

# 2

## Non-governmental organisations and environmental policies

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### 2.1 Introduction

Most environmental problems are caused by human interferences in physical and biological surroundings, including interferences caused by the policies of government agencies or business enterprises. Environmental policies can and do change, of course, because policy-making processes occur in dynamic political contexts involving an array of more or less powerful organisations and groups with conflicting interests and values. Environmental NGOs (non-governmental organisations) are part of such political contexts and engage in advocacy work to try to change policies that they perceive as damaging to the environment. Sometimes NGOs are more or less successful. Sometimes they try but fail to make much of an immediate impact on policy. Why? Part of the answer to any such question about influence always involves some agency – the initiatives, choices and *actions of the actors involved* – and some structure – the *constraints and opportunities* within which the actors act.

This is the broad context for this chapter on NGOs and their influence on environmental policies. The chapter concentrates on trying to:

- 1 characterise briefly the nature, diversity and growth of environmental NGOs throughout the world
- 2 identify major constraints and opportunities within which NGOs work to try to influence environmental policies
- 3 identify major aspects of NGO action that can affect the extent to which they are influential
- 4 consider a variety of factors that need to be borne in mind when trying to assess the influence of NGOs on environmental policies.

The four main sections of the chapter deal with each of these subjects in turn.

## 2.2 The nature, diversity and growth of environmental NGOs

### What are environmental NGOs?

An environmental NGO is an *organisation* that is *non-governmental* and *non-profit-making* and engaged with an *environmental problem or problems*.

An NGO is an organisation in the sense that it has at least several full-time people involved, some sort of hierarchy, a budget, an office (although with local NGOs this can sometimes mean little more than someone's house or flat). In Europe, NGOs as organisations are registered for VAT, non-organisations are not. The boundary between organisations and non-organisations can sometimes pose problems. For example, is Earth First! an NGO? It has only very limited organisational features; it only has a place, not permanent staff, in Montana (USA) from which a journal is produced.

An environmental NGO is non-governmental. Boundary problems can also arise here. There are QUANGOS (quasi non-governmental organisations), for example, that the government appoints to advise it on an environmental issue, but these are usually not classified as NGOs because they are too closely involved with the state. But then, there are NGOs clearly outside the state in civil society that are almost exclusively financed by the government – does that make them an arm of the state?

An NGO is non-profit-making. An example of a boundary problem here is an NGO that is a non-profit-making environmental research organisation sponsored entirely by profit-making business enterprises. Normally there are legal distinctions that establish a boundary. In the UK and the USA, for example, most non-profit-making organisations are registered as such; surpluses can be made and distributed, but not to themselves. There are anomalies; religious institutions and party political organisations are non-profit-making and non-governmental, but they are conventionally not considered NGOs.

An environmental NGO is engaged with an environmental problem or problems. Such a problem is defined as a change in the physical environment brought about by human interferences which are perceived to be unacceptable with respect to a particular set of commonly shared norms (Sloep and van Dam, 1995, p.42). Many NGOs have broader remits than just the environment, e.g. OXFAM. This is particularly true in the South, where nearly all environmental NGOs direct their attention more broadly at development problems within which a particular environmental aspect may be only one of several concerns.

Despite such boundary problems, the definition of environmental NGOs as non-governmental, non-profit organisations engaged with environmental problems works reasonably well in identifying a distinct category of actors in the arena of environmental policy-making.

### NGOs and the environmental movement

NGOs as organisations are distinct from movements. The famous Chipko movement in India, for example, involves village people in the Garwhal Himalaya, especially women, who hug trees when loggers arrive to cut them down; but it is not an NGO because although there are leaders and followers there is no formal organisation.

More broadly, there is an environmental movement made up of diverse NGOs, groups and individuals who generally share a set of beliefs about the environment and what should be done about it, for example as set out in Agenda 21 and who seek through collective action to convert – to *move* – people to action and new consciousness consistent with those beliefs. The individuals and groups may be mobilised from time to time by NGOs to contribute money or, more unusually, engage in political action like demonstrations or letter writing campaigns. The movement also continually tries to mobilise new constituents to the collective enterprise from amongst the silent multitude of people who may share the beliefs of the movement and are anonymously recorded as doing so by periodic opinion polls.

The collective enterprise of the environmental movement in localised settings will be galvanised every now and then to try to change environmental policies impacting adversely on the environment. Perhaps even more importantly in the longer term, the work of the environmental movement can gradually transform public environmental consciousness. (This is a subject taken up later in this chapter and in the final chapter of this book.) The size and strength of the environmental movement can wax and wane through time; and the fortunes of environmental NGOs, embedded in the movement, can rise and fall correspondingly.

## **Diversity of NGOs**

There are various ways to classify NGOs within the environmental movement. A quick way to appreciate their diversity is to note differences of size, level and links.

### **Size**

Environmental NGOs are far smaller, generally speaking, than organisations of either the state or the business world in terms of numbers of full-time staff, size of budgets, extent of record keeping and so on. Large NGOs like Greenpeace UK have an office building and attached warehouse in London, a multi-million pound budget, over 100 paid employees and so on. But this is exceptional. At the other end of the scale are NGOs that are so small that they occupy a very borderline position in terms of their organisational characteristics. An example is Spandana Samaja Seva Samudaya, near Sirsi in the remote rural district of Uttara Kannada in the state of Karnataka, in South India. Spandana aims at sustainable agricultural development in a small rural area and its 60 members (in 1994) engaged in activities to promote environmental awareness, the use of alternative sources of energy and so on. There is a membership fee of Rs 100 and a managing committee consisting of a president, secretary and four co-ordinators. They keep rudimentary records mainly regarding Spandana's several sources of funding, but there are no full-time or part-time paid employees. It may not be quite a formal organisation, but it is a little environmental NGO.

It is mistaken to assume that Northern environmental NGOs are usually larger than Southern ones. There is no such pattern. BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) is one of the largest NGOs in the world, with a paid staff of 2000 (WRI, 1992, p.224). Some Northern NGOs with international operations like Greenpeace are large but others can be surprisingly small. JATAN (Japan Tropical Forest Action Network), well known in Japan and abroad, had only four staff members in 1992.

## **Level**

Environmental NGOs can operate at a very local level indeed. Spandana in rural Karnataka is an example. Other NGOs are international. An example is the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), with corporate-like offices in Brussels which, at the beginning of the 1990s, was an organisation linking over 100 national-level environmental organisations with a combined membership of 20 million located within member states of the EU. The EEB worked on EU environmental policy issues that had implications for both European and global environmental problems.

