

NGOs and the Environmental Warning

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Environmental concern now seems to be a matter of broad consensus. It is sometimes forgotten that NGOs, long considered marginal, were the first to sound the alarm and lead the movement to protect the planet. We will now look back on thirty years of mobilisation that have changed our perception of these organisations.

Protecting the environment belongs in the category of great, globalised causes, along with fighting discrimination and promoting human rights. What is now happening in Copenhagen is part of an international agenda bringing together government representatives, international experts and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The role of the latter in protecting the planet is complex; nevertheless, from the very beginning their action centred on informing public opinion and spreading the idea that environmental issues require urgent decisions. For them, their task is to warn people and to highlight the paradoxes of international public policy – particularly individual countries' transgressions.

However, during this conference we have seen that NGOs have done little to renew their repertoire of collective action; that is, the methods and procedures enabling them to register complaints or defend a particular interest (in this case, defending the environment). If the script is pre-determined to such an extent that the actors show no inventiveness, it means that the organisations are true professionals in the art of protest and their expertise as activists is extremely polished.

In the world of environmental protesters, some small groups are keen on direct action without cumbersome organisational procedures (anti-advertising, anti-vivisection etc.), while other networks of an anarchistic, anti-globalisation persuasion may choose radically

alternative ways of living (such as squatting or returning to nature). Environmental political parties, for their part, push in new directions, airing primarily environmental concerns. All these players interact; they are sometimes well acquainted and may cross paths during major unifying events. Nevertheless, NGOs have an entirely unique profile that cannot be sidelined in international negotiations. They are alternately experts commissioned by international institutions (United Nations officials) or agitators wielding the weapon of public opinion; some know how to play the two registers whereas others, because of their history, excel in one over the other. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Sierra Club and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) are recognised for the expert work they carry out on protection issues, while Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth are perceived as troublemakers, an image of which they take full advantage. Since the mid-1990s, the French global environmental protection scene has been transformed by the local action taken by these NGOs, which originated in the United States, and by the emergence of a new entrepreneur of activism, Nicolas Hulot, who has taken up tried and tested forms of activism but added his own media appeal and personal style.

As the Copenhagen conference gets underway, this article will focus on the dynamics of environmental activism which, through perseverance, has managed to force its concerns onto international agendas. NGOs, with their highly varied profiles, have succeeded in pushing ambitious environmental policies while local political players failed to demand that such international measures be applied. At a time when the public is taking environmental matters seriously at national level, and political good will is flaunted from every side, should NGOs redefine their position? To be sure, some new players are declaring themselves environmentally aware (businesses) and others are claiming they are ready to make changes in that area (political leaders). Is the style of the Nicolas Hulot Foundation, for example, historically unprecedented in the environmental movement, or does its novelty reside in companies' increasing commitment to sponsoring the pro-environmental movement, alongside the NGOs? The challenge NGOs now face is how to carry out a public opinion campaign whilst taking account of this particular context.

From Stockholm to Copenhagen, a key role

From a historical perspective, the discernible emergence of environmental concerns on the international agenda took place with the founding of UNESCO in 1945 and the establishment of a network of players, the IUCN, in 1948. The biologist Julian Huxley, a

scientist and remarkable entrepreneur of collective action, has analysed this landmark structure on which the world of environmental protection is still based. The WWF then appeared in 1961 at the instigation of the IUCN, with the main aim of increasing public awareness of the disappearance of some species (particularly in Africa) and raising funds in order to finance awareness campaigns and the management of national parks. That time marked the point at which environmental campaigners moved into the media age and began to seek funding in order to offset countries' own lack of will.

In the 1960s, another major change in people's perception of the environment was starting to take place. Through its scientific programmes, UNESCO established networks of academic communities, enabling them to meet and exchange information. The term 'biosphere' was coined around this time (1966). The fact that people were beginning to adopt a global perspective in their reasoning transformed their perception of the environment, which seemed increasingly under threat from human activity, while North-South relations could no longer be ignored and people began to think not just in terms of the mere survival of animal species but of the very existence of humanity. It was during this period that a new generation of activists arrived on the scene, having been socialised on university campuses that were the site of protests focusing on decolonisation, the Vietnam War and the problems of segregation in the United States. This generation of baby-boomers challenged the productivist model of their parents' generation. It was in this context that two NGOs came into being and were to remain fundamental: Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace¹.

