

# **NGO STRATEGIC NETWORKS: FROM COMMUNITY PROJECTS TO GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION**

by David C. Korten

In March 1988, ANGOC held a landmark workshop in this conference room on the theme of NGO Strategic Management. The workshop focused on what was then the cutting edge issue for Asian NGOs, the movement beyond village level projects to a concern with focusing the NGO's resources on clearly defined objectives to leverage national scale change. We identified democratization as a unifying concern of NGO action across Asia. We addressed the need for coalition building at national and subnational levels to combine resources within the NGO sector toward the definition and pursuit of a shared vision of national development.

The intervening period has been a time of dramatic change for NGOs in Asia as elsewhere. As we broaden our perspectives we realize that the deepening poverty, environmental devastation, and violence we see in the villages where we work are not local phenomena. They are pervasive and global the result of systemic forces that cannot be resolved by action at the village level alone. This awareness helps us to put our work in perspective.

## **A SELF-DESTRUCTIVE VISION OF HUMAN PROGRESS**

Contrary to its promise, economic growth is not alleviating the conditions that define the unfolding global crisis. Indeed there is reason to believe that it is the single minded pursuit of growth that is the cause. We face a dilemma. It has become an article of faith among much of the world's population that economic growth is the key to universal prosperity. People, the world over, expect their leaders to provide it. As the crisis places ever increasing pressures on them, these same leaders, who seldom have time for serious reflection, become increasingly obsessed with the need to take whatever action promises to add to national output statistics in the current year and to fight any action that threatens them. They fail to see that their actions only add to the crisis not to its resolution.

The favored short-run policies lead to the concentration of ever greater economic power in the hands of the state and/or large corporate enterprise, each of which is in turn evaluated by society primarily on the basis of its contributions to economic output. In the pursuit of this mandate, these institutions seek ever greater control over economic resources, which they mine with an eye only to today's bottom line usually at the expense of those who are too weak to protect themselves. The greed of the wealthy is indulged while the poor and future generations are deprived of the means of meeting their basic needs and reduced to a struggle for economic survival and stripped of their basic sense of humanity and community. Poverty, environmental destruction, and the communal violence that results from a breakdown of the social fabric are all a direct consequence.

Contrary to prevailing belief, our world is divided not between the developed and the underdeveloped, but rather between the over- and underconsumers of earth's available resources. Because these resources are finite and because total current consumption is at or beyond the ability of earth's ecosystem to sustain, we are forced to acknowledge that there is a direct link between the behavior of the overconsumers and the plight of the underconsumers. The despair of the latter cannot be overcome without curbing the greed of the former. The answer lies not in growth, but in a transformation of the values and institutions that define how we use earth's bounty and distribute its benefits.

Human society is locked into a mind-set that places it on a collision course with the limits of a finite planet and the psychological and social tolerance of its own members. The task before us is one of breaking humanity out of this pattern of collective self-destruction. This task takes us far beyond the traditional role of assisting the poor through village based development projects. It requires new ways of working and thinking, new organizational relationships, new strategies, and new skills.

## MOVEMENTS AND NETWORKS: HOW PEOPLE CHANGE UNRESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONS

The small size and limited financial resources of most NGOs make them unlikely challengers of economic and political systems sustained by the prevailing interests of big government and big business. Yet the environment, peace, human rights, consumer rights and women's movements provide convincing examples of the power of voluntary action to change society. This seeming paradox can be explained by the fact that the power of voluntary action arises not from the size and resources of individual voluntary organizations, but rather from the ability of the voluntary sector to coalesce the actions of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of citizens through vast and constantly evolving networks that commonly lack identifiable structures, embrace many chaotic and conflicting tendencies, and yet act as if in concert to create new political and institutional realities. These networks are able to encircle, infiltrate, and even co-opt the resources of opposing bureaucracies. They reach across sectors to intellectuals, press, community organizations. Once organized, they can, through electronic communications, rapidly mobilize significant political forces on a global scale.

Engaging in such processes is a new experience for most development oriented NGOs. Yet in growing numbers they are joining forces with and learning from the experience of established social movements. As we learn more about the nature of true movements, we realize that they are not defined by organizational structures. They are characterized by values-driven action oriented flows of voluntary social energy given shape and direction by a broadly shared social vision. Participation is driven by value commitments rather than by anticipation of financial or political rewards.

