INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Evolving Concerns

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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Peter,

Awareness of the importance of environmental conditions and natural resources as the basis for sound, sustainable development has been growing in Africa. Environment and natural resource issues are becoming increasingly central to main political agendas. This is true not only within individual African countries, but also among regional groupings of countries. Coupled with growing governmental concerns has been the emergence of various nongovernmental organizations and networks working in this area.

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, Sweden, occurred as a result of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activitists raising concerns about environmental issues in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result of the Stockholm conference, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established, with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. At the same time, an "umbrella organization", the Environment Liaison Centre (ELC), was set up to link the global NGO community with UNEP. ELC now has over 7,000 NGO members.

When ELC was created, few formal NGOs existed in the developing world. The NGOs active in promoting the Stockholm conference had been primarily from the industrialized world, primarily concerned about environmental pollution issues. ELC and UNEP have sponsored numerous workshops and conferences, and have been busy publishing newsletters and extension materials. Both have been active, since their creation, in promoting the establishment of indigenous NGO networks in developing countries, such as KENGO and ANEN.

The Kenya Energy and Environment NGOs (KENGO) network is a well-known and developed African environmental NGO. KENGO's activities include training, education, research, and publishing of a newsletter and extension materials. Although KENGO's work focuses on Kenya, it has undertaken a regional improved-woodstove program, training people from neighboring eastern African countries (Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi), and published some extension materials in French as well as English.

The African NGO's Environment Network (ANEN) is a relatively new organization that has emerged with the assistance of ELC, UNEP, and KENGO. In operation since 1982, ANEN became independent of ELC in 1985. ANEN now represents over 350 indigineous African NGOs, continent-wide, and has produced a directory of African environmental NGOs. ANEN's current efforts focus on training and networking, as well as raising money to help fund grassroots activities of its members.

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ANEN has obtained funding from UNEP and from other donors. Of a $220,000 grant from UNEP's Desertification Centre, ANEN has allocated $120,000 to core institutional support, publications, and training, and $100,000 for small grants to member NGOs. The first four NGOs funded are the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, the Kweneng Rural Development Association in Botswana, the Association des Soeurs Unies Contre le Desert (Association of Sisters United Against the Desert) in Senegal, and the Association Sis-X (Association Six-S) in Burkina Faso. Two are women's groups.

From 21 to 25 September 1987, ANEN held its first training workshop for indigineous African NGOs in Nairobi. This meeting, co-sponsored with KENGO, brought together representatives from twenty-five NGOs from thirteen African countries. ANEN used the meeting as a forum for NGOs to discuss their grassroots activities in the area of anti-desertification control, and to articulate their needs for outside assistance. Including representatives of international NGOs, governments, UNEP, and other observors, over fifty people participated in part or all of the workshop.

This meeting began with major addresses by invited speakers from the Kenyan government and UNEP. UNEP speakers stressed the role of African NGOs in regional efforts to tackle desertification and other environmental issues. They explained, for example, current efforts that have been launched under the Cairo Programme.

UNEP, with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), has organized two African Ministerial Conferences on the Environment (AMCEN). The first conference, held in Cairo, Egypt from 16 to 18 December 1985, resulted in an ambitious plan -- the Cairo Programme for African Cooperation. A second meeting, held 4 to 6 June 1987 in Nairobi, Kenya, reconfirmed commitment to this program.

The Cairo Programme aims to demonstrate successes in environmental management in Africa, which can serve as models for replication elsewhere. Each country is to choose three villages in which energy and food self-sufficiency will be promoted through development efforts. In addition, for the thirty African countries with semi-arid grazing lands, a model livestock management scheme is to be tried.

The Cairo Programme has sought the participation of African NGOs, as represented by ANEN. An ANEN representative is to participate in each of the four working committees of the Cairo Programme, which deal with issues concerning: (1) lakes and river basins, (2) coastal seas, (3) forests and woodlands, and (4) deserts and arid lands.

