

UNHEARD VOICES AMONG THE BUZZING CHAINSAWS: The Role of Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) in the Global Environmental Politics of Forest Governance

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Seventy five percent of the world's forests are controlled or owned by governments (ITTO, 2006). This startling fact shows that when it comes to the protection and sustainable use of forests, it is government policies and actions that have the greatest impact. To understand and thereby influence how governments construct and implement policies related to forest use is therefore of enormous significance in the struggle to prevent the further degradation and destruction of the world's forests. Given this situation, it is pertinent to ask if environmental NGOs (ENGOS) have any influence over the directions that governments take and the decisions that they make in relation to forests, and if it could be said that ENGOS have carved out a role in the global environmental politics of forest governance that exists beyond the government sphere.

It is necessary to consider, first of all, the wider political environment that is relevant to the issues of forest protection and how this affects ENGOS specifically. It will then be appropriate to look at the characteristics of ENGOS and what capacities they employ as actors in this environment. This paper will conclude by arguing that, although caution should be exercised in not over-estimating the ability of ENGOS (for the private sector too has a role to fulfill), such organizations have made significant contributions in vital areas and, if favourable conditions allow, may yet be able to take on more important roles in the global governance of forests.

The roles ENGOS have traditionally played in this area include that of researchers, monitors, purveyors of alternative visions, and supporters of sustainable practice. The extent to which they play these roles effectively has come more and more to depend on their ability to exploit partnerships (as explored at the UNCED conference in Johannesburg in 2002) with a variety of other organizations from governments, research institutions and the private sector. Very few ENGOS (with *Greenpeace* a notable exception) have the resources to directly exert influence by themselves in global arenas. For the vast majority, partnerships have had to be formed, alliances pursued and cooperation sought after, but ENGOS still have a role as organizations that can offer radical alternatives.

Before beginning the discussion proper, two important points need to be made. The first concerns the link between the global and the local. The question under discussion concerns specifically the role of ENGOs in the *global* arena, however, as civil society organizations born of citizen activity, much of the work of ENGOs takes place at the *local* level; securing the protection of small areas of forest, helping indigenous communities find sustainable ways of exploiting forest produce, gathering extensive data about a forest's composition, condition and how it is used, and so on. The global problems that result from deforestation often originate from regional or local causes and it is at these levels that problems need to be addressed (ESRC, 2000). Local actions, through, for instance, the demonstration of good practice, the replication of successful projects, and the exposure of corruption, means that local activity can exert some influence at the global scale. In other words, local action can lead to global change. This influence may originate at different points. Although large international ENGOs operate predominately at global levels there are thousands of small ENGOs which work only at the local level. However, it will be argued that even work at the grassroots can be seen to influence global perceptions. While this link will not be over-stressed it is important to recognize that it is still part of the equation when considering the global role of ENGOs.

This leads on to the second point, namely, the problem of defining ENGOs. ENGOs may be large, non-territorial (DeSombre, 2002), have official recognition from the UN system, and be involved in the negotiation of conventions, treaties and action plans. They may include what Morphet calls (in Willets, 1996), "hybrid" ENGOs, for example, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), that are closely linked to governments and accept significant funding from them. Conversely, many ENGOs are also local, small scale, attached to particular geographical locations and often unknown outside their area of influence. For the purpose of this paper, ENGOs will be defined as organizations originating from civil society that are concerned with initiating change for the benefit of under-represented groups or issues, in this case the sustainable use of forests and their protection along with the rights of forest users and dwellers.

Do ENGOs possess the capacity to exercise influence as actors in global environmental politics? Factors that might support a significant role include the fact that with such great diversity ENGOs can be innovative in seeking solutions. They are known for their ability to mobilize public opinion to place pressure on decision-making bodies. Those that work at grassroots level are, through their local knowledge, able to match more closely and appropriately policy measures with the capacity to implement. They can also exert influence through transnational advocacy networks.

On the other hand, there are several factors that might inhibit their ability to play an effective role. ENGOs do not and can not speak with a single voice - their diversity may result in messages becoming diluted, though there are several large ENGOs which are able to command more attention. Nevertheless, many, if not most ENGOs suffer from a lack of resources which reduces their capacity to be a key actors.