As our understanding grows, we see that strategic networks are the building blocks of social movements. A strategic network is a temporary alliance of individuals and organizations through which their resources are combined in pursuit of shared, defined and consequential goals that strengthen the movement's position in relation to major opposing forces. These alliances commonly reach beyond the formal voluntary sector to engage students, media, universities, agencies of government, and responsible business organizations. In many instances they link local, national, and international groups.

Many of the participants in a strategic network may be acting on the basis of an immediate agenda or interest without perceiving themselves to be part of a larger social movement. As is true for the larger movement of which strategic networks are a part, each network may itself be comprised of countless shifting tactical networks formed around narrower agendas that contribute to the larger strategic objective.

While the success of strategic networks commonly depends on their ability to energize spontaneous voluntary action on a considerable scale, they are seldom in themselves spontaneous creations. Usually one or more individuals or organizations assume critical and

highly self-conscious roles as strategic network catalysts in their creation, maintenance, and direction. NGO experiences in the region provide rich insights into the nature of this role.

## CASE OF THE NAM CHOAN DAM

In Thailand, the campaign against the Nam Choan Dam, which would have displaced thousands of people and destroyed a major wildlife sanctuary, is an example of a successful strategic network that is especially helpful in understanding the role of the strategic network catalyst. One of the organizations that played such a role in this campaign was the Project for Ecological Recovery (PER), a small Thai environmental NGO with ten paid staff members and an annual budget of less than US\$35,000. This tiny organization forged an alliance among thirty-eight grassroots organizations in the threatened area, student organizations, conservationists, and mass media in Thailand, and an international network of environmental organizations and journalists. The alliance ultimately convinced the government to cancel the project.

In the course of this campaign PER organized countless meetings and seminars, talked with representatives of government, helped keep all the groups in contact with one another from day to day, organized visits to the dam site by citizen groups from Bangkok and abroad, acted as a clearinghouse for technical and campaign information, engaged the media, and worked constantly to broaden the campaign's tactics and base of public support.

Each participating group had its own reasons for being engaged. PER recognized and accepted their differing motivations and helped each to find a role within the larger coalition consistent with its particular commitment and strategic resources. Each group was encouraged to tell its own story from its own perspective, with PER helping each to project the messages to those elements of the public most likely to be sympathetic to its particular appeal.

- The local people faced the destruction of their homes and livelihoods. They were fighting for their immediate self-interest. PER made them the foundation of the campaign. Rather than attempting to form new community groups, it worked with whatever groups already existed: traditional councils, housewife groups and village scouts. It encouraged different grassroots groups to meet with one another to share concerns, develop joint tactics, and form an association all the while working with existing structures and forces and keeping its own role to a minimum. The local groups staged marches, submitted petitions, applied pressure on their elected representatives, and hosted visiting delegations.
- The students, who represented a leftist perspective, saw the dam as an effort to benefit industrial interests at the expense of the rural poor and engaged themselves in what they saw as a battle of class interests. They arranged demonstrations and publicity events that sometimes involved direct confrontations with government.
- The environmentalists, generally intellectuals and public figures of a more conservative political orientation, were primarily concerned with the preservation of a unique forest. They were encouraged to analyze the environmental dangers and social costs in public forums and press conferences. Mutual suspicion of one another's motives between this group and the students, led PER to work with each group separately in its own language rather than trying to bring them together for joint strategizing.
- The journalists and film makers were engaged through seminars, press releases, site visits, and letter writing campaigns as professionals whose role is to keep the public

informed on important issues. They disseminated information about the uniqueness of the area to audiences in Thailand and abroad and publicized the consequences of the project for people who lived in the area.

