

ENGOs and the Public:

Alternatives to the Lack of International Leadership

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Introduction

This short essay is aimed to answer one of the questions from the initial panel abstract, specifically: “Could bottom-up [...] initiatives compensate for the lack of international leadership?” It is argued that in the context of climate change and broader environmental degradation bottom-up initiatives can indeed make a difference – and that the change to a great extent happens bottom-up. It can be stimulated by responsible governments, business, and non-governmental organizations. The main purpose of this paper is to clarify conceptual distinction between the two types of action that ENGOs can exercise and suggest that activities directed at changing norms, values, attitudes and behavior of the general public are underrated in the system of ENGO priorities.

Two approaches to change

The starting point of this paper is that the international political system is failing to address global environmental crisis and the pressing challenge of climate change. Repeating declarations of commitment and little action of governments within UNFCCC platform resemble a famous play by Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, which dwells on setting arbitrary benchmarks in the future and repeatedly delaying action. Climate talks were heavily criticized by civil society groups, academia and some governments; criticism reaching its tipping point at the 15th Conference of Parties in Copenhagen in 2009¹. Climate change phenomenon is too broad and complex; it is hard to tackle as it involves political, economic, social and environmental dimensions and is complicated by scientific uncertainty. Governments in current political settings and with a given structure of incentives are highly unlikely to come to an agreement on drastic CO2 emission reductions and, more specifically, on the very need to phase out fossil fuels. Calls for alternatives to state-lead action increase in frequency.

In this context, two views can be outlined with regards to how a response to climate change could happen. The first view has at its core an idea that addressing environmental crisis in general (and resolving climate change in particular) requires political will and action from governments and large transnational corporations, actors in power. If these actors are convinced in the urgency of action, at a national level they would pass laws and introduce policies that are supposedly going to resolve the problem. At a global and regional levels, to strengthen the commitment of those who is already committed and include parties who prefer to maintain status quo, governments can agree on binding treaties to restrict and regulate each other’s damaging activities (like CO2 emissions, for example) through a system of monitoring and enforcement sanctions. The change is considered a done deal as soon as governments agree to pass laws or policies on the matter in question. What

¹ For example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8421910.stm#nongovernmental> or <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/18/copenhagen-deal>

happens after these laws and policies come in force and whether they achieve expected results oftentimes falls beyond the scope of this view as it takes time to test policies and laws in practice. Let us call this a **top-down** approach – an idea that change originates from governments and is imposed onto individuals.

On the other hand, there is a view that climate change is too broad and complex to be resolved solely top-down. It challenges the effectiveness of top-down political action on the grounds of what this paper took as its initial assumption: considering the urgency of climate change and an overall consensus about the need for action, there is still little done at a global scale to address the problem, apart from rhetoric. A crisis that requires almost immediate response and a drastic change does not get due attention and high level political commitment. Top-down approach is not outdated or wrong, it works well in other areas and for other crises. But rather in case of climate change it can be considered as less efficient due to complexity of the phenomenon and uncertainty surrounding it.

Some environmental philosophers argue that resolving climate change cannot happen without a normative shift, a shift in people's values, attitudes and behaviors. The world continues to operate within a system of values that emerged in times of unlimited resource availability and direct responsibility for one's actions². At least since the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* in 1972, this planet's limited carrying capacity became a fact. The new reality requires moderation at all levels. But our values are not changing as fast as our environment, and "old" values and categories continue to shape our judgments at all levels (from global to individual), threatening the prospects of our planet and humans on it. In the same vein Gardiner argues that in order to resolve climate change conceptualized as a collective action problem in game-theoretical terms we need to change underlying motivations and incentives for action³. These motivations would need to include new values such as care for the planet and for the future of human kind, sense of a global bound community, intragenerational and intergenerational solidarity. New values, attitudes and behavior on the scale of societies are essential in combating climate change.

Values and norms do not change overnight. Neither can they be imposed by governments. Social psychologists suggest that changing environmental attitudes of the general public does not always result from new policies and laws⁴. Policies and laws that are not grounded in a broader context of public understanding and acceptance have much less chance to be successful than when the public agrees with the need for and usefulness of the proposed measures. That is especially true in cases when a new policy or law requires substantial behavioral change (like changing individual lifestyles in case of climate change) or involves economic incentives. So, new norms and values cannot be imposed top-down. The transformation can be stimulated by responsible governments, business, and non-governmental organizations but the ultimate change is in the minds of people, reflected in their attitudes, behavior and choices. In this second view, the change happens bottom-up, so let us call this a **bottom-up approach**: an idea that a bottom-up societal transformation is a necessary condition for resolving climate change.