There are NGOs also at various intermediate levels. There are national-level environmental NGOs, e.g. Vereniging Milieudefensie in The Netherlands, ANADEGES (Análisis, Desarrollo y Gestión) in Mexico. There are regional-level environmental NGOs, e.g. Sierra Club of Western Canada. Any one country will have NGOs at different levels, e.g. FOE (Friends of the Earth) Scotland, SCOTTIE (Society for the Control of Troublesome Industrial Emissions) in Stirlingshire and a local SCOOT (Scottish Community Organization Opposed to Toxics). The NGO 'coverage' at different levels is not uniform. In the state of Karnataka in South India, for example, some rural districts have numerous NGOs, others have very few. In the early 1990s, the Philippines had more than 2000 development cum environmental NGOs at various levels, whereas there were virtually no environmental NGOs in Vietnam.

## **Links**

Nearly every environmental NGO is linked to others. The linkages can involve only a few NGOs at a local level; they can include numerous NGOs within any one country; and linkages can be truly global, bypassing the nation state. There are perhaps four types of NGO linkages, as set out in Table 2.1.

Networking is part of any environmental NGO's life, even if it is only in the form of an occasional telephone call to a neighbouring NGO. The new information technologies have helped to make networking possible on a far wider scale. Most NGOs,

**Table 2.1** Types of linkages between environmental NGOs

Type of linkage	Methods/characteristics
Networking	Access to information flow from elsewhere; passive, occasional, unpredictable use of information technology 'nets'.
Networks	More active exchange of information, sometimes involving a secretariat (which can itself be an NGO); more regular personal contacts; more emphasis on information sharing on more general matters (including morale boosting), less on joint campaigning on specific issues.
Coalitions	Single event joint campaigns often by fairly diverse NGOs; limited life recognised and accepted.
Alliances	Long-term allegiance to common ideals among trusted partners; regular consultation by post, fax, IT and personal meetings.

Source: based on Eccleston (1996)

including many in the South, had by the mid-1990s access to information relevant to their environmental work through some form of APC net: in the USA there was Econet; in Europe there was Greenet and there were other nets elsewhere. Most NGOs are rather passive in relation to such nets.

A network exists when there is more active, regular networking between NGOs. Many networks have no name, many others do and some of these may have a small secretariat which is itself an NGO. Examples include FEMNET (African Women's Development and Communications Network), PAN (Pesticides Action Network), APPEN (Asia-Pacific People's Environment Network). Such networks can sometimes convert to a coalition on a particular campaign of limited duration.

Coalitions come and go. They can form from networks and alliances. An example is ASOC (Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition) through which about 200 NGOs from 49 countries linked up for some years in relation to a campaign to make Antarctica a World Park; for most of the time it had only one staff member (Clark, 1994, p.165). Most NGO campaigns involve some sort of NGO coalition.

Alliances come in various shapes and sizes. One type is the North-South confederation; some of these are global in scope. Friends of the Earth International is an example comprising in 1993, 50 national-level NGOs (each with local branches) from around the world with a total membership of over 1 million. These national FOE organisations are basically autonomous but do meet annually to agree certain priorities for the coming year and co-ordinate strategy. Other examples include Greenpeace International, WWF (Worldwide Fund for Nature; see Figure 2.1) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

Another type of alliance is the long-term (although not indefinite) formal allegiance between a Northern NGO and Southern NGO partners. The Northern end of these alliances can be financed largely by subscriptions, like Save the Children and OXFAM in the UK. In other cases the Northern NGOs are dependent on funding from the governments in which their headquarters are located, like CARE in the USA, Médecins sans Frontières in France and most of the large development NGOs in The Netherlands and Scandinavia. Some sustain environment and development projects directly in Southern countries. Others work indirectly, that is, they fund and give technical assistance to indigenous Southern NGOs. There are four mechanisms used in India, for example (Farrington and Lewis, 1993, pp. 95-96):

- 1 An intermediary organisation or umbrella organisation in India identifies local NGO projects on behalf of the Northern NGO and monitors the work done.
- 2 An Indian intermediary pools incoming resources from a consortium of Northern sources and distributes them to local NGO projects.
- 3 A Northern NGO (e.g. NOVIB in The Netherlands) has an office in India staffed by Indian nationals and with a high degree of autonomy, through which its funds are channelled.
- 4 A Northern NGO (e.g. Christian Aid) works directly with a local NGO, periodically visiting it.

Many other alliances are not North-South. There are Northern alliances, e.g. ANPED (Alliance of Northern People for Environment and Development), based in Amsterdam. There are Southern alliances, including NGO umbrella organisations, e.g.



## IN THE FORESTS OF PAKISTAN, THE AXE IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE GUN.

In the Suleiman mountains of Pakistan, conservationists find a wedding is no cause for celebration.

It's a tradition that the bridegroom must first cut down 125 chilghoza trees to raise enough money to provide a payment to the bride's parents. This year, 40 men want to get married and they don't intend to let 5,000 trees stand in their way.

The real price, however, is paid much later. The forests protect the soil and water of wildlife feeding grounds. They provide a vital watershed for the local rivers. Without the trees, water from torrential rain funnels down valleys, smashing houses and bursting river banks.

The consequences are no less ruinous for the local economy. Mature trees offer a rich harvest of nuts and oils that earn vital rupees in the markets of Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Peshawar and Islamabad.

So what can be done to protect them?

In this part of the Baluchistan, some 15 warring tribes own 70% of the forests.

Into this troubled land walked the local WWF organizer. At their first meeting the tribesmen still had their rifles

slung across their shoulders. They listened as the WWF representative explained that the forests were their future. That reforestation was possible. That they could profit from sustainable development of nuts, berries and fruit.

"Hawk-eyed and tough looking," they may have been. But he met with success. An agreement was reached to limit the cutting down of trees. All based on a WWF feasibility study.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Merely the beginning.

The education programme goes on. More efficient uses of fuel wood and alternative energy sources are needed.

And not just here.

This is just one of over 100 WWF forest projects in 45 different countries.

Of course, this costs money. If you want to help, you can make a donation or a legacy to WWF's work.

Armed with that, we can achieve anything.

World Wide Fund For Nature  
(formerly World Wildlife Fund)  
International Secretariat,  
1196 Gland, Switzerland.



**Fig. 2.1** WWF advertisement: informing people all over the world about nature conservation and environmental degradation.

COICA which in 1991 formally co-ordinated the work of NGOs in five Amazon basin countries representing the interests of indigenous minorities living there. Alliances can disintegrate; ANEN (African NGO Environment Network) linked 530 NGOs in 45 countries in 1990, but it became moribund for a time subsequently, due to internal problems. Communication within some of these alliances can from time to time be all irregular and the umbrella may at times be more adequately described as a network. WALHI in Indonesia is perhaps an example; at times the relations between the more than 300 environmental NGOs under this Indonesian umbrella have been fairly quiescent, then a certain campaign can make a part of the alliance into a temporary coalition.