It would appear therefore that partnerships, in a variety of forms, are the major way that ENGOs can play a role in the governance of global forests. However, these partnerships have to be based on mutual trust, a roughly equal balance of power between the partners, and an understanding of expectations, conduct and decision making with processes in place for conflict resolution (SustainAbility, 2000). Without these provisos, ENGOs will find themselves manipulated or co-opted.

I shall now offer a short analysis of what governments have recognized as being their obligations in respect to forests and how have they have discharged these obligations. This analysis will help to partly identify the role of ENGOs.

The 1972 Stockholm Conference recognized the vital importance of forest ecosystems and their place in maintaining the health of the planet. It also recognized the need for appropriate land management policies, effective monitoring and surveillance, and more extensive research and cooperation (UNEP, 2002). Unfortunately, the UNCED 'Earth Summit' twenty years later revealed that little progress had been made by governments in these areas. Although Agenda 21 identified NGOs as being a special group with whom governments should work, chapter 11, relating to forests, and the subsequent 'Statement of Forest Principles' were, it was widely felt, lacking in commitment. The Stockholm recommendations "remain valid and unfulfilled" (UNEP, 2002 p.90). The gap between perceptions of forest governance between Western countries keen on preservation, and countries with tropical forests equally keen on exploiting them, remains wide (Dresner, 2002). The inability to square this particular circle has serious implications for the role of ENGOs who have shared in the frustration of many at the lack of progress, leading to efforts in other fora to break the deadlock. The response of ENGOs has, according to the UNEP, brought about a rapid evolution of forest governance systems that accept (albeit by default) "the respective roles and responsibilities of government, the private sector, indigenous communities and civil society" (UNEP, 2002, p95).

Two other factors are significant in explaining the increased involvement of ENGOs in forest governance. Firstly, the changing political climate which promotes multi-stakeholder processes and has led to an expanded role for ENGOs, and secondly, evolving concepts of the nature of governance (DeSombre, 2002). ENGO presence at UN negotiations has slowly gained acceptance together with increased cooperation with development-related NGOs allowing clearer expression of alternative opinions to be heard. Ideas of governance have widened with the idea that governance needs to be spread across many levels. Coupled with this is the particular positive characteristic that governance carried out by ENGOs may (correctly or not) reflect concepts such as 'fairness' and 'equity'. It is becoming more and more accepted that societies cannot be governed at one level only (Ibid).

What roles then have NGOs been able to play in negotiations on forests within the UN system? It has largely been a history of frustration; moments of optimism followed by long periods of growing disillusion and pessimism where influence has been minimal. Though NGO presence at the 1992 'Earth Summit' in Rio was high profile, ENGOs had almost no input into the final agreements on forests that were produced (Dresner, 2002). Subsequent negotiations at the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) 1995-97, the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) 1997-2000, and the six sessions held so far of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) have seen some NGO involvement, but opinions about the contribution of ENGOs and their role has been mixed, as has the extent to which ENGOs have felt part of the process. It has to be said that the inconsistent manner in which governments treat ENGOs has made it difficult for them to carve out a role in such fora. To illustrate, at the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Working Group in 1994, ENGOs were permitted to add the issue of participation and transparency in forest management to the agenda of the Working Group (IISD, 1995). Moreover, the Earth Negotiations Bulletin, published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development was particularly positive in its assessment of ENGO participation in the second session of the IPF in 1996, when "invaluable contributions" by ENGOs were included in revised draft texts and ENGO participation had "blazed the trail... to make similar inroads in other policy fora" (IISD, 1996). Unfortunately, such optimism is rarely maintained. In this case, it had all but evaporated by 1998 when groups associated with the IFF (successor to the IPF) felt that its lack of identity and role, exacerbated by its relative powerlessness when recommending action to more powerful bodies, made connection with it a waste of valuable ENGO resources and time (IISD, 1998). ENGOs seemed to be fighting for a voice in a flawed organization.

