

NGOs in the Climate Crisis

Processes of Fragmentation, Lines of Conflict, and Strategic Approaches

By Barbara Unmüßig

"The global crisis situation challenges us to adopt a new process-oriented approach to the engagement of civil society " – concludes Klaus Heide in a contribution to the 2009 Social Watch Deutschland Report. Heide presents a critical reflection on the role of civil society – indeed, a rare phenomenon from the ranks of civil society organizations. He cites limitations, divisions, and the diverse dilemmas facing civil society actors. (Heide 2009)

The debate is overdue. For many years, the belief has survived that we are *one* global civil society, which – in a historic mission – will save the world in light of the *universal* failure of state policies. This position is experiencing a renaissance, particularly following the disappointing United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009. At the same time, the international climate negotiation process highlights how large the conflicts of interest among civil society climate actors have now become in terms of geography, positions, and ideologies. There can no longer be any talk of strength through unity, of harmony of positions. The political conflicts of interest are further joined by numerous internal institutional principles and constraints on civil society work – especially with respect to access to resources and financial aid and to (media) publicity.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that become involved in global processes such as the climate negotiations have long been confronted with the same structural problems and dilemmas as those of official government negotiators: Who is included, who is excluded? How is it even possible to achieve the capacity to act and develop strategies in light of extremely heterogeneous interests? What would be a smart division of labor with so many actors? Which resources can be meaningfully put to use? What can be implemented in a politically realistic way and what would be desirable in climate policy (justice, solidarity, overcoming the North-South conflict)?

Since the disappointment in the outcome of the climate summit in Copenhagen, many civil society organizations have indeed begun to reflect on their own role in the climate negotiation process and on climate protection in general. In his discussion paper of January 2010, Jürgen Maier, Director of the German NGO Forum on Environment and Development, calls on the NGOs "to take a self-critical look at themselves and ask to what extent they actually contributed to the poor result of the climate negotiations and whether they should adjust their course accordingly." (Maier 2010)

Whether Greenpeace¹ or the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)², Whether the Climate Action Network (CAN)³ or Friends of the Earth International (FOEI)⁴ and Climate Justice Now!⁵ – all the global climate actors have discussed their future role at the climate negotiations and in climate policy in general in closed meetings, following the failure at Copenhagen. Very few of these debates have become public. Based on my own observation, the questions mentioned above have hardly played a role in those debates. There is no such thing as an international and interorganizational strategy debate. There is no single actor who could organize such a debate. There just isn't that *one* strategic center for *civil society* and there won't ever be one.

Mixed Bunch

Who is this mixed bunch known as "NGOs"? NGO stands for "nongovernmental organization" and is the collective term for not only vastly differing civil society organizations but also informal coalitions and inter-regional networks (Janett 1997). In public surveys, they sometimes achieve favorability ratings which politicians can only dream of. They are occasionally even described as "the makings for a better world." (Nuscheler 1998)

There is nothing new about the occurrence of NGOs, much less in climate policy. For two decades now, no UN climate conference has taken place without them being present and involved in negotiations. Since the beginning of negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, interested NGOs have been included in the official negotiations. As long as they have the status of an organization or an institution, they may register for the negotiations as observer organizations. While 171 organizations were registered at the start, that number has already grown to 530 organizations by 2000 (Carpenter 2001). To date, more than 1,297 NGOs are registered at the UNFCCC. That high number may seem astonishing at first glance. But the United Nations apply a broad definition of "NGO" to include all organizations not "established by means of an intergovernmental agreement." This definition therefore also includes universities, trade and industrial associations, churches, and municipal authorities.⁶

Trends in Climate Work

The participation of civil society actors in the UN climate negotiations has experienced various trends during the past 20 years. Numerous environmental and development organizations participated in the

1 Regarding climate work by Greenpeace cf.: Greenpeace 2010, <http://www.greenpeace.de/themen/klima/> (02/08/2010).

2 WWF 2010, <http://www.wwf.org/> (02/08/2010).

3 Climate Action Network (CAN) is a network of approx. 250 NGOs that support the cause of a policy that combats climate change. Apart from CAN International, the network also operates via regional networks, for example, CAN Europe and CAN South Asia. See: <http://www.climatenetwork.org/> (02/08/2010).