### Growth

The growth in the number of environmental NGOs has been striking, most of them coming into existence since about 1980. For example, it has been estimated that there were more than 6000 NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean at the beginning of the 1990s, most of them having been formed only in the previous ten years (Tolba *et al.*, 1992, p.728). The story is repeated in other regions of the world. Numerous NGO directories have recently appeared to cope with the development.



**Plate 2.1** Bombay, India. Demonstrators protest against the Narmada Valley Dam project, one of the largest and most controversial water resource developments undertaken anywhere in the world (and financed by the World Bank). Over the next 50 years or so, 30 major dams, 135 medium-sized dams and 3000 smaller dams are to be built on India's Narmada River and its tributaries. Once the project has been completed, the dams will provide 50,000 sq km of land with irrigation and generate 2700 megawatts of electricity. The protesters' main objections are directed at the negative externalities of irrigation (i.e. waterlogging and salination), the displacement of people, the danger to public health (e.g. the spread of schistosomiasis) and the loss of forests and cultivated and grazing land. Hindus have also objected to the project because they regard the river as a holy site. Photo: Roderick Johnson/Lineair

Another indicator is the phenomenal growth in size of some individual NGOs. Greenpeace, for example, originated in a small committee hastily formed in Vancouver, Canada, in 1969 to organise an environmental demonstration at the US-Canada border between Seattle and Vancouver. Various radical students, draft dodgers, yippies, housewives, a few professors and one or two ministers (religious) showed up and managed briefly to close the border. The committee turned itself into Greenpeace in 1971. By 1992, Greenpeace International was an alliance of national offices in 30 countries with thousands of full-time and part-time staff, about 4.5 million supporters in 143 countries and annual revenues in excess of \$100 million (Bergesen *et al.*, 1992). Top people from national offices now jet in grey suits from science conferences to international banks, to advertising agencies, to government departments, to campaign meetings. While they quietly confer and lobby inside, other Greenpeace people actively demonstrate outside in the streets and at sea. Other major Northern-based NGOs and North-South NGO coalitions have similarly come a long way in the last two decades.

There has also been a burgeoning in the number and resources of Northern-based NGOs linked financially to Southern NGOs partners. A prompting factor was Northern governments channelling some of their international aid for environmental and development projects in the South through such NGO links. In 1970 such North–South NGO arrangements handled less than \$0.9 billion, but between 1975 and 1985 the financial resources deployed in this way roughly doubled in real terms (at 1986 prices). By 1989 Northern NGOs were shifting \$6.4 billion to their Southern partners, about 12% of all public and private Northern aid – in terms of net transfers, more than was provided by the World Bank (Clark, 1991, p.47). This development helped to spawn the growth of tens of thousands of new NGOs in the South formed in the expectation of having access to the funds pouring through from the North.

An important reason why the role of NGOs increased quickly in the 1980s and early 1990s in terms of growth of numbers and resources was the advance of neoliberal economic ideas in the 1980s about minimising the role of the state in the functioning of the market – an upheaval in thinking drastic enough to be called a ‘counterrevolution’ by Toye (1993). In the new orthodoxy of ‘public-bad, private-good’, NGOs were viewed as part of a private non profit sector and therefore ‘good news’. One must be careful not to exaggerate the extent to which NGOs moved in as governments cut back. For one thing, governments did not cut back very much. But the new economic ideology was congenial to the growth of the NGO sector.

The activity leading up to and immediately following, the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 also energised the environmental movement. Environmental NGOs, being part of that movement, grew in size and numbers as part of that wave of interest. Such interest seemed to taper off somewhat by the mid-1990s and NGO growth appears to have slowed down.

Environmental NGOs are non-profit-making, non-governmental organisations, many of which are now linked to each other in various ways throughout the world. Their rapid growth up to the early 1990s made them highly visible, even trendy. However, one needs to be careful, in making such observations, not to jump to the conclusion that NGOs generally became more influential in relation to environmental policy-making. Sometimes NGOs have some influence, frequently they have little or no impact on policy. Why the difference?

## **2.3 Constraints and opportunities**

Part of the answer to the question about more or less influence involves understanding the constraints and opportunities within which NGOs act. A structural constraint can severely limit what an NGO can do. However, constraints for NGOs should not be seen as cast in concrete, irremovable obstacles that forever determine what NGOs can and cannot achieve. Although structured constraints tend to carry on through time, their features can and do change slowly and sometimes not so slowly. Changing structures can provide opportunities for NGOs. Even essentially unchanging structures offer opportunities in some circumstances. For these reasons the structural context in which NGOs act must be analysed in terms of *both* constraints *and* opportunities. This basic point is illustrated in this section with reference to four structures with which NGOs must contend.



First, any NGOs attempting to influence an environmental policy inherits *the particular environmental issue* to which the policy relates. This is a 'given' in the situation they confront, about which they can do very little in the short term; but certain environmental issues tend to be more amenable to NGO influence than others. For example, it is harder to influence an environmental policy where the proposed policy changes can be shown by opponents to involve the sacrifice of economic benefits for significant sections of society. An environmental policy where proposed policy changes by NGOs would affect the vital interests of powerful organisations is also less likely to be accepted; examples are NGOs campaigning to end commercial logging in tropical moist forests when the interests of government are served by land concessions as political favours to large wood-producing firms or when policy proposals would involve agrarian reform detrimental to powerful landed interests. Similarly, proposed environment policy changes advocated by NGOs that are self-evidently grounded in ideas about intergenerational equity are also more difficult to bring to fruition. These examples are instances where the content of environmental issues and policies can make a difference to the success or otherwise of NGO advocacy work.

NGOs usually work on one particular environmental issue at a time and if it happens that the issue is intrinsically less amenable to NGO influence, then that is a major *constraint* on their advocacy work. But there are also *opportunities* here. For example, certain environmental issues can become more amenable to NGO influence if they advance on the global environmental agenda, in terms of international agreements reached. Of the ten global environmental issues identified in 1992 by the long-time Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Tolba, 1992), ozone depletion (in the stratosphere) was furthest advanced in terms of the international conventions and protocols agreed, which regulated environmental policies on this problem. By contrast, five issues had hardly been advanced at all in this sense – climate change, deforestation, land degradation and desertification, water resources and water quality, environmental disasters. The other four issues – atmospheric pollution, marine pollution, loss of biological diversity, management of hazardous and radioactive wastes – may be said to have fallen between these two extremes in that there were some international agreements. On the whole, NGOs can be more influential on global environmental problems where there are conventions and protocols with nation states agreed on certain policies or courses of action.