The establishment of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) in 2000 was meant to be a

new start. As part of its mandate it promised to involve civil society more actively (IISD, 2005). However, by then, expectations that ENGOs could play a role had sunk even lower. Hopes of getting a legally-binding Forest Convention, supported by many ENGOs, had all but been abandoned and once again initial optimism on the part of ENGOs following the formation of the UNFF dissipated. The fifth session of the UNFF, held in 2005, represented a low point. Universally viewed as a failure, the Multi-stakeholder dialogue that was included was seen as misrepresenting ENGOs and indigenous groups who felt shoe-horned into the UN's 'major group' categorization. In its report to ECOSOC the UNFF stated that "major groups shared a diverse set of perspectives and opinions about priorities," but was described by the Earth Negotiations Bulletin as diluting the voices of ENGOs and indigenous peoples by the association with "business and industry" (IISD 2005). The breakdown of the multi-stakeholder dialogue at the Fifth session led the Sixth session of the UNFF held in February of last year, to discontinue its multi-stakeholder dialogue. Without consistent political support, ENGOs and civil society generally are relatively powerless in these key UN institutions and have little role to play.

Have ENGOs had any more success in institutions with wider membership? The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) described as an "innovative, interagency partnership" that is "open, transparent and flexible," was set up by ECOSOC in 2001 and might at first glance appear to offer more fertile ground for ENGOs trying to work in the UN system (CPF, 2002). Its 13 members include FAO, UNDP, UNEP as well as the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the World Conservation Union, ITTO and The World Bank. It boasts of having the capacity and resources to support the decisions of the UNFF. It also has a network (the CPF Network) which invites all stakeholders in forests, including ENGOs, to become involved in information sharing and collaborative action. However, collaboration is qualified as that which is "deemed feasible" and the multi-stakeholder dialogue, seen as a key mechanism for communication between the network and the CPF is moribund. On top of this, a monthly electronic newsletter, the *UNFF News*, meant to encourage debate with contributions from those in the Network, appears to serve merely as a mouthpiece for the UNFF.

An exception to this pattern has been the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) which has had a more positive relationship with ENGOs and allows them a greater role. In a statement directly to ENGOs earlier last year, the Executive Secretary of the CBD, Dr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, acknowledged the debt owed to ENGOs for placing environmental issues on the agenda and keeping them there (UNEP, 2006a). The comparison with the UNFF is noticeable. The historical role of ENGOs is appreciated along with the belief that they are partners in pursuing the work of

the Convention. In the recent COP 8 ENGOS were, for example, invited to “fully participate in, and contribute to, the implementation” of education and public awareness-raising programs (UNEP, 2006b, p159). In addition, ENGOS are encouraged to take an active role in the future ‘forest biological diversity’ program. Certainly ENGOS themselves have a more positive relationship with the CBD. Devoting resources to preparing eight position papers for the COP 8 of the CBD at Curitiba last year suggests that the WWF believed the opportunity to play a role at the conference was one worth taking (WWF, 2006).

Why have ENGOS been almost completely unsuccessful in gaining a position of influence in these institutions? It is partly to do with their relative lack of power and, despite the rhetoric, the reluctance of the UN system to fully welcome ENGOS to the process. However, their failure is part of a collective failure. The UNFF and its predecessors, and associated groups like CPF have achieved very little: no convention, legally-binding or voluntary, no world body, and no Forest Fund. The various interests of all the actors have cancelled each other out, leaving those who wish to maintain the status quo as the only winners.

ENGOS can be seen to exercise more influence at other levels of governance: in governmental and intergovernmental fora outside the UN system, for example, the ODA ministries of national governments and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO); in institutions like the European Tropical Forest Research Network (ETFRN) and Global Forest Watch; in independent research institutions such as CIFOR; in NGO-initiated projects such as the Forest Stewardship Council; and in ENGO coalitions like the World Rainforest Movement.

For information related to and examples of sustainable forest management (SFM) ENGOS and other development NGOs are making effective use of organizations like the ETFRN. The ETFRN comprises EU institutions and organizations, researchers and civil society groups. It provides a web service for dissemination of information, workshops and research exchange. ENGOS are using organs like the ‘ETFRN News’ to focus on the case studies of many local NGO activities in global forests. They serve to illustrate what NGOs are doing in issues of forest management and are playing an important role in illustrating the complexity of the issues involved, but also, what is being done about them. One news item reporting on NGO activities in Kenya, notes that forest products often make up the shortfall for forest dwellers when other income sources are inadequate. Unfortunately, collecting such products can take substantial amounts of time, the burden of which falls on women and girls who may be collecting illegally because the nationally-set permit fee is far beyond their ability to pay (Adano, et al, 2003). Such a case clearly

shows the complexity of forest issues and can relate to matters of poverty, resource management, gender and policy. It could be argued that such news sources are now so numerous that their ability to influence policy making is lowered accordingly. This may be so, however, it is by being armed with such knowledge of what local groups are doing that the ENGOs working at inter-governmental levels can add weight to their arguments and claim legitimacy as representatives of forest stakeholders.