4 Friends of the Earth International is also a network comprising 77 national environmental groups and approx. 5,000 local activist groups. See: Friends of the Earth International 2010, <<http://www.foei.org/> (02/08/2010).

5 Climate Justice Now! is a network of organizations and movements standing up for social and ecological justice and gender equality. The following are members of Climate Justice Now!: Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth International and Gendercc –Woman for Climate Justice, among others. Cf.: Climate Justice Now! 2010, <http://www.climate-justice-now.org/> (02/08/2010).

6 Cf. UNFCCC 2010: Parties & Observers, http://unfccc.int/parties_and_observers/items/2704.php (02/08/2010).

negotiations during and after the Earth Summit – the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In Germany, the UN Conference of Parties, generally known as COP, admitted that it had achieved a high degree of mobilization and local, national, and international networking in Berlin in 1995 (Walk 1997). The interest of a broad spectrum of civil society actors then began to fade following the Conference of the Parties to the Convention in Kyoto, Japan (1997). Development organizations from the North and South in particular withdrew from the climate process and increasingly dedicated their political attention to “traditional” poverty issues and in particular to international trade policy – at an international level, to the World Trade Organization process. Consequently, the anti-globalization movement which was gaining strength hardly, if at all, addressed global ecological challenges. Issues of distribution and equity were linked more closely to social rather than ecological issues. Civil society was no longer as committed to discussing environment and development in the same joint context as it had been doing in the 1990s.

As a result, large and transnational environmental organizations such as WWF and Greenpeace, national environmental organizations such as the U.S. Environmental Defense Fund⁷ or the German BUND,⁸ international networks such as Friends of the Earth International or the Climate Action Network, as well as more recent highly specialized NGOs such as the German organization Germanwatch⁹ or the British E3G¹⁰ virtually kept to themselves at the annual UN Conference of Parties. Their climate specialists buried themselves in the technical details of the negotiations and concerned themselves with the complicated structures of the UN climate process. And although they criticized some instruments such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and emissions trading on the margins, they generally supported them. In the well-publicized annual ritual of the COPs, the NGOs lamented the lack of progress with regard to implementation of the emission reduction commitments made in the Kyoto Protocol and demanded more technology transfer and more money for climate protection. The international negotiation process was, however, hardly bound to the larger NGOs’ own members and could hardly be communicated to a wider public. The NGOs themselves no longer even bothered with a wider mobilization. The NGO climate specialists mostly kept to themselves and enjoyed more of a co-elitist status relative to the government delegations. Moreover, apart from transnational networks such as the Climate Action Network or Friends of the Earth International, civil society actors from the countries of the global South were virtually absent from the negotiations. Even international development organizations such as Oxfam stayed away for years.

This situation did not change until the mid-2000s. However, the global wake-up call for a new offensive in global climate protection came not from *civil society* but from climate scientists who, based on their findings, warned the public and policy makers of the dramatic advance in climate change.

Many civil society organizations changed their agenda once again and became re-involved in climate protection, at the expense of trade issues, among other concerns. The WTO was now out, as the massive caravan of NGOs descended on Copenhagen for the UN climate summit in December 2009. That

7 See also: Environmental Defense Fund 2010, <http://www.edf.org/home.cfm> (02/08/2010).

8 The League for the Environment and Nature Conservation, Germany, is the German section of Friends of the Earth and thus a member of Friends of the Earth International. Also see: BUND 2010, <http://www.bund.net/bundnet/> (02/08/010).

9 See also: Germanwatch 2010, <http://www.germanwatch.org/> (02/08/2010).

10 See also: E3G – Change Agents for Sustainable Development 2010, <http://www.e3g.org/> (02/08/2010).

climate summit experienced the largest mass mobilization ever in the existence of the climate negotiations. Thus, many new actors from the North and South have become re-involved in the climate negotiations: Development organizations such as Oxfam¹¹, Christian Aid¹², or, in Germany, Misereor¹³ and Bread for the World¹⁴ are once again active in climate policy, whether in the newly founded German Climate Alliance¹⁵ or in developing countries with adequate programs and partners. Locally, there are again also ever more initiatives and organizations – whether in the North, East, or South – opposing misdirected energy projects or other large-scale projects.