There are perhaps three reasons for this. First, an internationally agreed convention or protocol amounts to a public commitment by parties to the agreement (i.e. governments) to pursue policies meant to deal with an environmental problem and such public commitments provide points of leverage for NGOs when lobbying governments that are slow about meeting their commitments. Second, meetings of the parties provide avenues of access for NGOs to important policy networks related to global environmental problems, access which in the absence of such agreements may be lacking. Third, once such international agreements have been reached and meetings of the parties have begun to occur, the focus of attention shifts somewhat from agenda setting to issues of policy implementation, a matter on which NGOs can have considerable leverage. The reason for this is that in implementing environmental policies, governments frequently depend to some extent on NGOs for the public support needed in such administrative activity, for monitoring and so on.

A second major structural constraint on NGO advocacy work is the character of the *target organisations* whose policies are affecting the environmental problem. There are three main types. First, there are organisations within the state, e.g. a Ministry of the Environment, of Industries, of Forests, a Nuclear Inspectorate, an Overseas Aid Agency. There are also different state organisations at national, state/provincial and local levels. These different organisations within the state sometimes do not agree about environmental policies and some of them may be more amenable to NGO influence than others. Second, NGOs target business organisations whose policies use or abuse the environment. Many do abuse it but a few are beginning to move towards more sustainable business policies (e.g. Business Council for Sustainable Development, 1992; Hawken 1993). Third, NGOs target IGOs (intergovernmental organisations) whose policies have important environmental consequences. These range, for example, from the World Bank to various organisations within the UN, from GATT to the ITTO (International Tropical Timber Organisation), from the G7 to the G77, from relevant agencies within the EU to the secretariats and meetings of the parties for international environmental conventions and protocols.

NGOs not only target organisations directly, they also seek to influence certain target organisations in order indirectly to influence others. For example, environmental NGOs in the USA have directly lobbied congressional committees which make decisions about US government funding for the World Bank, in order indirectly to put pressure on the Bank to build environmental considerations into the Bank's lending criteria.

Basically, certain target organisations are more amenable to NGO influence than others. If the 'opposition' for an NGO is a particularly tough target organisation, then that is a major *constraint* on their advocacy work which profoundly affects their attempts to influence policy. But there are also *opportunities*. Targets which are, or are becoming, more accessible can be more amenable to NGO influence. Accessible targets are open to the arguments of others, they may even be quite favourably disposed towards environmental NGOs. NGOs may be invited to the meetings of such target organisations from time to time and the proceedings of the organisation may be more or less known rather than kept secret behind closed doors. GATT, for example, was never accessible; NGOs were never allowed into the meetings and their influence on the organisation was virtually non-existent.

More vulnerable target organisations are also more amenable to NGO influence. Vulnerability in this context means that the organisation is accountable to some constituency or 'public'. Where there is such accountability, then political leverage can be brought to bear on the target organisation by NGOs. For example, commercial firms whose policies impact adversely on the environment can be vulnerable to consumer boycotts, organised by NGOs, which can hurt sales and profit margins. Target organisations can also be vulnerable if their sources of funding are accessible to NGO lobbying.

A third major structural constraint for NGOs is the character of the *policy network* involved (Smith, 1993). One target organisation may publicly enunciate an environmental policy and take responsibility for implementing it, but the policy may actually have been fashioned by a policy network. Changing that policy may require dealing with a network rather than just the front organisation. Certain types of policy networks

are more amenable to NGO influence than others. For example, closed and fairly settled policy networks made up of a set of powerful organisations may be less amenable to NGO influence than more open and changing networks of organisations between which there is more or less severe conflict over environmental policy issues. Once again, both constraints and opportunities are involved here. NGOs try to stay well informed about the state of policy networks relevant to their environmental policy concern and whenever networks are changing, NGOs can try to move to take advantage of this opportunity. Richard Sandbrook, head of IIED (International Institute of Environment and Development) in London, summed up (in a personal interview in 1992) the NGO view of network watching: 'Don't trust target organisations; track them'.

Some policy networks include environmental NGOs while others do not. An important example of the former was the 'Tuesday Group' in the USA in the early 1990s which brought together each month in Washington DC representatives of the main government agencies involved in current environmental policy issues at a national level and leaders of 20 major environmental NGOs in the country. In other political contexts, NGOs cannot gain access to environmental policy networks, e.g. in an authoritarian regime like Indonesia. Sometimes NGOs deliberately stay outside. An example is Greenpeace UK and its relations with the comparatively closed policy network that deals with radioactive waste. When, in October 1993, Greenpeace was described by a High Court judge as an 'eminently respectable and responsible lot' during a court action by Greenpeace to try to stop British Nuclear Fuels at Sellafield from proceeding with the THORP Reprocessing Plant, Peter Melchett (Executive Director of Greenpeace) was quick to deny that the organisation was now becoming part of the establishment or of the relevant policy network. 'Our role,' he said, 'is to be as independent and uncompromising as possible to achieve success in protecting the environment [...] Government's role appears to be to admit the problem [...] while carrying on as before. Our role is to say that's crap – we say shut down [THORP] and find alternative, clean technologies' (*Guardian*, 2 October 1993, p.23).

Consideration of the relationship between NGOs and policy networks points straight at a major conundrum all NGOs face in their advocacy work. If an adversarial NGO is part of a policy network, then it has in a sense joined the opposition and its capacity to speak out forcefully against a policy on the environment may be compromised. If an NGO stays outside or cannot gain access to the policy network, then its advocacy work in relation to environmental policies it opposes may be marginalised.

Fourthly, policy networks are part of broader institutional structures of politics and government and *the political structures* that an NGO confronts can affect the influence it has on environmental policy. NGOs in Britain, for example, have to contend with a unitary state with power heavily concentrated in London (with the exception of Scottish and Welsh Offices in Edinburgh and Cardiff which do attract regional lobbies), an electoral system which tends to produce exaggerated majorities in Parliament and strong governments, ministers more or less dependent for advice on generalist civil servants who tend to depend a lot on specialist advice from outside the government department (including sometimes specialists in NGOs), unusually centralised media dominated by national newspapers and London-centred broadcasting which also assist the centralisation of power, both in terms of agenda setting and policy

formulation. NGOs therefore tend to concentrate their main energies in Whitehall (Richardson, 1993, pp.89–90). NGO advocacy work *vis-à-vis* government policy is not easy in such an institutional context. It has been said that ‘Because many policy makers think of themselves as custodians of the public interest and feel that they understand the best interests of the public with minimal reference to the public itself, environmental policy in Britain continues to be made in closed policy communities’ (McCormick, 1993, p.269).