This second generation broke new ground in more than one area: it brought together activists who at the time were defiant members of the hippie counter-culture. They were fervent pacifists and anti-nuclear campaigners. The first Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace activists were strongly anti-Vietnam and constituted a threat to the United States government. In the middle of the 1970s, barely five years after they had been established, these two American NGOs were known to the media all over the world, and local groups (particularly of Friends of the Earth) were set up across Europe. These created the environmental network

¹ Friends of the Earth was established in San Francisco in 1969 and, under the aegis of the United Nations and with the city's support, set up the first Earth Day, a demonstration intended to give the Earth protection movement an environmental dimension – in the naturalist sense of the term – and a political dimension by declaring its pacifism. Greenpeace came about in 1971 in Vancouver, Canada, a city on the United States border which received many young people fleeing conscription: like the Quakers, its aim was to denounce the American nuclear weapons tests that were polluting Canadian waters and threatening areas inhabited by indigenous groups.

which, in France for example, supported the first anti-nuclear demonstrations and the first political campaigns (René Dumont in 1974; the 1977 local elections). The founders immediately began to use the media by means of scandals that were remarkable for the time. Demonstrations on bicycles, pyramids of bottles in London in protest against waste, etc. told those watching at the time that the burgeoning environmental movement brought with it a new form of discourse and new interests.

However, there was also another reason for establishing these networks: the North-American NGOs had a real need to internationalise in order to be recognised and accredited by the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Indeed, these NGOs quickly realised that they primarily needed to step up their campaigns on the international stage, in particular because the United Nations was preparing its first International Conference on the Human Environment. For this unprecedented event, organised from behind the scenes by experts from international – often academic – networks such as the IUCN, gave them an opportunity to issue a warning about the environmental challenges that governments had to meet. Thanks to the media coverage it received and the campaigns led in major Western countries, the 1972 Stockholm conference succeeded in ‘creating’ environmentalism; that is, an environmental concern that went beyond protecting species or areas of land and took on a clearly global dimension. Since that time, protecting the planet has been a real issue in international politics with repercussions for individual countries as well. For example, the majority of ministries and junior ministries emerged in Europe and North America in the wake of the Stockholm conference. Around that time, the European Economic Community showed signs of its first pro-environmental leanings. The first alarm signals about the depletion of the ozone layer were also heard in Stockholm.

Will Copenhagen be just another convention that follows in the footsteps of the Stockholm conference? It represents real progress in terms of specifically recognising climate change as a major environmental issue (along with deforestation, biodiversity, toxic products, quality of and access to water, oceans, etc). In other words, by making the environment a public policy issue, those who raised the alarm in the 1970s have succeeded in widening their campaign and making sure their interests became a focal point of negotiations. However, it took almost forty years to reach the 1997 Kyoto conference and all of the UN Conferences of

the Parties. The NGOs, with the active support of many international organisations, have had to show great tenacity in order to make their voice heard².

A network connecting campaigners and experts

We have been focusing on the most active NGOs, those that carry out the most protests. And yet the definition of an NGO is not clear, and in this group it is possible to find active, socially aware NGOs, NGOs characterised by scientific expertise which function like a research consultancy, or indeed NGOs (such as the IUCN) that bring together government representatives and even ministries. The ‘non-governmental’ reference is, in these cases, just a word: NGOs are not entirely free of cumbersome government procedures. They can be criticised in other ways, too: some people believe that they represent Western interests and are the mouthpiece for North-American concerns.

What is more, friction between different NGOs is not uncommon, due to both the cause being defended (animal welfare, environmental protection, man’s place within the concept of environmentalism, etc.) and the type of collective action taken (low-profile scientific studies carried out in institutions, vociferous media activity, utilising people’s sensitivity or presenting figures as proof). Rivalries are common, to the extent that analysts often talk about the world of NGOs in terms of ‘networks’ or ‘movements’ rather than environmental interest groups. Although it is difficult to deduce their nature from their profile alone, their role is nevertheless recognised both during international negotiations and by European institutions.