With these new civil society actors, “forgotten” or neglected topics such as climate justice and poverty have also returned to the negotiation processes. This was visible and tangible by the time of the 2009 COP in Bali and has manifested itself, among other ways, in the establishment of a completely new transnational network such as Climate Justice Now!. Within a period of three years, the influential Third World Network¹⁶ established itself as a central voice for civil society with a large influence on governments in southern countries and now publishes daily newsletters during interim climate negotiations and during the COPs themselves. CAN has accepted new members mainly from the South. They have called on CAN internally to engage in debates on climate justice and burden sharing with regard to CO₂ reduction targets and finances. The NGO Focus on the Global South¹⁷ helped organize a *climate justice conference* in Bangkok in July 2008, where 170 activists from social movements and the critical scientific communities from 31 countries took part.¹⁸ In the South Indian village of Mamallapuram in October 2008, CAN hosted its second *Equity Summit* since 2001, which 150 representatives from civil society organizations representing 48 countries attended (Fuhr 2008). Participation was thus noticeably expanded and has become less homogenous and exclusive. The greater diversity and heterogeneous nature of the NGOs has, however, also intensified the conflicts between them and the various advocacy groups (indigenous and professional organizations, feminist and gender-issue organizations, trade unions, and many others).

Notwithstanding these changes, another factor remains important for participation in global negotiations: Who is able to raise the necessary funds? Who is able to afford the travel, the hotels? These material questions, too, determine who is excluded and who participates. As a result, the NGO community has experienced a split, which divides the more hierarchically structured “global players” from other NGOs with fewer resources and spontaneously organized grassroots organizations and social movements.

11 Regarding the commitment of Oxfam in view of climate change, see, for example: Oxfam 2010, <http://www.oxfam.de/klimablog> (03/08/2010).

12 Regarding the work of Christian Aid, an NGO registered in Great Britain but which is active internationally on the topic of climate change see: Christian Aid 2010, http://www.christinaid.org.uk/whatwedo/issues/climate_change.aspx (03/08/2010).

13 Regarding the work of Misereor on the topic of climate change see: Misereor 2010, <http://www.misereor.de/themen/klimawandel.html> (03/08/2010).

14 Regarding the climate policy work of Bread for the World cf.: Bread for the World 2010, http://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/weltweit-aktiv/index_1880_DEU_HTML.php (03/08/2010).

15 More than 100 organizations formed an alliance under the Climate Alliance. Together, they campaign for the creation of political framework conditions which result in a drastic reduction of greenhouse gases in Germany. The following are members: BUND, Bread for the World, Forum Umwelt & Entwicklung and Germanwatch, among others. Cf.: The Climate Alliance 2010, <http://www/die-klima-allianz.de/> (03/08/2010).

16 Also see: Third World Network 2010, <http://www.twinside.org.sg/> (02/08/2010).

17 See also: Focus on the Global South 2010, <http://www.focusweb.org/> (02/08/2010).

18 Cf. Focus on the Global South Philippines 2008: Announcement: Climate Justice Conference, 12-14 July 2008, <http://focusweb.org/philippines/content/view/141/5/> (02.08.2010).

Fragmentation and Diverging Interests

Now more than ever, the climate crisis reveals how historical and economic responsibility for the crisis differs and how regions and social classes are differently affected by climate change. This also manifests itself in the diverging interests within civil society. Conflicts of interest are becoming more and more visible, between northern and southern NGOs, between NGOs and social movements, and between environmental and development organizations. They latch onto particular positions, but also onto strategic processes (lobby work vs. actions) and onto the relevant level of activity (local vs. global). Thus, divisions have become inevitable. Friends of the Earth International has left CAN. Climate Justice Now! has not even become a member of CAN. Overall, CAN has lost some of its unifying and coordinating power. The search for compromise has become cumbersome due to heterogeneous interests and the greater number of members. Especially large NGOs, which invest a lot of money in their presence at the climate negotiations, organize their own publications and events relating to the summits, and above all want to feature in the (global) media, are increasingly working “for their own account” again. No time is left to engage in strategy debates or to search for compromise. Moreover, irreconcilable differences in positions appear to make coordination irrelevant – the NGOs each simply go their separate ways.

