resources Defence Council of the USA, is preparing the Sri Lanka Citizens' Alternative Energy Plan (SLACNEP) which is an attempt to research and analyze the energy demand and supply scenario in Sri Lanka. The results of this research will then be used as an advocacy tool to reform the energy planning process.

- Both EFL and SLEC have commissioned independent studies/overviews of existing environment-related legislation (over 80 statutes) with a view to suggesting guidelines for future legal reform.

- The SLEJF is planning a series of investigative environmental journalism tours in 1992 to several areas of Sri Lanka where there are acute environmental/developmental crises. The mediapersons will be assisted to research the issues and publicize the findings.
09.5 Citizen Action:

While NGOs provide citizens a voice in public affairs they also motivate citizens to address environmental concerns directly. Environmental NGOs at both national and local levels channel energies of ordinary citizens to promote environmental conservation in their own communities. Reforestation, water management, waste disposal, and school education projects are examples of activities where NGOs solicit and co-ordinate voluntary efforts of individuals to address community objectives, facilitating private sector solutions to local environmental problems. Examples:

- The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lanka's largest development NGO with branches or programmes in several thousand villages, has mobilized its village level groups to create a large number of "green belts" in their areas, and to generate thousands of plants at village level nurseries. Their aim, ultimately, is to do something similar to what the famous Green Belt Movement of Kenya has achieved in Africa.

- The Public Campaign on Environment and Development, an informal alliance of nine leading NGOs (including Sarvodaya, EFL, SLEJF, MFC and SLEC) was formed in February 1991 to prepare a "Citizens' Report on Environment and Development". It has held a large number of public hearings in all accessible parts of the island, and is now compiling and analyzing the views, perceptions and proposals of a wide cross section of the Sri Lankan population in relation to their living environment. The resulting report will be supplemented by a 20-minute video summary.

- A grassroot level organization, "Sobadaham Mithuro" (Friends of Nature) led by an energetic Buddhist priest managed to reforest a considerable area in Kalutara in the 1980s entirely through mobilizing voluntary village workers. For his sustained and untiring efforts, the priest was conferred with a "UNEP Global 500 " award - the first for a Sri Lankan.
10. Failures and Inadequate responses by NGOs:

The journalist in me compels me to acknowledge here that Sri Lankan NGOs have had only partial impact, or no appreciable impact, on certain issues in the past few years. Such failures were often due to a combination of factors, which I shall not go into, but they offer valuable insights and lessons.

Several such instances can be cited where NGOs should have been more alert, active and vociferous, but were not.

- In the mid 1980s, the Veddhas, Sri Lanka's dwindling population of aboriginal tribesmen, were forced out of their traditional jungle land when it was declared a protected area. Veddha appeals to remain there, hunting only for their sustenance, were not granted. NGOs on the whole have failed to react to this situation, although a few individuals are now enlisting international support for Veddhas.

- From 1978, Sri Lanka implemented the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme, the largest agro-irrigation scheme in the country's history costing several billion Rupees of grant or loan money from donors. Although an environmental impact assessment was done, NGOs kept a low-profile in the process; only a few individual critics openly spoke out against the programme, which was a highly political one.

- When multinational companies, backed by the Government, opened up large areas of land in the South-east and east to cultivate sugarcane in the early 1980s, traditional farmers and inhabitants of the area were up in arms against it; farmer protests were largely ignored and suppressed. The Colombo-based national NGOs failed to take sufficient notice of the controversial cultivation.

- Sri Lankan NGOs have not addressed with sufficient depth and commitment certain fundamental issues such as land tenure and reform, urban housing policies, agricultural subsidy schemes, etc. There is a need for environmental NGOs to look beyond the immediate concerns of forestry, wildlife and energy issues, and come up with meaningful alternatives to basic development issues.