Environmental policy-making in the US government, by contrast, is much more open. NGOs and other lobbies are much stronger in relation to a more divided state (divided between executive, bureaucracy and legislature), with multiple points of access at national, state and local levels. NGO advocacy work in this context is quite different from the UK. Japan is different again. So one could go on from one institutional context to another.

It is widely assumed that NGOs have more opportunities to be influential when operating in more democratic political structures. NGOs cannot choose the political structure in which they find themselves. Such structures shape NGO advocacy work. In countries with more authoritarian forms of rule, NGOs may have a much tougher time influencing environmental policy; indeed in some repressive regimes, there are virtually no NGOs anyway.

On this issue of the importance of democratic political structures, there are perhaps four general points that can be made. First, NGOs are more likely to be influential where the target organisations whose environmental policies they are trying to change are accountable to voters or members of a ‘public’. Second, NGOs are more likely to be influential where there is a plurality of conflicting and changing power centres within the state providing points of leverage for NGO lobbying. Third, NGOs are more likely to thrive and be influential in political contexts where relevant civil and political liberties prevail, especially freedom of expression and association. Fourth, NGOs are least likely to exist or be influential in communist party mobilisation regimes, where mass organisations of citizens are mobilised by a political party to participate directly in making binding rules and policies relating to their environment. NGOs can thus be said to have their *raison d’être* within liberal democratic politics; if such regimes move towards more participative forms of direct democracy, then NGOs may wither or take different forms.

Such general propositions stating relations between features of liberal democratic regimes and NGO advocacy work are perhaps worth bearing in mind at a general level of analysis. Their limitation is that they can obscure particular non-democratic structures of power within liberal democracies. For example, local NGOs campaigning on an environmental issue in a liberal democracy may make little headway if they are up against powerful and united ‘triangles of accommodation’ between bureaucrats, politicians and local ‘strongmen’ (Migdal, 1988).

Structures of power that shape what NGOs can and cannot achieve by way of influencing environmental policies are not confined to local and national political arenas. Such structures can also be global in scope. Transnational economic processes of global capitalism and uneven North–South development are powerful forces about which NGOs can do nothing in the short term. For example, Cubatao in Brazil is one of the most polluted areas on earth, but local or even national NGOs are unable to make

much of an immediate impact on the policies producing that pollution because the Cubatao zone has been occupied and developed mainly by multinational industrial and pharmaceutical firms, including the French petrochemical giant Rhone-Poulenc. Development in the North has had adverse environmental consequences in the South.

Major conflicts of interest between the North and the South can develop from such relationships. Such conflicts are publicised particularly by NGO people in the South. For example, Anil Agarwal, of the Centre for Science and the Environment in New Delhi, has argued:

The North works on the warped assumption that population and not consumption, leads to environmental degradation. But if the world's population were to survive on average Indian standards of consumption, global consumption would be much lower than at present, significantly reducing the strain on the environment. One American child consumes as much as thirty-three Indian children or 477 Ethiopians. And this is precisely the root of the problem. The rich countries want to reduce the population of the developing world so that they can continue to enjoy their 75 per cent share of the world's natural resources, but the developing countries want the rich to reduce their consumption so that the poor can have better access to these resources. (paraphrasing Agarwal, 1994)

Many Southern NGOs broadly share this view. Such North–South conflicts can reverberate in the NGO world and can have adverse effects on attempts by Northern and Southern NGOs to engage effectively in common endeavours to influence global environmental policies.

Various structures that shape NGO advocacy work in relation to environmental policies have been briefly considered – the nature of the environmental issue being worked on, the nature of the target organisation and the policy network being confronted, aspects of the particular political context in which the NGO finds itself. Structures can be constraints for NGOs; they can also provide opportunities. Examples other than the ones already mentioned include the changing structures of public opinion about the environment which can provide an opportunity for NGOs to strengthen their political base within the environmental movement. The ending of the global superpower conflict in the late 1980s and the prospect of using the peace dividend for major programmes of sustainable development may be another opportunity which NGOs can use when advancing their arguments. Whether or not an NGO takes advantage of an opportunity will depend on their capability as agents or actors.

## **2.4 NGOs as agents/actors**

NGOs act as agents within structured constraints and opportunities to influence environmental policies. Their actions may be said to involve a combination of advocacy work directly aimed at changing an existing environmental policy and a much longer term effort to shift ideologies and other structural constraints taking advantage of structural opportunities. This latter aspect of NGO work involves what Gramsci called a protracted 'war of position'.

NGOs may be engaged in the 'war of position' without exactly seeing it that way or being conscious of it on a regular basis. But their normal work, year in and year out,

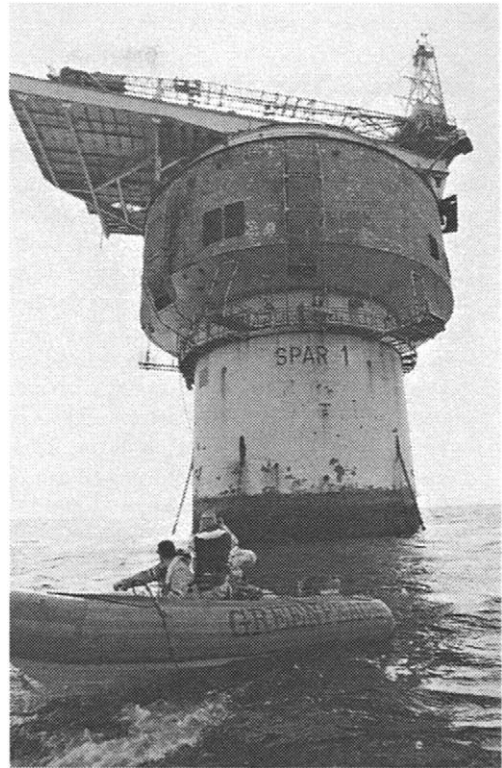
may gradually have the consequence of transforming public consciousness and, in so doing, shifting environmental policies. For example, a small NGO in British Columbia may be opposed to the government policy of clear-felling of the temperate rainforest there by logging companies and its direct advocacy work of trying directly to lobby relevant people in these target organisations to change their policies may have been completely unsuccessful. But this little NGO, doing its normal thing of going out into the forest on a regular basis from year to year to monitor and map what is going on, trying to make this public, forms part of a long 'war of position' in which gradually the sheer existence of this NGO, what it does and might do, together with its allies and supporters in the environmental movement, begins to figure in the calculations of policy makers.