ENGOs are also exploiting well-placed and well-focused organizations like the Forests and the European Resource Network (FERN), for example, which works to advocate change to EU policies affecting forests. It works at a variety of levels, supporting local projects but also campaigns with ENGOs at national and regional levels. Acknowledging the enormous scope of forest issues, FERN focuses its attention on what it identifies as the underlying causes of deforestation (lack of financial support, logging, and government policies) in order to concentrate its influence in key areas (FERN, 2006). Through their association with its NGO network, ENGOs can utilize the group to help in the coordination of activities and the issuing of joint statements on forest issues – clearly a more effective employment of the ENGO role to raise awareness about forest issues. Despite being an organization closely connected with government institutions, FERN is happy to challenge existing structures with innovative thinking. It can provide a platform for ENGOs to propose changes that could bring about solutions to long term problems in the forest sector (Ibid).

An analysis of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) provides clear evidence of how ENGOs have succeeded in influencing an inter-governmental body. The 59 members of this organization control 90% of the world's tropical forest timber trade (ITTO, 2005). Yet the organization supports the “active participation” of civil society and implements projects from locally-derived knowledge and local communities (Ibid). Notwithstanding, it might be expected that such an intergovernmental organization would likely cater to the lowest common denominator in its deliberations. However, this is not so, and two points are of relevance here. First, the International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA) under which the ITTO works, is a document that requires regular re-negotiation, and, as such, is more adaptable to the changing forest conditions and timber trade (DeSombre, 2002). Second, the governing Council of the ITTO allowed the input of a Civil Society Advisory Group (CSAG) over several years leading up to the re-negotiation of the ITTA. Members of the CSAG included Forest Trends USA, and WWF-International (CSAG, 2004).

It is worth considering the CSAG position statement and then comparing the 1994 ITTA with

the re-negotiated ITTA of 2006. The CSAG made several recommendations on the input of Article 1 – the organization’s objectives – prior to delegates’ discussions (CSAG, 2004). One was a request to re-affirm the primary purpose of the ITTA, namely the sustainable management of tropical forests. Compared with the 1994 Agreement the 2006 version mentions ‘sustainable management’ on an additional six occasions in the article’s 19 subsections, and, in a new preamble to Article 1, a further eight times (ITTA, 2006). A second recommendation by the CSAG was that the ITTO commit itself to tackling illegal harvesting and trade of forest products. In 1994 there was no mention of this issue, however, the new agreement included a clause to promote sustainable management of forests by “strengthening the capacity of members to improve forest law enforcement and governance, and address illegal logging...” (Ibid). Finally, the CSAG was successful in also having inserted a reference to the importance of indigenous and local communities to forest management, also absent from the 1994 treaty (ITTA, 1994). Although non-binding, this would appear to show the valuable role that ENGOs can play in strengthening agreements on forest issues. ENGOs may feel uneasy granting legitimacy to an organization that wishes to increase the trade in tropical timber, but ENGOs that overcome their reservations, may find a role in shaping agreements made by organizations like ITTO.

ENGOs can often play an important role as partners with governments. For example, in Costa Rica where 25% of timber is illegally traded, the Ministry of Environment together with an NGO produced a five-year strategy in 2001 to tackle the problem. In addition, other groups, including ENGOs were involved in implementing the strategy (FAO, 2005). ENGOs in West Kalimantan have also been involved with government representatives to monitor the judiciary process in improving compliance with forest laws in Indonesia (Ibid). It can be seen from these examples, that ENGOs are exerting some degree of influence on governments and their policies regarding sustainable management and protection of forests.