The high technical level of many environmental documents demands credible scientific analysis that only the NGOs, in conjunction with universities, can provide. Far from being in demand only in times of emergency, they are often called upon by UN and EU institutions in order to help generate information and regulations which subsequently have force of law, given that they often become legislation. For example, WWF played a key role in drawing up the 1992 Biodiversity Convention, one of the primary documents resulting

² We should remember that, in the hierarchy of interests worthy of consideration in international politics, the environment, like the protection of human rights and humanitarian issues, represents what is referred to in international relations as ‘low politics’, that is, the political issues which, in the field of diplomacy, are often dealt with after strategic and economic matters.

from the Rio Conference that same year. The IUCN and WWF provide a typical example of the behind-the-scenes experts who draw up texts for negotiation.

Ever since its inception, UNESCO has relied on networks of scientists that go on to become key players in environmental matters, forming what is known as an epistemic community. For example, the network of Nobel Peace Prize winners campaigns on human rights or humanitarian issues. On climate issues, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has played the role of whistle-blower, spread information about climate prognoses and provided experts capable of finding concrete solutions that may bring global warming under control.

Nevertheless, not all NGOs demonstrate expertise, and not all achieve the same level of trust and recognition at international level. This is why many NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, often ousted from the negotiating table and the preparation stages, develop conspicuous tactics that are not generally agreed upon. They raise public awareness of scheduling delays, half-hearted approaches to guidelines or international regulations, and countries' unwillingness to apply international laws. When negotiations are taking place, these different strategies come into play, reflecting the NGOs' varying roles. Campaigns aiming to shift public opinion begin weeks or even months before a conference is held; they draw attention to any inadequacies and remind people of the urgent nature of the measures to be taken. Greenpeace takes the public by surprise with its highly symbolic actions, and even questions politicians by directly confronting them (as seen at the French National Assembly last week).

The struggle to change people's minds

Generally speaking, the aim of NGOs is to make events happen and maintain media pressure during negotiations. While this now a familiar routine, with the agenda of international conferences reflecting that of NGO campaigns, we can see that the process has stabilised since the 1992 Rio Conference in particular, an event also known as the Earth Summit. In the past, they often relied on intermediary organisations linked to the United Nations or even UN institutions themselves in order to generate interest in a particular area of environmental protection (biodiversity, climate, forest protection or combating desertification). That period – which could be described as 'epic' in the sense that countries and businesses were not yet aware of environmental issues – required NGOs to exert their

strongest influence within institutions. By repeating their campaigns, the NGOs – including those considered least rebellious (for example, WWF) – played an undeniable role in raising awareness of global environmental issues.

Having worked to change public opinion through campaigns, shocking images, petitions and even documentaries, several factors then had to come together in order to bring about a general change of attitude towards the environment. In particular, the fall of the Berlin Wall motivated the international community and the UN, which were able to imagine a world in which the international agenda would no longer be subjected to the balance of terror. NGO campaigners recall that the Rio Conference represented a time of hope, thanks to both its recognition of issues related to development and the task facing civil society, led by Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

The post-Rio period was disappointing: at the 2002 Johannesburg Earth Summit government representatives and NGOs were more concerned with regulating excessive market liberalisation, or even discussing the imminent American invasion of Iraq, than examining the world from a purely environmental perspective. Nevertheless, since Rio, issues related to sustainable development have achieved greater recognition, including on national and local agendas. Many local authorities have engaged in sustainable development policies. At the same time, NGOs have progressively carved themselves a position as consultant on these issues, increasing their influence and advisory role. In medium-sized European cities (around 200,000 inhabitants), it is no longer uncommon to see Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth representatives either lobbying elected officials or taking part in events such as Salon de la Terre. And yet this localised role, within a context that is considerably more receptive to environmental matters, has enabled NGOs to campaign in an atmosphere that is less hostile and less ignorant of the issues at hand. Furthermore, governments have adopted positions that have given their campaigns a new legitimacy.