NGOs can also more deliberately engage in what they know will be a protracted 'war of position'. An example is the decision by a group of NGOs in the early 1980s in North America, including the National Wildlife Federation and the Environmental Policy Institute, to work on the major 'underlying causes of the accelerating degradation of natural resources in developing countries' involving (in their view) problems of external development finance and pressure to pay mounting international debt. MDBs (multilateral development banks), including the World Bank, were targetted because they were seen as 'effective levers for eventually modifying development theory and practice globally' (Bramble and Porter, 1992). Environmental issues hardly figured at all in MDB policies. Shifting priorities at the World Bank especially, it was believed, would in the long run affect the policy priorities of many other organisations engaged in development policy affecting the environment. The NGOs began to lobby the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Foreign Operations as a way of getting at the World Bank, because the USA government is the single largest shareholder in the Bank, giving these legislative committees important leverage to which the Bank must pay careful attention. The NGOs brought people from the South affected by Bank policies to testify, including Chico Mendez from Brazil. Over the years, these efforts gradually had some effect. By 1993 the Bank had built environmental concerns into its policies to some extent (World Bank, 1993) and by 1994 the Bank was involved in 118 environmental projects involving about \$9 billion in loans and credits (World Bank, 1994).

The literature has comparatively little to say about the 'war of position' aspect of NGO work. Most of the attention is on deliberate advocacy campaigns by NGOs aimed directly at changing an environmental policy. What do NGOs do in such campaigns? They lobby policy makers within target organisations, brief journalists, work together in the field to monitor the implementation of environmental policy, engage in litigation, go to conferences and meetings, produce publications and engage in direct action (from handing out leaflets in shopping malls to filming lawbreaking whaling ships at sea and putting sand in chainsaws). There are at least six criteria for assessing the effectiveness of NGO action.

First, *political expertise allied to a clear strategy and sense of purpose* is important in NGO advocacy work. For example, having the skill and political intelligence to pick the right target organisation at the right time can be crucial. It is also important to be able to identify political support and political opponents. A campaigner with Indonesia's WALHI said some years ago: 'we do not generalise among government officials, but try to identify those who have mutual objectives and democratic attitudes and

**Plate 2.2** On 30 April 1995, Greenpeace protesters occupied a disused oil platform in the North Sea. The Greenpeace campaign proved a success and Shell, the owner of the Brent Spar, was forced to abandon its plan to scuttle the platform. Later, however, it emerged that Greenpeace had miscalculated the amount of toxic substances which it had alleged were present in the Brent Spar. Photo: Greenpeace/Sims



co-operate with them. It is actually a matter of identifying the “good guys”, targeting the “bad guys” and educating the “ignorant guys” ’ (Witoelar, 1984, p.417). Political expertise is also about having advance intelligence of proposed policies damaging to the environment before they are publicised and having clear and workable alternative policies ready for use. Implied in all this is the capability to organise swiftly to exploit chance events favourable to advancing an NGO’s cause. Being able to move quickly is one of the distinctive advantages NGOs can have over a larger, more bureaucratic target organisation. ‘Influencing the BERD’ (see Box 1) is an example.

The overall importance of political expertise was summed up (in a personal interview, in 1993) by Tony Juniper, forest campaigner at FOE in London, when he was asked why his work in trying to influence policies damaging to the forests was sometimes successful. He paused, then said, ‘Essentially it comes down to being able to intervene effectively as a catalyst in a developing political opportunity’.

A second important asset for NGOs trying to influence environmental policy is having, or having ready access to, relevant *professional, technical and scientific expertise*. This is well recognised in interest group research. A characteristic remark in this literature is that the most successful organisations lobbying the EU, ‘will be those which exhibit the usual professional characteristics – resources, advance intelligence, good contacts with bureaucrats (and with parliamentarians when the occasion arises) and particularly the ability to put forward rational and technical arguments which will

## Influencing the BERD

NGOs sprang into action in the early 1990s when the proposed Bank for European Construction and Development (BERD) was being set up. Twelve EU members, 14 other developed countries and eight Central and East European countries had agreed to take part in BERD. Within two weeks of its formal announcement an international coalition of NGOs moved swiftly to try to ensure that the statutes and byelaws of the BERD would have an environmental mandate more friendly than that of the older World Bank. The coalition comprised the Polish Ecological Club, the Danube Circle (Hungary), ARCHE (German Democratic Republic), FOE (USA), Greenpeace, WWF, Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defence Council. They drafted model language for the BERD statute, translated it into the languages of the various parties to the agreement and used it for lobbying purposes. BERD eventually became the first multilateral development bank to have clear environmental language in its legal statute, byelaws and operating manual. It is impossible to say for certain that the lobbying of the NGO coalition produced that outcome, but it seems likely the NGOs had some influence. (Sands, 1992, p.28)

assist in the formulation of practical policy' (Mazey and Richardson, 1992, p.105). Another student of interest group politics in the North asserts that 'organisations without a strong and professional staff have great difficulty in influencing politicians, civil servants and industrialists' (Willetts, 1982, p.111). NGO campaigners engaged in effective policy advocacy work are also usually known to be exceptionally well informed about the technical and scientific aspects of the environment problem with which they are concerned. To be able to deploy an argument about what 'the science' says regarding an environmental problem can be a distinct advantage in advocacy work. The problem, of course, is that usually 'the science' is not at one; target organisations can have their scientists, NGOs theirs.

Third, the role of *the media* at crucial junctures in a campaign can be very important. Most NGO campaigners try to stay regularly in touch with 'their' journalists and broadcasters. Coverage of environmental issues by the press and electronic media can build public awareness which can be a factor in shifts in environmental policy by governments and business organisations. However, newspapers are frequently owned by conservative businessmen and the electronic media are almost always owned or at least controlled by the state. Their coverage may not be particularly supportive of an NGO campaign and indeed, may be hostile to it. This can be the case particularly for NGOs working in authoritarian political regimes in the South. For NGOs, the media can be a mixed blessing.

A fourth important consideration is *political support*. NGOs can command more influence in their advocacy work when they can draw upon political support, thereby enhancing their bargaining power. Isolated NGOs with small memberships and few resources are rarely influential. This is obvious enough, but surprisingly underdiscussed in the literature. Political support can come from other large organisations, e.g. trade unions or professional associations. For an NGO to be able to say that they speak for a large membership or body of supporters can also be advantageous. More generally,



NGOs will refer to the environmental movement, that large collectivity of actors who express ideas about nurturing and preserving the physical environment on which human societies depend (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). One thing about the environmental movement is that it has NGOs 'of all shapes and sizes, but you don't have to join one to become part of it' (Anderson, 1987, p.285). So NGOs are both part of the environmental movement and purport to speak and act for it but the relationship between the two is a complicated and uncertain one. Critics will dispute the claim that NGOs represent accurately the views of such an amorphous constituency. The argument has been even further advanced, particularly by target organisations in democratic governments, that NGOs are not elected by or accountable to anyone and therefore what NGOs advocate can be dismissed as of marginal importance because they are small elitist organisations who speak only for themselves.