The PER's mode of working is quite different from that of more typical development oriented NGOs. For example,

- It maintains a low profile, never using its own name, always projecting the image of other groups and highlighting their commitment to the cause.
- It does not take on any function that another group can perform, confining itself to facilitating linkages and filling temporary gaps not serviced by other organizations.
- It does not fund local groups, preferring to strengthen their self-reliance by helping them plan and carry out their own fund raising events, such as rock concerts.<sup>1</sup>
- It does not publish a newsletter. When communicating with a particular constituency it uses that group's newsletters. When it wants to get a message out to the public, it uses the mass media. Thus it reaches a far larger audience at a fraction of the cost.
- It keeps itself small and its budget modest, working by activating, enabling, amplifying, and focusing existing social forces. It lives by the logic that big organizations have to take on large conventional projects to justify themselves. They necessarily become competitors with other organizations and interests rather than facilitators who measure their own success by their effectiveness in helping others to be strong and successful.

PER's experience suggests a number of useful operating principles for organizations that serve as strategic network catalysts. (See the box insert on the following page.)

#### Operating Principles for Strategic Network Catalysts

1. Maintain a low public profile. Emphasize the commitment and contribution of other organizations to the network's goals. Measure own success by effectiveness in making others stronger and more successful contributors to these goals.
2. Recognize the differing motivations and resources of the groups engaged in the network.
3. Look to those who have the most direct and compelling interest in the outcome to provide the sustained leadership.
4. Continuously scan the environment for opportunities to engage new participants who bring new perspectives and may appeal to additional segments of the public.
5. Do not take on any function that another group can perform. Facilitate linkages and fill temporary gaps not serviced by other organizations.
6. Work through existing communication networks and media to reach large audiences efficiently.
7. Help other groups find their own sources of funds, but don't become a funder.
8. Keep staff and budget small to assure flexibility, avoid competing institutional interests, and maintain dependence on the effective action of others.

## 9. Use protest actions to position the movement to advance a proactive agenda.

PER's experience with a variety of campaigns against socially and environmentally harmful development projects has led it to the conclusion that attacking ill conceived projects is not enough. It now realizes that the government's need for dams stems from ill conceived development policies that fail to account adequately for their residual social and environmental costs. It must put forward credible alternatives. For example, the dam projects that PER has successfully fought are being put forward by a government desperately seeking ways to meet the projected demand for energy, driven by Thailand's export-led industrialization strategy. There is need not only for an alternative energy policy that emphasizes energy conservation and efficiency, but also an alternative development policy that points to ways to enhance the well-being of the Thai people without significant dependence on large new centralized power generation facilities.

Producing and presenting credible alternatives poses a serious new challenge to PER. Government, business and existing technocratic think-tanks are all committed to established concepts of development. PER thus sees a need to develop its own research capacity as it redefines its role from one of resisting harmful development projects on a case by case basis to one of formulating and popularizing well thought out and documented alternatives more beneficial to the long-term interests of Thailand's people.

## NGO THEORY OF POVERTY: FROM BASIC NEEDS TO DEVELOPMENT VISION

Tim Brodhead says that to be a development organization it is essential to have a theory of poverty that directs us to its underlying causes. Without such a theory the organization inevitably remains a relief and welfare agency, responding only to poverty's most evident symptoms.

Indeed many NGOs concerned with the plight of the poor did begin as relief and welfare organizations, and many remain so today. They see that people are unable to meet their basic needs and, without asking why, respond in the most direct and immediate way by providing food, clothing, health care, and shelter as required. They engage in first generation strategies.

The more thoughtful NGOs at some point find themselves asking, "Why are these people poor." They began, at least implicitly, to formulate a theory of poverty. They attempt to "look upstream," searching for the source or cause of the problem. Many NGOs that pursue this question conclude that the problem is local inertia, a sort of self-imposed and by implication self-correctable powerlessness resulting from lack of organization, political consciousness, belief in self, credit, and basic skills. Armed with an action theory that suggests this inertia can be broken through appropriate external interventions, they set about to intervene with community development programs. They reorient themselves to second generation strategies.

When the theory of community inertia proved to be inadequate, some of us looked further upstream. This led to a realization that in large measure the evident powerlessness of the villager is not self-imposed. Rather it is externally-imposed and sustained by policies and programs, often originating from the state and funded by foreign agencies, that deprive the poor of access to productive resources and maintain them in a state of dependency. Development projects, such as dams and industrial forest plantations, that displace the poor from their homes and means of livelihood are among the most obvious examples. Some NGOs have adjusted their theories accordingly and set about to advocate for changes in

critical policies and to work with government through partnerships aimed at reorienting its programs in ways that strengthened local control and initiative. They moved to third generation strategies.