The more NGOs become professional, the greater the risk that they will lose their grip on reality and their direct democratic aspiration. And the more heavily they influence real political processes, the more likely they are to lose their ability to speak for the public good. They often lose themselves in the minor aspects of their selective concerns. They concentrate on matters that their donors might like. Those who want not merely to protest and organize campaigns but rather to work together with government institutions so as to obtain access to power soon run the risk of sacrificing a piece of their autonomy and being instrumentalized by the system. Not all the NGOs are able to manage this balancing act between the rightness of their concerns and the significance of their influence.

Common Denominator: Two Degrees

But, first, let us look at what may be regarded as the consensus among all the civil society climate actors: All those relying on the UN process want an ambitious, fair, and binding post-Kyoto agreement that is guided by the findings in climate science. The medium- and long-term emission reduction targets must aim to keep global warming as far below two (or even 1.5) degrees Celsius as possible – by means of a binding UN agreement. It is agreed that emissions have to be reduced by up to 90% by the year 2050 and that, to this end the economy has to be decarbonized as soon as possible. It is also undisputed that the global South has to receive financial and technology transfers from the OECD countries when phasing out fossil fuels and adapting to climate change.

First Line of Conflict: Burden Sharing between North and South

However, the differences in positions among civil society climate actors begin with the question of burden sharing – as is also the case among governments. Once it became clear that the two degree guideline could only be maintained if, in addition to the industrial countries that bear the main responsibility, the large emerging countries would also have to agree to large-scale emission reductions in a global agreement, the related controversies have intensified. While some regard as outdated the old division of countries into

Annex B countries, that is, those countries that have made concrete commitments to reduce emissions pursuant to Annex B of the Kyoto Protocol, and non-Annex B countries,¹⁹ which are not obliged to ensure reductions under the Kyoto Protocol, others remain absolutely committed to this categorization.

Many NGOs, including the Third World Network, the Indian Center for Science and Environment (CSE)²⁰, and the CAN regional groups, maintain the same stance as that of the emerging economy governments of the South: They do not want to agree to any binding reduction commitments as long as the North does not reduce its CO₂ emissions in a binding and drastic manner (preferably up to minus 40 percent by 2020). It is here that the role of the United States becomes central, because it constantly demands the inclusion of the emerging countries of China and India, while being unable itself to add anything to the negotiations that would be consistent with its historical and current responsibility. Still, NGOs from the OECD countries are also urging the governments of the South to accept their responsibility for the two degree target, beyond all commitments by the North. In line with the positions of their governments, civil society organizations of the small island nations are also demanding ambitious reduction targets from industrial and emerging countries. It is therefore not uncommon for NGOs to frame their demands similarly to the interests of their respective countries and governments. In the haggling over national reduction commitments, which preferably should not cause any economic disadvantages to the respective national economies, the NGOs unfortunately do not always perform the role ascribed to them "to act as organizations of the 'third sector' between the spheres of government authority and economic power." (Janett 1997)

Instead, they often become allies of governments. This situation becomes even more problematic when authoritarian regimes are involved that violate human rights and suddenly present themselves as champions of climate justice on the global stage. The justification of certain U.S. government positions by some U.S. NGOs also has to be classified as a similar problem.