² Dale Jamieson, "Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming" in *Science, Technology, and Human Values*, 17 (1992), 139-153

³ Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, Oxford University Press 2011 (i.e. page 53 or page 62)

⁴ Thomas Heberlain, *Navigating Environmental Attitudes*, Oxford University Press 2012

What difference can ENGOs make?

In the context of lacking international leadership and commitment from governments and large corporations to take action on climate change, ENGOs since the very start of climate talks in 1992 maintained strong commitment and dedication to the cause. ENGOs advocated for urgent action on climate change, working with governments, businesses and the general public for the last twenty years and more. In the 1990s ENGOs were referred to as “the conscience of the world”⁵, implying that these organizations represent good values and do the right thing by trying to convince governments and other stakeholders in the need to act on climate change. ENGOs were recognized for having ability to change international norms and public attitudes and opinion on environmental matters⁶.

So, how can we assess activities of ENGOs through the lenses of the two approaches towards a climate change response outlined earlier?

Most of the rhetoric around ENGOs developed in line with the top-down approach which views governments (and large business) as primary actors in capacity to implement a change. Most ENGO studies implicitly assume that actions of ENGOs directed at these actors are the most important (and worth studying) part of ENGOs’ activities. As these studies show, ENGOs were prolific in their activities on climate matters since Rio 1992 and got increasingly involved into global politics, into lobbying and “convincing” governments and business about “the right thing to do”⁷. ENGOs’ initial rapid infiltration into global environmental politics in the 1990s even initiated discussions about the changing world order⁸.

However, looking back at the developments of the past twenty years many scholars agree that the influence of ENGOs on the outcome of climate talks was and remains limited⁹. Some privileges that were granted earlier (like partial access to the UN rooms and corridors and, therefore, to governmental officials and UN staff) did not grow into full access (including the right to intervene) to the most important intergovernmental discussions. ENGOs do not have a full right to speak and express their views during intergovernmental discussions like states. Even in the most recent meetings of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals ENGOs were invited to present their views – but *before* the meeting of Member States, only to the co-chairs, and were only allowed to speak in the last 3-5 minutes of the intergovernmental discussion itself¹⁰. In spite of being granted access and right to speak at the UN premises on paper, ENGOs have little ways of making themselves heard in the UN settings in practice, apart from engaging directly with diplomats.

⁵ Piter Willetts, *The Conscience of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organizations in the UN System*, Brookings Institution Press 1996

⁶ Wapner, Paul. 1996. *Environmental Activism and World Civil Politics*. SUNY Press

⁷ i.e. William F. Fisher “Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices” in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26 (1997), pp. 439-464

⁸ John Gerrard Ruggie, “What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and Social-Constructivism Challenge” in *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4, *International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics* (Autumn, 1998), pp. 855-885 / p.876

⁹ For example, Michelle Betsill and Elizabeth Corell, *NGO Diplomacy: The Influence of Nongovernmental Organizations in International Environmental Negotiations*, MIT Press 2008; Steinar Andersen and Lars Gulbrandsen, [“The Role of Green NGOs in Promoting Climate Compliance”](#) 2003

¹⁰ From the observations of the author and also here:

<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1636>

Therefore, in spite of a promising entrance, power-wise ENGOs' position in state-dominated UN climate talks resembles one of a poor cousin from a countryside staying with his richer family in a city: speak when asked to and don't overstep the boundaries of hospitality. If a joint action by governments is considered to be a measure of effectiveness of ENGOs' influence on global climate politics, then the stagnation of global climate talks is a proof that ENGOs were not successful in exercising their influence.

Much less attention in the literature was given to the role of ENGOs in changing values, norms and attitudes of the general public. One of the first to emphasize this dimension of ENGOs' activities as a political action in itself was Paul Wapner¹¹. Large ENGOs that have trust of and access to millions of supporters, such as WWF and Greenpeace, are in capacity to influence public opinion, change norms, values and attitudes. As it was mentioned earlier, ENGOs have a recognized track of successful cases of changing international norms and public attitudes on environmental matters. Some examples here could be whaling¹², radiation waste dumping in oceans¹³, ozone layer depletion¹⁴. Changing these norms and underlying values involved activism and engagement with the general public. It required raising awareness, attracting attention and changing public attitude and opinion about specific issues, otherwise unnoticed.

However, WWF and Greenpeace seem to view public opinion not as the goal in itself but rather as means to an end, as a political leverage to influence decision-makers in broader democratic settings. Raising awareness or changing attitudes, values and norms of the public is not among top priorities of ENGOs – but working with governments and business are. It is impossible to disaggregate data from annual reports of these organizations available online and find out how much funds went to support participation of ENGO representatives in different meetings of the global intergovernmental process and how much funds were allocated on awareness raising, education¹⁵ and outreach to the general public measures. But materials available on the websites of the three ENGOs clearly send a message that governments and business are key targets of ENGOs' political action and that ENGOs call general public to share their views and support these actions¹⁶.