Dr. Maxime Ferrari, who directs UNEP's Regional Office for Africa and formerly served as Foreign Minister in the Seychelles, asserted that, "We Africans know the problem and what to do about it." The past 30 years have brought so little development to Africa, he argued, because the environment and the need for sustainable development have been inadequately considered, and the focus has been on sectoral, rather than integrated, development. Since villagers or rural people are fed up with outsiders telling them what to do, Ferrari urged NGOs to function as insiders -- who can listen to, learn from, and help grassroots people do better what they are already doing.

The phenomenal growth of NGOs -- particularly in Kenya -- was highlighted. According to James Korrelach, the Assistant Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources in Kenya, over 11,000 registered NGOs operate in Kenya.

Korrelach's remarks later prompted Monique Mainguet, Deputy Director of UNEP's Desertification Control Programme Activity Centre, to ask how many of these NGOs constitute real "honest" NGOs -- how many actually spend time working at the grassroots level with farmers and field technicians? How could the activities of such a large number of NGOs possibly ever be coordinated?

The workshop participants presented information on their activities relating to anti-desertification. The two most common activities are promoting environmental awareness and education, and tree-planting. The NGOs discussed planting trees for wood, fruit, animal fodder, gum arabic for income-generation, or planting multipurpose trees.

Many workshop participants argued that desertification can only be controlled through integrated land and resource management. Some groups promote soil conservation activities, such as terracing, planting windbreaks, or rotating land with cover crops. A few groups emphasize organic farming methods, such as composting, companion crop planting, organic pest control, agroforestry, and animal husbandry activities. The use of "zero-grazing", where animals are kept in stalls and fed cut fodder, rather than being allowed to freely graze, is also being stressed. One NGO demonstrates its integrated approaches to farming and multi-purpose trees in a pilot "model village", where food production has increased ten-fold over normal yields.

A few NGOs work on dams, water tanks, and water catchments areas. One group has combined water catchments with fish farming, to raise tilapia. Some NGOs are engaged in research on energy, fuel-efficient cookstoves, indigineous tree species, gum arabic production, or policy-related issues, such as development of a national conservation strategy.

The workshop then turned its attention to NGO needs. Most indigenous NGOs need core support, which will cover costs such as office expenses, salaries, and transportation; expansion of, and training for, staff members; and development of grassroots extension and training programs. Some have specific needs, such as tools, typewriters, or wells.

A major problem, which ANEN proposes to address in its next workshop, is the difficulty that many NGOs have in preparing proposals for funding from outside donors, to be able to meet these identified needs. Each donor, it seems, wants different kinds of information presented in a proposal, written in its own specific, unique format. ANEN also is willing to help NGOs on an individual basis, by taking their proposal drafts, seeking funding, and helping the NGOs rewrite their proposals to meet the specific criteria of a particular donor. One participant, however, reminded the others that it was best if NGOs focus first on what they can do with local resources, before seeking outside funding.

An issue that came through very clearly at this workshop was the need for NGOs to have contact with one another, to learn of each other's efforts. Recommendations were made on how information could be shared, through

training programs, workshops, exchange visits (between NGOs), documentation of case studies, and use of ANEN's publication, EcoAfrica, for networking. The value of exchange visits was underscored by one Sudanese participant, who remarked, "That which you have seen is not like that which you have heard." Information needs were identified with respect to four issues.

First, most participants believe that compilation of information on tree-planting experiences, particularly species trials, would be of great value. A heated debate broke out over whether NGOs should promote the use of exotic species or just local, indigineous species. Eucalyptus species, which were originally imported from Australia and have been widely planted all over Africa, came under particular attack.

The case against Eucalyptus was eloquently argued by Mr. Walulya Mukasa, the chairman of the Joint Energy-Environment Projects (JEEP) in Uganda. Mukasa asserted that NGOs ought to only promote the use of indigineous species, and never use exotic species such as Eucalyptus species. Since NGOs work at the grassroots with farmers who have small landholdings, such farmers cannot afford to experiment with exotic species, which may turn out to be unsuitable twenty years from now. Planting exotics means foregoing the opportunity to plant local species: it was like the Ugandan proverb concerning chickens -- "If you eat the egg, you forego eating of the flesh."