NGOs are now taking another look still further upstream. What they see is deeply disturbing, i.e., many of the most devastating programs and policies are a direct consequence of the way human society has come to define development itself. They are imbedded in a growth-centered development vision and in the institutions that we have collectively created to pursue it. We are now looking at the most fundamental driving forces of the global system and coming to realize the extent to which the poverty, environmental destruction, and communal violence experienced in the villages of Asia are symptoms of forces that have locked human society onto a self-destructive path that ultimately threatens the very survival of human civilization.

Many NGOs have become expert in consciousness raising at the village level. They defined the problem as one of an inappropriate mind-set. Now we see that though the problem was correctly defined, its scope was seriously underestimated. Consciousness change is essential, but not only for the poor villager. It must be universal, including the power holders of global society.

As we reflect on the events of the past few years, we will see that we have been engaged in a continuous process of what Hazel Henderson calls "upstreaming," reaching beyond the evident consequences of the problem at hand to address its source. We are finding that this is not a simple matter. Each time we move "upstream" we find the issues are more complex and the vested interests more powerful. We feel less confident in our traditional skills and face needs to create ever wider networks. We are led into increasing involvement with the global context of our national political and economic systems and pulled into ever larger and more complex international coalitions.

To achieve changes of the scope and magnitude required, it is necessary to think of the NGO's people-centered development alternative not as a village project, but as a global people's movement for social transformation. The strategic networks we will be examining this week are among the countless such initiatives that are giving this movement its vitality and direction. They represent, however, only a bare beginning. On a global scale thousands more are needed, each with their own catalysts. Hopefully our deliberations will lead us to insights into how they may be developed more rapidly and effectively.

## ISSUES

There are a number of basic issues to be addressed by those of us who chose to define our roles as catalysts in the formation and guidance of strategic networks as elements of a larger movement for global social transformation.

-- From protest to proaction. Engaging major constituencies in protest can make an important contribution to strengthening awareness of issues and building commitment to activism. Protest is relatively easy to organize as it is usually easier to build consensus about what should not be done than about what constitutes a positive alternative. At the same time protest actions only pose barriers to the negative forces of the growth-centered development vision. Even when successful, they do not resolve them.

Eventually there must be attention to building support for a proactive agenda aimed at transformational change. The question should be continuously in mind: What do we want in place of what we cannot accept? Each protest action should be consciously designed to lead toward defining such alternatives and building supporting constituencies. Perhaps we might explore during this meeting how this can be accomplished, and how the strategies and tactics of strategic networks engaged in protest actions differ from those working for proactive outcomes.

-- Building Citizen Democracy. Democratization is a key theme of NGO activity throughout Asia. We have learned, however, that the institutional forms of democratic governance are in themselves little more than empty shells. They provide citizens with the means to engage in the governance process, but they cannot insure that they will be used. Unused, they will inevitably be abused by those in power. Our experience is leading us to the realization that "democracy is not something we have; it is something we do."<sup>2</sup> Democracy cannot exist without citizen action.

Democratization is best thought of as a process of building capacities for and commitment to citizen action through action. The traditional organization building agenda of NGOs is a part of this process, but only a part. Strategic networks are another. Single organizations are rarely successful in taking on significant policy and institutional change agendas acting entirely on their own. Where the issues involve significant external political and economic forces, strategic networking becomes an essential mode of action.

Strategic networks are important training grounds, as well as instruments of, citizen democracy and should be treated as such. Strategic networking can also contribute to the essential process of rebuilding a sense of community, recreating the social structures based on shared values that modern society with its emphasis on impersonal market transactions and hierarchical organizations has disrupted. They are a means of helping to break the feelings of alienation and powerlessness that this disruption has left behind.

In a vital democratic system, an individual person or organization may be engaged simultaneously in a number of strategic networks that involve different agendas and different combinations of actors. Citizen democracy grows out of the thickening web of active networks that form around a growing number of needs and issues.

Each strategic network effort should seek consciously to leave behind a more informed and active citizenry with a strengthened sense of being part of a local, national, and global community of caring citizens. Though networking links are often temporary and ephemeral, each time a link dissolves, there should be left behind a positive memory trace that will make new linkages easier to form toward the solution of new problems.

