

Political Ecology and Sustainability

A Comprehensive Study of the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Projects Abroad

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Heinrich-Böll-Foundation (HBF) as a political actor affiliated to the Green Party in Germany considers 'political ecology' to be one of its main missions. Political ecology means: turning environmental topics into political issues, in public awareness as well as in government policies and laws. HBF spends one third of its budget to support NGOs, movements, networks and a few government institutions which try to put environmental problems and their solution on the political agenda, be it on a local, national or international level.

The purpose of this cross-sectoral study was to assess the various approaches, strategies and concepts adopted by partner organisations in Latin America, Africa, Asia and East-European countries. 67 projects and programmes, and 242 short-term measures mainly run by the regional offices of HBF were analysed. Total funds were 14 Million Euro. The time period covered was 1996 to 6/2001.

Actors: During this time period, in many countries democratisation and decentralisation processes opened up new opportunities for civil society forces to act on various political levels and to intervene into politics. In compliance with HBF's organisational identity to act as an enabler of civil society forces, most of HBF cooperation partners are NGOs, mostly small organisations, established in the 1990s, but already well reputed as environmental activists or actors in their countries. Due to a specific historic situation of newly formed states and administrations, in four of the projects government institutions were implementing agencies.

The organisational profile of the partner-NGOs is a blend of activism and expertise while professionalism increased in the recent past. The NGOs act as catalysts and facilitators between affected people, the general public and policy makers. While they preserve strong connections to the grassroots and local communities, the strategic focus shifted from the grassroots to the policy level. The NGOs intensify their networking, in particular on the regional level. They tend to go beyond single-issue approaches, and NGOs in the South – different from those in Eastern Europe and the North – are able to link environmental and social issues, the interface being problems of environmental justice and resource rights.

Policy fields: The study identified seven predominant policy fields in which the partner organisations were active. The term policy fields was chosen to overcome the departmentalisation of environmental issues into 'sectors'. The four focal policy fields were:

- Organic farming and protection of biodiversity,
- livelihoods,
- energy and climate,
- sustainability concepts and alternative development models.

A fifth time-bound policy field was the preparation for Rio+10/WSSD 2002. 'International trade and industry' and 'water' are two political areas of concern which will be stressed in future.

An important trend in the project work is that the various sectors are no longer dealt with in an isolated manner but more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approaches are adopted. Additionally, environmental issues are viewed from a regional perspective, and more cross-border activities are coordinated. These more systematic and holistic approaches result in addressing issues increasingly in terms of political guidelines and regulation in specific countries and internationally, while issues focussing on practical activities or the grassroots, such as organic farming, have taken a back seat.

Strategies: Within the projects, programmes and short-term measures six main strategies were identified:

- Environmental education
- Political consulting and intervention
- Networking
- Establishment and support of environmental movements
- Gender mainstreaming
- Practical environmental protection

Environmental education, provision of unfiltered information and awareness creation are a crucial strategy in nearly all the activities analysed. Political intervention by the NGOs increased. Regarding their relation to governments, a clear shift of paradigm took place from protest to political dialogue, from confrontational to discursive strategies. Simultaneously, less projects on the level of practical environmental protection are supported. NGOs increasingly network which helps them in gaining political strength and democratic legitimacy. Although many initiatives were started, it is difficult to build a mass-based environmental movement. No systematic gender mainstreaming was implemented in the projects, resulting in a confinement of women to mostly practical environmental protection and their exclusion from policy and decision making.

Levels of Activities: A comprehensive view of the analysed policy fields and strategies reveals three levels of activities:

- a) the practical level with environmental protection and sustainable resource management
- b) the civil society level with capacity and institution building
- c) the political and legal level with policy intervention and creation of regulatory mechanisms

The strategic objectives which link these three levels of activities are:

- An economy of attention which gives weight in society to the problems of ecology and sustainability
- The politization of ecological issues starting from the grassroots up to macro-political levels
- Linking between practical environmental needs and strategic ecological interests
- Ecological empowerment that enables people to become environmental actors and agents for ecological transformation
- Enforcement of collective rights of local communities to resources, information and participation

Lessons learnt: Looking at these strategic objectives, the main lessons learnt are:

- Ecology is a question of democracy: democratic space is a precondition for policy intervention and environmental transformation. Democratisation and decentralisation could be used for environmental activities and policy intervention increased. However, measurable success beyond participation and tangible results are still limited.
- Civil societal forces have to develop an economy of attention in order to mobilise pressure for practical and political solutions for environmental problems. More public and political attention was generated.
- Environmental education and the right to know are important means of ecological empowerment. However, an enhanced environmental awareness has not yet been translated into behavioural and structural change.
- To initiate societal change it is necessary to link concerns at the grassroots with public awareness and policy & decision making. Practical needs of people and strategic ecological interests, social and environmental issues have to be married.
- Gender justice and environmental justice have to be linked systematically; the glass ceiling has to be broken pro-actively.
- Collective rights of local communities with regard to their livelihood are cornerstones for sustainability.