Second Line of Conflict: Market Mechanisms vs. System Change

This also applies to the second area of conflict. What instruments should be used to meet the challenge of climate change? Here, there are larger conflicts regarding what are known as "flexible market-oriented instruments," such as the Clean Development Mechanism, the instruments of Joint Implementation (JI), Emissions Trading, and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD). While a large group of NGOs endorses these instruments in principle but also sees an enormous need for reform, more radical NGOs generally reject them as unsuitable for climate protection, reducing inequality, and overcoming poverty. "We also condemn their [the northern governments'; *remark by the author*] aggressive promotion of false solutions such as carbon trading (including the Clean Development Mechanism and Reduced Emissions from Deforestation in Developing Countries/and Forest Degradation); technofixes such as agrofuels, megadams and nuclear power, and science fictions like carbon sequestration and storage. These so-called solutions will merely exacerbate the climate crisis and deepen global inequality."²¹

19 The term "Annex B countries" is often used as a synonym for industrialized nations. On the other hand, developing countries are referred to as "non-Annex-B" countries.

20 The Center for Science and Environment is an NGO located in New Delhi, India, cf.: Center for Science and Environment 2010, <http://www.cseindia.org> (03/08/2010).

21 "Towards Climate Justice in Asia," summary report of the Climate Justice Conference, Bangkok, 12-14 July 2008, published

Some NGOs that 10 years ago criticized the Kyoto Protocol with regard to some of its basic elements – for example, trade in emission allowances or the spurious offsetting of greenhouse gas reductions against energy-induced emissions – today defend it vehemently against new NGOs and social movements that condemn the current climate process, including the involved NGO representatives, as nothing more than the legitimization and stabilization of the status quo economic system. Do we need “green growth” à la capitalism reloaded or rather a radical system change to avert collapse?

At the same time, indigenous organizations in particular hope to receive financing from the new mechanism REDD to protect their forests. They want to profit from this mechanism, while others regard it as another loophole through which the industrial countries are shirking their responsibility. Large nature conservation organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), that operate globally in nature conservation with hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars also see themselves profiting from REDD and have been intensifying their lobbying in this sphere for many years.²³ These are just some of the lines of conflict that quickly dispel the myth that NGOs or social movements are acting in concert or speaking with one voice.

Local vs. International

There are also larger differences in the forms and levels of action. Indeed, a broad alliance for the large climate demonstration was achieved during the UN climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009. Yet it cannot be overlooked that some still regard their lobbying activities at the negotiations as promising, while other organizations and alliances merely treat this approach with contempt. Instead of exchanging complementary strategies and agreeing on a smart division of labor, the various NGOs and social groups and movements are drawing sharp demarcations and dealing with each other less and less. At the climate summit in Cancun in 2010, this chasm was become literal, with various NGO forums taking place 30 to 50 kilometers from the official conference center and parallel marches occurring in different places organized by various groups. Although the large majority of climate policy activists still refer to the UN as the suitable process for a global agreement, it is also increasingly criticized.

It is alleged that too many resources are focused on the global process instead of being used for more climate protection specifically, on site, locally. Jürgen Maier takes this line when he asks, “[...] is the limited power of the NGOs invested best if we mobilize everything [...] towards obtaining an agreement by means of consensual resolution of the United Nations?” And “[...] we must ask ourselves whether the snail pace of the UN process can provide the answers we need.” Finally, he pleads, as many others

on 26/08/2010 under <http://www.ecologicaldebt.org/Carbon-and-Climate-Change-Debt/Summary-report-of-the-Climate-Justice-Conference-Bangkok-12-14-July-2008.html> (03.08.2010).

22 It may be regarded as undisputed that the reduction of deforestation is an important component in climate policy. What is, however, disputed, is the question of how to organize the funding of REDD: via a market mechanism or a fund. In Amazonia, a broad pro-REDD alliance of NGOs and social groups has been formed – including the Indian organization COIAB as well as private companies – to advocate for the inclusion of REDD in international emissions trading, from which it expects to earn large sums of money. Voices critical of REDD have also been organized: In the letter of Belém, which was signed by the trade union federations, the movement of the landless (MST), Via Campesina, and numerous other groups of Amazonia, the fear is expressed that REDD will open loopholes for the reforestation by means of tree plantations. See also: Fatheuer, Thomas 2009: Amazonien: Kontroversen um die Reduzierung der Entwaldung (REDD), 29/10/2009, <http://www.boell.de/weltweit/lateinamerika/lateinamerika-7729.html> (02/08/2010).