If international climate talks are stagnating and ENGOs have little influence on their outcome, why then does working with states remain at the top of priority list of ENGOs instead of working with the general public? Why do ENGOs with significant, yet limited, resources at hand¹⁷ decide to focus on lobbying at the expense of awareness raising?

If we take the top-down approach, the answer is straightforward: because governments and business are the actors in power to resolve the problem. Moreover, by targeting governments

¹¹ Paul Wapner, *Governance from Below: NGOs, Global Civil Society and the Politics of World Collective Life*, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI, 1996

¹² Wapner, Paul. 1995. "Politics Beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics". *World Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Apr., 1995), pp. 311-340

¹³ Lasse Ringius, "Environmental NGOs and Regime Change: : The Case of Ocean Dumping of Radioactive Waste". *European Journal of International Relations* 1997 3: 61

¹⁴ Parson, Edward A. 1993. "Protecting Ozone Layer". Chapter 2 in Haas, Keohane, Levy *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 448 pp.

¹⁵ With exception of WWF Annual Report 2012

¹⁶ www.wwf.org and www.greenpeace.org

¹⁷ Annual budgets: WWF – ca. \$239 mln; Greenpeace worldwide – ca. 268 mln euros

NGOs only have a few people to convince, and these people can trigger policies and laws that would resolve the problem – instead of targeting many individuals in the general public who don't have much political power. Simply put, it is about resource efficiency: less efforts and bigger impact from targeting states.

But what we can see happening is that this approach is failing with failing international climate talks. If NGOs want to remain the “agent of change”, they might want to re-think their idea about how change works. NGOs should recognize the importance of bottom-up evolution and their role in the process. Focusing more on educational and awareness raising efforts, on changing individual lifestyles and choices, social norms and values, would help create a solid ground for political top-down action and, possibly, help trigger this action through democratic participation of the general public.

WWF and Greenpeace have capacity to (1) produce their own research studies about important environmental problems, including climate change; (2) communicate their findings to millions of people through vast media networks. These NGOs have good human capital; they attract bright employees¹⁸ who could come up with creative and innovative strategies of targeting the public instead of targeting states. This work would probably require assistance of people with social psychology background rather than political scientists alone. Changing a law and changing values might be two sides of the same coin, but they do require two different strategies.

Two more points to highlight. By the “public” here I mean people living in developed states. These states have certain moral responsibility for past emissions causing climate change. Also, lifestyles of people in these states are significantly more energy-consuming per capita than in developing world. Developed states have a good potential to change their consumption and carbon footprint bottom-up, based on changes in individual decisions and choices of the general public. Greenpeace and WWF have majority of their supporters in developed countries¹⁹.

Secondly, one argument against broader engagement with the general public that NGOs frequently use is that they are limited in resources. While this might be true in some cases, budgets of Greenpeace and WWF are at the level of hundreds of millions of dollars. Allocating resources in this situation is entirely the matter of will and priority setting: if the top priorities are states and business, then most resources go to support activities to engage with these actors. Awareness raising and educational efforts would get funds according to how important they are considered on the list of priorities. But even if we agree that engaging with the general public is too expensive for NGOs, there are always ways to lobby for educational standards or partner with states or business for awareness raising campaigns. Once again, realizing the role of NGOs in bottom-up change is entirely the matter of their own will and vision. But then who is going to convince organizations that convince others about the right thing to do – in what would be the right thing to do for them? Probably nobody, unless these organizations evolve from within.

¹⁸ Interview Kumi Naido, 2011:

http://www.democracynow.org/2011/12/5/greenpeace_head_kumi_naidoo_from_anti

¹⁹ WWF has 1.2 million supporters in the US only out of 5 million supporters globally

(<http://worldwildlife.org/about>); Greenpeace has around 3 million supporters worldwide, mostly from Europe (<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/404/>)

Conclusion

To conclude, this short essay attempted to start developing an interdisciplinary argument about the two types of influence that ENGOs can have on the international arena. This distinction is made entirely for analytical purposes and does not call for separating the two approaches completely. After all, it is clear that policies and laws won't work if the majority of people does not understand and support them – as it is clear that a broader public consensus on the importance of action towards climate change should be supported by relevant laws and policies. The main purpose of this distinction is to draw attention to an approach different from the acclaimed top-down action and suggest that the importance of a bottom-up evolution should not be ignored or underrated. It should take its place in the debate about ENGOs influence and, possibly, change the way ENGOs allocate their resources. This is a preliminary idea that needs to be further developed in a longer paper.