Others disagreed with Mukasa. Alemayehu Abebe pointed out that Eucalyptus has been grown for so long in Ethiopia that they are now considered by the people to be local, multiple-purpose tree species. Kim Oltaro argued that his organization, the Kweneg Rural Development Association in Botswana already had plantations of Eucalyptus, so the issue was not what to plant, but how to manage what they have. Other speakers mentionned how, in their respective countries, indigineous species grow very slowly -- perhaps taking up to 60 years before harvest. Consequently, the local people need fast-growing exotics like Eucalyptus while they wait for the local species to mature. In Kenya and Uganda, however, both KENGO and JEEP have found fast-growing indigineous species that outperform the exotic ones.

Mukasa spoke about JEEP's efforts to revive the traditional uses of Ficus natalensis, an indigineous tree in Uganda. Historically, the bark of this tree was used for bark cloth: this use, however, had been discourged by European missionaries, and knowledge was dying out. JEEP is promoting the making and use of this bark cloth, which can be made into local crafts, such as hats and placemats. These, Mukasa said, could now be sold as tourist souvenirs to the Europeans who had earlier tried to eliminate the making of bark cloth !! The tree also has other important uses, such as goat fodder.

Many participants, while agreeing that indigineous species can be important and should be stressed, nonetheless felt that exotic species can be valuable in certain situations. It all depends on the reason for which one is growing trees, and the local conditions. Therefore, the workshop participants agreed that a compilation of information on which species had been shown to be effective, for which uses, and under what conditions, would guide the efforts of NGOs. They also concluded that NGOs must begin promoting not just planting, but the conservation of indigineous vegetation.

The ecological concerns about the appropriateness of exotic species in general, and Eucalyptus species in particular, are well-founded, as much

recent reserch suggests. Nonetheless, I felt that the debate over species choice was more than just an ecological discussion. It seems that some NGOs have adopted the use of indigineous species as an "article of faith" -- they wish to focus their work as an African indigineous NGO on indigineous African species. Similarly, the workshop discussion touched on the need for the development of African expertise, rather than continuing to fund importation of expatriate experts.

While most people would agree that Africa needs African solutions to African problems, the debate over species choices suggests that a wide range of opinion exists on what the appropriate solutions may be, and that they may vary greatly from one part of Africa to another. Having an open forum for debating these ideas, such as this particular NGO workshop, seems useful and productive for stimulating the search for viable solutions.

A second area of information needs was raised by Pierre Nicot, representing Association Six-S of Burkina Faso. He called for the sharing of information on experiences in promoting grassroots participation. Under what conditions, for example, is promotion of voluntary, self-help labor preferable, and when should incentives be used? Other speakers suggested comparing experiences in development of extension and training. The need to reach and train a wide variety of target individuals and groups was discussed: among those mentionned were church groups and clergy, soouts, youth groups, and teachers and students.

Third, Alimata Dioum, of Association des Soeurs Unies Contre le Desert, expressed the desire of her organization to share experiences and strategies with other women's organizations. She invited others to come visit their project in northern Senegal, near the Mauritanian border.

The training of women, in areas such as community leadership or tree nursery establishment, was highlighted. Two Kenyan participants stressed their belief that, "When you train a women, you train the whole world. If we train women in Kenya, we believe we can combat desertification." This meeting had more African women present than had some earlier NGO meetings I have attended: seven of the thirty African participants were women, and seven of twenty-two observers were women, including one African woman.

Finally, the need was expressed for learning how NGOs themselves could be supported or fostered by government policies. One workshop participant, Lolo Mkhabela, came to the workshop on the behalf of the government of Swaziland, to learn how the development of Swazi NGOs could be promoted.

This workshop underscored some of my own observations concerning African NGO activities. As I have traveled around sub-Saharan Africa over the past few years, I have been struck by the differences in popular participation in tree-planting and other environmental management activities. Some countries, such as Kenya and Senegal, seem to be far more active than others. Two major factors seem to be involved -- political commitment and the presence of an active, viable NGO community.