What role do ENGOs working independently (or as part of ENGO coalitions) have to play and how would we evaluate their activities? In this situation, we find that ENGOs have developed considerable expertise in what is seen as more traditional areas for ENGOs, that is, monitoring, campaigning and advocacy. In addition, certification, an ENGO initiative, has also become part of forest governance discussions and solutions. Global Forest Watch (GFW), founded by the World Resources Institute, is a coalition of 75 academic, scientific organizations and NGOs that serve a monitoring role of the physical condition of the world’s forests (GFW, 2006). However, in addition to this, GFW assesses the kind of development that take place within forests, how sustainable it is and who are the agents involved. GFW are at the forefront in putting their research to practical

use. For example, the report 'Monitoring for Impact' (WRI, 2000) seeks to educate any organization planning to monitor by illustrating the key considerations and pitfalls in creating monitoring programs. Thirteen case studies on monitoring programs implemented by groups such as Conservation International and Forest Watch/Sierra Legal Defence Fund provide valuable experience for those wanting to make their monitoring as effective as possible. Another organization, the Global Forest Coalition (GFC), similarly sees its advocacy and research from a practical angle. This group is dedicated to promoting and monitoring the commitments made by multilateral institutions. Through monitoring and advocacy campaigns GFC seeks to raise public awareness of these commitments and provoke greater political will to bring about implementation.

A third organization worthy of note is the Taiga Rescue Network, a coalition of over 200 ENGOs and indigenous groups concerned with the protection and sustainable use of boreal forests. Like many coalitions, its three-pronged strategy is, 'Education and Advocacy', 'Campaign Coordination', and 'Research and Policy Analysis'; and its newsletter 'Taiga News' attempts to draw lessons from the activities and experiences of the ENGOs in its network thereby influencing how policy decisions may be affected (TRN, 2006).

One area in which, up until recently at least, NGOs have had a dominant role in is that of certification. The principles of certification were largely drawn up by ENGOs and clearly put the benefits of forest communities uppermost. Certification has also helped to bring the forest industry in as an active player working with forest communities and NGOs. However, with certification of large forestry companies becoming more common, the benefits to local communities have decreased (WRM, 2001). Problems of certification, say its critics, are due to its market-based structure, and an attempt to use the idea inappropriately when it is best suited for specific, local circumstances only.

ENGOs, particularly through forming coalitions, have made considerable progress in strengthening their abilities to play a role in global forest care. Though at such a remove it is difficult to state how effective they are. Nevertheless, the need for clearer, up-to-date information remains vital. Undoubtedly there are many ENGOs that remain ineffective through a lack of resources or a disciplined approach, or that prefer not to work with other groups, however, coalitions like TRN can act as models to raise the standard of NGO monitoring, advocacy and campaigning over the care of the world's forests.

This research shows that, within certain contexts, ENGOs have been able to play an effective role in the global political arena of forests. In important areas however, they lack any real power or voice. Though the presence of ENGOs in global decision-making bodies relating to forests has been increasing, their influence remains small. They remain relatively unheard voices among the buzzing chainsaws that continue to destroy the world's forests. Notwithstanding, their role in advocating greater involvement of marginalized forest communities and groups is crucial and it will be through developing innovative forms of partnerships with willing stakeholders that a greater role will be secured. A greater coherence among ENGOs can be seen, but they need to continue exercising whatever leverage they can find to do more for the global protection of forests and their sustainable use.

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Unheard Voices among the Buzzing Chainsaws: the Role of Environmental Non-governmental Organizations (ENGOS) in the Global Environmental Politics of Forest Governance

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Abstract

Governments own the majority of the world's forests. It is therefore government policies on forests which have the greatest effect on how forests are used and protected. This paper seeks to analyze the role of environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in influencing those policies in order to reduce forest destruction and encourage sustainable use. NGOs have traditionally exerted some influence at the local level. It will be argued that, under the right conditions, they may also exert influence on a regional or global scale. In addition, though ENGOS have in the past been restricted to monitoring and research, they are increasingly active in international fora and policy-making bodies. Unfortunately, government encouragement of NGO activity in governmental arenas has been patchy. It is suggested that this is due to the lukewarm efforts on the part of the United Nations and its various fora concerned with forest policy, though there has also been a collective failure due to conflicting objectives among ENGOS. Outside the UN system there has been more success, and this paper will provide several examples of this. The paper also highlights some of the innovative approaches by NGOs to gain a more influential role in constructing forest policy, including input into policy-making with business organizations like the International Tropical Timber Organization, and timber certification processes. The research will conclude that ENGOS have scored some successes in affecting the way forests are governed but unless they are able to make stronger and more equal partnerships and gain greater political support, they will have no more than a marginal effect on governmental forestry policy.