Fifth, the undoubted importance of political support has been an important motivation leading NGOs to form *coalitions* and build *networks and alliances with other NGOs*. Clearly, to be able to demonstrate to a target organisation that you are part of a larger advocacy formation can increase your influence on environmental policy. For Northern NGOs, to be allied with Southern NGOs and 'the grassroots' has been an advantage for some time. Southern NGOs also can increase their influence locally by 'going international', alerting their foreign friends in Northern NGOs to put pressure on leaders in Northern institutions that have political clout in relation to Southern target organisations. Southern NGOs are also beginning to ask what their Northern partners are doing to educate Northern publics about environmental problems affecting the South. The Southern end of some global coalitions and networks are becoming assertive in another way. In 1993, within FOE International and the World Rainforest Movement more generally, a move began, orchestrated from the South, to shift campaigning strategy from 'tropical forests' to 'forests', including boreal forests in the North. This was because Southern NGOs insisted they wanted to campaign on both Southern and Northern forest issues to overcome charges from their opponents in the South that they were merely tools of Northern interests. Such moves can strengthen the advocacy potential of North-South NGO coalitions and alliances.

A sixth important factor is that *complementarity of NGOs acting together* can add more to a campaign than mere increases in numbers of NGOs. One NGO may lack the technical expertise needed to campaign effectively, but it may have exceptionally good relations with the media. Another NGO may have the former and not the latter. Together, the quality of their shared argument can be enhanced. For example, it is claimed that, in the NGO advocacy work in the USA in the period prior to the 1990 London Conference on Ozone, the Natural Resources Defence Council took 'the pivotal role of providing information and analysis and a legal approach to the negotiations. Friends of the Earth organised boycotts and media campaigns. Neither would have sufficed alone' (Bramble and Porter, 1992, p.352). Complementarity can also work globally, giving extra strength to NGO advocacy work. In the case of Barito Pacific's flotation on the Jakarta Stock Exchange (see Box 2), a variety of NGOs in Asia, Europe and North America with different expertise combined to try to change Barito's environmentally damaging policies by actions in London and elsewhere.

The Barito Pacific example not only suggests that North-South groupings of NGOs with complementary expertise can be effective in lobbying on global environmental

## Barito Pacific's flotation

In 1993, a North-South network of environmental and human rights NGOs engaged in co-ordinated environmental lobbying by sending letters to fund managers in London, New York and elsewhere in the North urging them not to invest in an Indonesian wood products company called Barito Pacific, which was planning a £179 million flotation on the Jakarta Stock Exchange.

The letters made specific allegations about a vast array of environmental and social abuses associated with Barito business practices, made public in Indonesia by SKEPHI, an Indonesian NGO working on forest issues. For example, Barito was fined \$4.2 million in July 1991 for logging in a restricted area of East Kalimantan but the company refused to pay the fine and no legal action was taken; and according to the UK-based NGO Forest Monitor, Barito had logged the traditional lands of indigenous people in East Kalimantan and South Sumatra, replaced the forest with fast-growing trees for pulp and paper production and used transmigrants from East Timor as labourers who had since 1992 been actively protesting about having been deceived by Barito about wages and living conditions (RAN, 1993, p.8).

In London, according to the *Financial Times* (18 August 1993), the response was mixed: One leading fund manager – who did not want to be named – was impressed with the environmental arguments and said he believed most of the allegations. He would not be subscribing. 'If there is an environmental cloud hanging over this issue then I think it will sink it. This campaign could be quite effective.'

Simon Fraser, Investment Director at Fidelity Investment Services, said: 'I have been in the business over 10 years and this is the first time I have been confronted with a situation like this. It is difficult to know how to react.'

Michael Hanson-Lawson, Managing Director of Crosby Securities UK, the flotation's international co-ordinator, said the project was environmentally sound and he would not be swayed by the campaigners' arguments. He was, however, impressed with the efficiency of the campaign. 'They targeted the fund managers very well – this could be an inside job.' He considered the environmental campaign to be nothing more than a 'minor irritant'.

James Robinson of Henderson Administration found the campaigners' document too emotive. 'They would do their cause more good if the language was less emotive. They use phrases like unacceptable political connections. Unacceptable to whom?' He said this was one of the first times he had been approached by a group of environmental campaigners. In future he would pay more attention to similar approaches if their arguments were presented in a better way.

Simon Counsell of FOE in London said NGOs would continue to target fund managers and would attempt to use the City as a lever in bringing about change. He admitted the campaigners had much to learn in dealing with the City. 'In the past we have, for example, successfully persuaded investors away from Fisons over their policy on peat extraction. We are relative novices in the use of City language, but we intend to improve,' he said.

issues. It also shows that NGOs individually and collectively can improve their political skills. The relationships between NGOs and target organisations are dynamic; over time, the influence of NGOs can increase because they can grow in

confidence, become more knowledgeable about the political and other contexts they are facing and become more practised in the skills of advocacy campaigning. Of course, over time, the influence of NGOs can also decline due to internal disputes, decrease in financial and other support, the growing strength of their opponents and other causes.

It has been suggested that the influence of NGOs on environmental policy can be enhanced if NGO action is marked by political expertise allied to a clear strategy and sense of purpose, technical and scientific expertise, good relations with the media, political support from memberships and publics, strong alliances in the form of enlarged coalitions and networks and complementarity of NGOs working together. These are not the only considerations. They are important ones, however and one indication of this is that these same considerations crop up also when NGO people are asked why they are *not* influential. Edwards (1993), in an analysis of the weaknesses of UK NGOs in relation to international advocacy, draws attention to the problems of an overall absence of clear strategy, a failure to build strong alliances, a failure to develop credible alternatives to current orthodoxes and the loss of advocacy edge due to becoming too cosy with donor agencies. Colchester (1993), speaking about NGO advocacy work on forests, identifies lack of co-ordination between NGOs due to divergent constituencies, inconsistent objectives and conflicts over fund raising (turf wars); he also names lack of appreciation of the nature of the environmental problem, including its technical and scientific aspects and an inability (due to faulty political analysis) to identify clearly 'the real enemies'.

## 2.5 Assessing NGO influence on environmental policies

NGOs try to *influence* the policies of target organisations. Influence is a complex concept. A standard definition (Knoke, 1990) in this context says that NGO A is influential when it intentionally transmits information to target organisation B which alters B's policies. The definition is useful as far as it goes, A can also intentionally influence B in order indirectly to influence C. Further complications arise upon consideration of the fact that A may influence B's policies without A intentionally transmitting information. The mere existence of A may shape B's policies because of B's belief in what A could or would do if certain policy options were adopted. Such influence is structural; it is part of the broader structure of power in society which shapes the interrelationships between A and B and helps to determine their relative power. The analysis of NGO advocacy work in relation to specific environment policies of particular target organisations involves both intentional transmissions of information directly or indirectly, from one to the other and other interdependencies that are structural in character.