23 For insight into the position of The Nature Conservancy with a view to REDD, see: The Nature Conservancy 2010: Climate Change – Get the Facts: Forests and Climate Change, <http://www.nature.org/initiatives/climatechange/strategies/art22146.html> (02/08/2010).

did after the failure of Copenhagen, for a stronger and even exclusive concentration on national and local climate policy activities and actions. "The changes must then come about in another way. If it is true that climate change is happening so rapidly that we cannot lose any time, then the NGOs have an obligation to concentrate on those activities that promise the fastest results." (Maier 2010)

Ultimately, Maier is pleading for nothing more than a strategically-based division of labor, where the largest part of civil society concentrates on processes of change and leaves the process of negotiating a global climate agreement to a small remaining group of diplomats and NGO representatives. If climate policy is multi-level policy par excellence, then it makes little sense to play these various levels off against each other. What is much more necessary is to communicate the right use of resources and political positions. Only those who ultimately do not expect anything from the UN climate process, who regard it as completely irrelevant, can delegate the international negotiations to a couple of self-appointed NGO lobbyists without concern for their role in it or their connection to politics and society (legitimization, accountability, etc.). But where in the international arena is a balance to be struck between the interests of North and South, where are the remaining emissions budgets of the future supposed to be distributed in a just manner, if not at the UN?

Conclusion

There is no doubt that developing ideas and making demands on how to improve the world are part of the core business of NGOs and social movements. They can confront the world of political, bureaucratic, and factual constraints and troublesome compromises with ideals and utopic ideas, which are otherwise lost in the day-to-day business of politics. And they enjoy the privilege of being able to look beyond a short time horizon of election cycles and to make suggestions which are all too often taboo in politics for tactical reasons.

But NGOs have been more than workshops for ideas already for a long time now. As they increasingly organize globally, they and their networks form the core of an international public and civil society. They can thus also act as a counterweight to the financial capital that has been organized internationally for quite some time, the transnational groups and trade associations with their squadron of influential lobbyists. And they can mobilize masses of people – against large dams and coal and nuclear power plants. They even manage to bring tens of thousands of people onto the streets in many capitals all over the world during rounds of world trade talks and climate summits. They are thus able to stymie power politics and enforce some publicity and transparency.

But even if they are justly described as a democratic counterweight to economic and political powers, the NGOs are still constantly exposed to the question of their legitimacy. Surveys may confirm that they are highly appreciated by the population, but this demographically determined acceptance does not lend them any democratic legitimization yet. In whose name do their officials speak if, for example, simple donors do not have any influence on the election of those officials? They represent a virtual community at best. The myth of the direct democratic organization that is only concerned with noble goals has been shattered by fundraising posters at bus stops and bitter donation scandals, even if these have only been isolated cases so far.

Notwithstanding their common goal, namely, that they want to save the world, NGOs thus remain a mixed bunch which can only agree on collective messages with difficulty and sporadically. Their advantage clearly is their watchdog function over politics, because many eyes can see many things, and their abundance of ideas and alternatives, because many minds can produce many thoughts. Yet NGOs, at best, succeed only briefly in committing to a collective, substantive, and strategic direction. After all, who is supposed to make such central decisions in a movement without a center?

The engagement of civil society in climate policy is more fragmented and varied than ever. Upon closer analysis, this fact helps us to dispense with the harmonious picture of a civil society that is given more credit for its skill in solving problems than "the" politicians. NGOs and social movements must strive to openly discuss their diverse conflicts of interest and differences in positions among themselves. Even networks established over the past years (CAN, Forum for Environment & Development, Climate Alliance) seem unable to organize such strategic and self-reflective debates. But sectoral, fragmented, and inconsistent approaches are not the answer to the global crises of the world. Without wanting to ignore the conflicts of interest, we need to identify new forms of communication and conflict resolution for a global and diverse civil society.

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