Activism and the ‘environmental emergency’

What does activism on behalf of the environment and against global warming mean in 2009? Of course, we can identify invariant patterns in NGOs’ methods: public opinion campaigns, exposing scandals, and producing scientific data, prognoses and statistics likely to win them support (for example, on the disappearance of habitats, ecosystems and species).

Nevertheless, from now on NGOs will be confronted over the way in which they challenge public opinion: some have lost credibility (on account of being too close to government or economic interests) and need to adapt to a world in which the role of national governments and economic players seems to be transforming, particularly as regards environmental issues.

Since the 2002 Johannesburg Conference, French and international circumstances have changed. There has been a growing number of crises on a range of issues, such as the wars against ‘terrorism’ (Iraq, Afghanistan), the financial crisis that began in 2007, and the increase in warnings of pandemics (SARS, Chikungunya, and swine flu). Amidst all these warnings, NGOs that were previously masters in the art of alerting the public to environmental destruction are now facing competition from international organisations, national governments and NGOs working in other sectors. Even under these circumstances, NGOs have succeeded in issuing warnings about the climate, even though this is considered highly technical, daunting and costly in political terms, given that it involves challenging the current model for economic growth.

Their success was brought about by the powerful media campaign waged on the theme of foreseen disasters. In less than five years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of documentaries on this subject (examples include *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore, *Home* by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, and *The Titanic Syndrome* by Nicolas Hulot). In their own way, these films all highlight the urgency of the situation and the vital need to take rapid measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Al Gore and the IPCC were awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, which helped put the climate issue on the agenda. The European Union, which took part in the Johannesburg Conference, is pursuing its own climate objectives and pressing Member States to reach a specific number of goals. Nicolas Sarkozy, all too aware of Nicolas Hulot’s influence over public opinion, made sure that his election campaign included the idea that steps would have to be taken. The environmental equivalent of the ‘Grenelle Agreement’, despite all the limitations highlighted by the NGOs, has nevertheless paved the way for a decision on carbon tax, which lies at the heart of the government scheme to encourage French citizens to reduce their greenhouse emissions.

The stages of international activism

- 1992: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- 1997: The Kyoto Protocol, intended to consolidate the Convention. Entered into force in 2005. 184 countries ratified the Protocol: 38 industrialised countries must reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2% from 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012.
- 2009: Annual conference in which countries discuss the fight against climate change, known as the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC and meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. The aim was to reach an agreement on the second commitment period, because the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol finishes in 2012. NGOs are campaigning for industrialised countries to reduce their greenhouse emissions by more than 40% in 2020 (the goal being not to exceed a rise in temperatures of more than 2°C!)

NGO lobbying has enabled them to establish the Climate Action Network. Information exchanges and homogenous campaigns with easily recognisable slogans and images allow them to reach wider sections of the public. The network is also active at national level (Climate Action Network France, for example). Humanitarian and development NGOs are increasingly incorporating an environmental agenda. The climate has helped to raise the issues of desertification and deforestation, and to understand that new migration patterns are being caused by climate refugees. The social dimension and North-South relations have come under even greater focus because the NGOs' line of reasoning has used the failure to anticipate the financial crisis as a means of clarifying the need to foresee potential migrations caused by climate change. At the Kyoto Conference in 1997, NGOs asked representatives from Pacific islands to express their fear over the certain, imminent disappearance of their environment. Their stories continue to illustrate the impending crisis by enabling NGO websites and arguments to give the situation the feel of a humanitarian emergency. The challenge NGOs face is how to find an angle that allows them to raise public awareness of the economic consequences of climate change during a time of economic crisis, which is rarely conducive to interest in environmental issues.