The need for political commitment is apparent. Each country has numerous development needs and a crowded political agenda. But for visible progress to be made on the environmental front, these issues must be a major priority. Thus, environmental issues should be supported not only by outside

donors, but also by a host government's own commitment of resources. This commitment can be assessed in many ways.

Second, NGOs can play a very effective role in structuring and supporting such popular participation. While NGOs are certainly not the only means, they are often more effective at reaching the grassroots than are either government structures or national political parties -- which usually have a wide agenda of issues. NGOs can be especially useful as a forum for experimentation: once successful strategies for participation have been developed, they can be expanded on a broader scale. In several countries, NGOs have been tackling a number of areas not yet well-developed by government agencies, such as species trials with indigineous species or development of extension materials.

The impact of NGO activities is beginning to be felt. KENGO, for example, envisions that within a few years it will no longer be necessary to educate Kenyans on the importance of tree-planting and the techniques of nursery establishment, as their campaign has been so successful. Consequently, KENGO will tackle some more complex issues, such as educating people on matching species choices with planting sites and intended uses.

In some countries, few indigineous NGOs yet exist. Governments are sometimes skeptical of why NGOs are necessary -- why the government itself should not be the organizing and mobilizing force for popular participation. But more and more, governments are coming to realize that NGOs can complement, rather than threaten, their own efforts.

Outside donors are also coming to appreciate the contributions of NGOs. While it is difficult for many large multinational and bilateral donors to work directly with small grassroots NGOs, some are working with NGO networks such as KENGO and ANEN. These organizations can, in turn, represent and serve their members, such as mediating fund-raising efforts.

Recently, many people have been questionning the amount of money and time that goes into NGO workshops. Certainly such workshops are expensive, not only in terms of the meeting expenses, such as facilities, communications, photocopying, and simultaneous translation, but also bringing the African participants together -- in terms of transportation costs (usually airfares), meals, lodging, and other per diem expenses. One participant at the ANEN workshop, in fact, asked why the money was not just given directly to NGOS for grassroots development activities?

But such meetings have an obvious role to play. As Jimoh Omo-Fadaka, the Executive Director of ANEN, asked, how could ANEN or other donors give support to individual NGOs if they didn't get together and talk, to learn their particular needs?

The chance to meet others, face-to-face, is also important for the NGO representatives. Exchanging ideas and seeing what others have done can provide useful ideas for experimentation upon returning home. One participant noted that he had been glad at this workshop to learn of the involvement of Scouts in anti-desertification activities, and would try to promote similar Scout involvement in his own country. JEEP's current work with women's groups in Uganda, Mukasa explained, is a direct result of his seeing how KENGO was working with women's groups in Kenya.

While it is certainly possible -- though in Africa, often difficult -- to exchange information in written form, through the mails, personal contacts can be far more convincing. For a pioneering, struggling NGO, knowing others in neighboring countries who have undertaken similar work can provide valuable psychological support. The networking of active, concerned African environmentalists seems to be a synergistic process, greatly contributing to the evolution of approaches to integrated sustainable development and resource management.

More and more, it seems, African NGOs are becoming independent of their sponsors. While they continue to hold workshops on topics that outside donors will fund, once at the meetings, the agendas are shaped to reflect NGO interests. Individual participants often pursue their own additional agendas outside of these meetings, in the evenings or for a few days before or after the meetings. Thus, for example, some participants at this workshop also met to discuss board business for a newly-created organization, the Forum of African Voluntary Development Organizations (FAVDO), which is to be a network of African NGOs working on all types of development issues.

Thus, I came away from the workshop feeling encouraged that NGOs are developing an effective voice in African environmental politics. As the expertise of individual NGOs develops and their cooperation increases, their concerns are evolving to meet new challenges of resource management. Their international cooperation is a model for efforts elsewhere.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

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NOTE: ANEN will be publishing a report of this workshop before the end of 1987. A list of workshop participants and observors is currently available.

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