-- Forming Alliances Across Social Movements. The NGOs concerned with poverty or social justice present an exceedingly weak force in the face of the transformation agenda. Remaining isolated and even competitive with one another and focusing almost exclusively on micro-level interventions it may be stretching the meaning of the term to call them a movement.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, many of them are moving quickly beyond their traditional limitations and are learning the ways of strategic networking, often through alliances with organizations from movements more experienced in that mode of action.

We are coming to realize that the people-centered development or social transformation movement is in fact a meta-movement that embraces the proactive agendas of many existing social movements, including the environment, human rights, peace, women's, social justice, and consumer protection movements. The meta-movement will emerge as a truly significant force for change only as the participants in its component movements come to recognize the extent to which the realization of their own agendas depend ultimately on achievement of the larger transformational agenda. A number of the strategic networking cases to be discussed in this meeting involve actions that join the interests of two or more of the component movements. Links between the environment, human rights, and social justice movements seem to be particularly common. Encouraging and strengthening these tendencies seems a desirable course of action. We might look for insights from the cases as to how this can be achieved.

-- Distinguishing Between Activist and Service Provider NGOs. There has been a considerable tendency to group together all NGOs concerned with the needs of the poor into a single category. They join the same coalition bodies, have the same kinds of registration, use the same terms to identify themselves, attend the same training programs, often seek funds from the same donors, etc. But are they the same?

While still too early to say for sure, there are indications that we may be seeing a somewhat permanent division among such NGOs between those that chose to be specialized service providers (elsewhere described as public service contractors)<sup>4</sup> and those that chose to be social activists working in more catalytic roles. These two roles require fundamentally different skills and orientations.

Service providers have a natural, and probably appropriate, tendency to grow in size and service area and are more likely to have hierarchical organizational forms. Their activities feature routine modes of working and they are likely to shy from controversies that might prove offensive to the donors on which their survival depends.

The activist organizations are likely to have a smaller staff, though they may have large membership bodies organized around decentralized local chapters. They will also tend toward looser, more decentralized structures. Very little of what they do could be considered routine. They are constantly facing new challenges. They may not seek political controversy, but are forced to accept it as part of the territory. Their funding is likely to be fairly precarious and they are more likely to depend on voluntary contributions of funds and time.

The above distinctions are based more on a theoretical analysis of differences inherent in the tasks of the service provider and the activist than on an examination of actual experience. As we examine the cases to be presented in this workshop, we might be looking for answers to questions such as the following: What are the characteristics of effective strategic network catalysts? To what extent have organizations with a consequential service delivery program been effective in this role? Can these organizations be effective network participants in other than the catalyst role? What are the implications? To what extent do the activists organizations feel compelled to look and act like service provider organizations in order to attract funding and maintain their necessary acceptability to government? Is it productive to blur the distinctions between the activists and the service providers? Or does the lack of a clear distinction hinder our ability both to develop effective national service delivery systems and effective forums for the practice of citizen democracy?

NGOs no longer enjoy the luxury of being inconsequential actors at the periphery of the development stage. Our choices make a serious difference to the global future. We must take our responsibilities seriously and prepare ourselves accordingly. We are only beginning to understand the nature of strategic networks and the critical roles of the catalysts that give them shape and direction. We must make rapid advances in that understanding, in the development of our skills as effective catalysts, and in sharing our insights with others who might assume similar roles.

---

David C. Korten is President of the People-Centered Development Forum and a Senior Associate of the Institute for Development Research. The People-Centered Development Forum is dedicated to advancing a people's development movement toward the realization of a people-centered development vision. This paper was prepared for the Asian Regional Workshop on Strategic Networking for Sustainable Development and Environmental Action, 26-30 November 1990, Bangkok, Thailand sponsored by the Asian NGO Coalition, the Institute for Development Research, the International Union of Consumer Organizations, and the People-Centered Development Forum. People-Centered Development Forum, MCC P.O. Box 740, Makati, Metro Manila, Philippines.

David C. Korten

PCDForum -- Localize Economies! Globalize Consciousness!

Fax (212) 242-1901