NGOs and businesses: a new relationship

While this globalised approach to risk has had an obvious impact on political agendas, the economic sector – willingly or unwillingly – also has an ecological dimension. Its involvement goes back some way: at the 1992 Earth Summit, multinational companies, including those most likely to be the target of environmentalists, built up a network of interest both to make their voices heard and to develop their image as advocates of sustainable development. A network was established as the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD), responsible for giving a voice to the business world. Then the World

Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) was set up as the result of the merging of the aforementioned BCSD and the World Industry Council for the Environment (WICE), part of the International Chamber of Commerce.

We should avoid adding to the debate over what stems from a real change in strategy and what is just a false show of ‘greenness’; it is clear, however, that many companies make use of both these approaches; nevertheless, since Rio and, to a greater extent, since Johannesburg, some NGOs (particularly WWF) have been forming partnerships with companies in the name of sustainable development. These partnerships enable NGOs to promote environmental standards in the business world, giving unexpected publicity to current awareness campaigns (sustainable consumption, fair trade, etc).

Nicolas Hulot’s method of forming partnerships with a large number of different companies has drawn criticism: his detractors believe that there is little proof that these businesses really wish to promote sustainable development. If we analyse the Hulot Foundation’s actions, we find that its novelty lies in the fact that it differs considerably from the rest of the French non-profit world, which is rarely open to the business world. It is more akin to North-American associations, or NGOs like WWF which do not refuse to form partnerships with industry or business. On the other hand, although Nicolas Hulot, a media man, has often surprised observers with his unconventional attitude towards the environmental circle of influence, individual entrepreneurs are not uncommon in the history of green activism: there is the Cousteau Society, the Brigitte Bardot Foundation, and people such as the volcanologist Haroun Tazieff, the astrophysicist Hubert Reeves, or even René Dumont, the agronomist and specialist of the Third World known for his strong character. Nicolas Hulot, in maintaining the approach of a man of influence rather than a man of politics, remains one of those capable of drawing a crowd with his name alone – at least during campaigns such as the Grenelle action. What is more surprising about his approach, and which raises the most questions among other environmental organisations, is his close relationship with the business world. Over the last ten years, criticism of these businesses has spread beyond the most radically degrowth, anti-capitalist core groups.

At the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, NGOs, including those least involved in the so-called alter-globalisation response such as Greenpeace, began to develop a line of argument that highlighted the mistakes of market liberalisation and sometimes the direction taken by governments. Businesses are, more than ever, targeted by environmentalists and even some governments. The Nicolas Hulot Foundation calls on governments, companies and citizens

whose mission is to lobby in the hope of bringing about widespread mobilisation. By forging open-minded partnerships with the economic world, the Hulot Foundation is an example of another transformation: the emergence of alliances between civil society and businesses, in the name of green governance. Given the urgency of the situation, widespread mobilisation is required; discourse focusing on that urgency shakes up the more conventional environmental analysis which, without necessarily being overwhelmingly anti-capitalist, challenges a form of exponential growth. How will Nicolas Hulot manage to maintain his style of urgent rallying without calling into question a form of economic growth?

Climate crisis, economic crisis

The public is keeping an eye on its governments during the current negotiations; these are taking place in a time of economic crisis, which usually forces environmental issues into the background. However, a new opportunity has presented itself: businesses need ecology in order to conquer new markets or transform their production. Some of them have every interest in developing new technologies or marketing their new ‘green’³ products. The current situation will no doubt have a decisive and unforeseen impact, given that the environmental crisis will be addressed in conjunction with the financial crisis. NGOs are focusing their campaigns on this matter by deliberately linking the climate crisis with the financial crisis in order to bring about a review of economic regulations.

These negotiations are taking place at a time when most countries are experiencing economic sluggishness and social tension. NGOs are demanding drastic changes to consumption habits and patterns; this is a favourable time in which criticisms of the liberal model are spreading beyond the core ‘alter-globalists’. But will governments and the general public hear them? Will businesses declaring themselves to be eco-citizens join with NGOs and play the lobbying game? Will governments be able to envisage an crisis exit strategy that promotes a new approach to energy? In the medium term, NGOs will probably have to take on new roles when supporting reforms, and clarify their position to their financial backers.

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³ China is questioning how their reputation may be effected by their tendency to sell products that fall far short of environmental standards.