- Sri Lankan NGOs on the whole prefer not to be too critical of the establishment or the status quo (although, it must be admitted, that environmental NGOs more than other kinds of NGOs have occasionally dared to cry out that the Emperor has no clothes!). Their public statements are made with care, and loaded with caution. Unlike their counterparts in more liberal societies, they have also not ventured to rank politicians, political parties or bureaucrats on their environmental performance. (An attempt was made at the last Presidential Elections in 1988 December to assess each candidate's green promises, but it did not materialize.) Perhaps this is because such issues will immediately place them against the establishment.
We must bear in mind, however, that the island’s NGO community is still coming to terms with its relatively new role as a major force in environment-development issues, and therefore needs more time, exposure, experience and resources to fully live up to expectations.

II. Constraints faced by NGOs:

Financial constraints and institutional limitations have thus far prevented Sri Lankan NGOs from reaching their full potential to facilitate public participation in environmental affairs.

As a group, the NGOs are largely dependent on outside financial assistance for their administrative and programme activities. This dependence has left the NGOs subject to unpredictable cycles of growth and retrenchment. Donor support for specific programmes often fails to provide for the administrative and other requirements necessary for long-term institutional development.

There is also a trend which tempts NGOs to go for potentially fundable, or the so-called "sexy" projects/programme activities. Such projects do not always cater to the immediate needs of society, but can often ensure that an NGO survives in order to address such priority issues at a later stage.

Specific constraints that have limited NGO development include, but are not confined to:

- lack of full-time administrative and programme staff,
- lack of office equipment,
- inadequate technical experience in administrative functions and specialized programme activities,
- lack of opportunities for staff development,
- lack of professionalism in the NGO sector,
- lack of communication among NGOs.

It would be noted that none of these constraints is peculiar to Sri Lanka; most NGOs in the Asia-Pacific region would possibly identify similar limitations.

Financial and institutional limitations have in turn affected the ability of NGOs to develop new programmes in their particular areas of specialization. In their present circumstances, Sri Lankan environmental NGOs do not constitute the true network that is required to ensure public participation in resource management and environmental conservation.
12. Issues for discussion and directions for the future:

There are, however, certain things that can be done by NGOs with the currently available resources and manpower. There are also certain issues which they must confront. A few of them:

- NGOs need to develop a philosophical and conceptual framework for alternative models of development (N.B: The Sarvodaya Movement has tried to do this by advocating a "no affluence-no poverty society", but by and large other NGOs have not joined in this consensus building).

- They can investigate and document traditional forms of environmental conservation, sustainable agriculture and land management, etc. There is such a wealth of knowledge which, if not documented, may be lost forever in a generation or two. And no Government research institute can have access to such information as efficiently as NGOs can.

- They need to develop better links with the media. Many NGOs still have very poor media relations, and generally view the media with some suspicion (suggesting that the media supports the establishment).

- They have to look beyond mere awareness generating and emphasize on mobilizing people. In Sri Lanka, thanks to the high literacy rate and free education, there is already considerable awareness of environmental problems; people now need to know what they can do, in their own day-to-day living, to help achieve environmentally sound and sustainable development. Of course, NGOs must continue their awareness programmes, but also have follow-up mobilization activities. Otherwise the mission will be only half fulfilled.

- NGOs have to devise ways and means to be financially less dependent on donors. While NGOs should not be driven by the profit motive, there is no reason why they should not earn some "honest money" through consultancies, publications and the like. This is a delicate balance to maintain, but there are some development NGOs which have succeeded in doing just this.

- Finally, NGOs should be a light unto themselves. If there is a self-correcting mechanism (once again, an ideal; but the alternative is far worse) there need not be Government probing or undue legal constraints.
Much of what I have discussed in this section concerns Sri Lankan NGOs, but some of it might provide useful "pointers" to NGOs in the other countries of the region. It is hoped that NGOs who are good at educating others will occasionally take some time off to assess and educate themselves.

It is also hoped that the processes of public participation in environment and development, which is the focal concern of this meeting, will receive some tangible benefits from our deliberations here and will, in the years to come, become more streamlined and sensitive to reflect the true democratic spirit.
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