The world of target organisations, environmental policy and NGO influence is marked by dynamic processes of collaboration and conflict. NGOs are not 'outside' this world. They are part of what amounts to a *public sphere* that produces environmental policies (Wuyts *et al.*, 1992).

Are NGOs influential within this public sphere? It is widely assumed that sometimes they are but can we be sure? Answer: not completely. NGOs frequently claim

that they have changed policy here or been successful there but if they are asked about this privately and if they are candid, they will reply that it is actually difficult to say for sure whether, or to what extent, they have been influential. The best indicator, they say, is their honest evaluation of a particular campaign, or clear 'sense' of their achievement, together with an indication from a disinterested party that their advocacy work had an effect on the outcome. Sometimes a spokesperson in the target organisation will concede publicly that an NGO campaign affected their policy choice or that the presence of NGOs shaped their agenda. Sometimes such corroboration by the 'opposition' can be believed by the NGO, but sometimes what target organisations say may be deliberately misleading. They may say the NGO was very influential in the hope that the NGO will go away satisfied and not bother them any more. Also, sometimes target organisations change policies because of NGOs but make no mention of NGO influence. An NGO rule of thumb in advocacy work is always to be cautious about what the opposition is saying.

Such uncertainty about assessing influence is part of a more general problem in interest group research: an organisation advocates a change in policy, the policy then changes, but there is no connection between the two events (the policy may have changed because of pressure from other organisations or other factors like sheer chance). *Correlation has been mistaken for causation*. Such problems do not mean that determinations of NGO influence are impossible, but there is no doubt that one needs to be careful about public claims by the parties involved. And even when care is taken there is still an element of uncertainty.

Why are NGOs influential? A number of factors have been considered. Some involve agency – the actions of NGOs and others involved. Some involve structure – constraints and opportunities that shape what NGOs can and cannot do and the content of their demands. Each factor throws some light on why NGOs are influential. There are also more general theories of interest group influence which draw upon a number of such factors and they do so in different ways. Any assessment of NGO influence will draw on some sort of theory, if only implicitly and different theories tend to produce somewhat different general assessments of the extent to which NGOs are influential.

For example, one standard explanation of NGO influence on environmental policy by state agencies is set broadly within pluralist theory. The basic premise in pluralism is that the driving forces that produce state policies are interest groups in civil society and, roughly speaking, the more powerful the interest group the more influence it will have (e.g. Dahl, 1961). A general pluralist explanation of environmental policy would tend to see NGOs as quite influential, or at least worthy of careful attention. A Marxist explanation of environmental policy would give much less attention to NGOs and more to class alignments and the structure of the state. Other explanations emphasise the importance of policy elites in environmental policy-making. For example, Grindle and Thomas (1991, p.33) argue that:

Specific policy choices are the result of activities that take place largely within the state and that are significantly shaped by policy elites who bring a variety of perceptions, commitments and resources to bear on policy content, but who are also clearly influenced by the actual and perceived power of societal groups and interests that have a stake in [policy] outcomes.

The perceptions of policy elites within the state are shaped by their personal attributes and goals, ideological predispositions, professional expertise and training, memories of similar policy experiences, position and power resources and institutional commitments and loyalties. The lesson is that different explanations of policy-making can lead to different assessments of NGO influence.

Some explanations work better in the North than in the South. For example, a pluralist explanation used in an authoritarian political regime in Southern Africa would lead to an overestimation of the influence of NGOs on the environmental policies of the state. The importance of particular factors that help to explain NGO influence can also be affected by North–South differences. It has been argued, for example, that scientific and technical expertise is very important in the broadly middle-class politics of NGOs advocacy work in relation to environmental policies in the North, whereas such expertise is less important in India than NGO-led direct action and constructive work, the NGOs there tending to be lodged in ‘a peasant movement draped in the cloth of environmentalism’ (Gadgil and Guha, 1994).

The complications of competing explanations and North–South differences need to be borne in mind when trying to assess NGO influence. Beyond that, there are two broad, not necessarily contradictory generalisations that should be built into one’s thinking about such assessments. The first is that NGOs usually do not have as much direct influence on environmental policy changes as they would like or that they tend publicly to proclaim. The second is that environmental NGOs have four unusual features which can give them sometimes more influence than standard interest group analyses would suggest.

First, assessments of the influence of NGOs on environmental policies can be faulty because insufficient attention is given to the *time lag* that can be involved between NGO activity and subsequent policy change. Earlier, a distinction was made between direct advocacy work and a ‘war of position’. The latter involves a prolonged effort to change values in society, the intention being to change the perceptions of significant portions of society such that environmental problems are brought to the top of the political agenda. It is a feature of environmental NGOs as protest groups that they all, more or less, engage in such work aimed at society generally rather than only at specific targets and their policies (Rochon and Mazmanian, 1993). The indirect impact of such societal work by NGOs on changing environmental policies can be underestimated if the time lags are ignored.

Second, environmental NGOs may have more influence than a conventional analysis of their power would suggest because, in comparison to their targets, they can focus persistently on a *single issue*, enabling them to concentrate their (limited) resources for maximum effect. By contrast, political leaders and top government officials are compelled to take into account ‘the complex interdependence of policy issues’ (Kitschelt, 1993, p.250), to weigh environmental requirements with others. NGOs are also distinct from that other main target, the business organisation. The two are similar in that both are usually motivated by a single interest and pursue their ‘partisan’ advantage in the wider society. But NGOs, although engaged with a single issue, may be said to position themselves as representatives of the public’s interest about an environmental problem that potentially affects everyone; the interest boundaries of environmental NGOs are unusually broad, taking in a wide range of people who have a stake in environmental policies (Princen and Finger, 1994). Environmental

NGOs can benefit from this unusual position when arguing for access to policy-making fora within the state.

Third, as we saw earlier, NGOs engage with a problem defined uniquely in terms of *physical and biological properties*. This particular feature can be both a constraint and an opportunity for NGOs. It can profoundly shape the policy-making arena in which environmental NGOs work, but it can shape it to the NGOs' advantage. The case of the pollution problem in the Great Lakes area of North America makes this important point (see Box 3).

3

## Environmental NGOs and the Great Lakes

### Water Quality Agreement *(from Manno, 1994, pp.69-73)*

The world's largest system of fresh surface water, draining nearly 200,000 square miles of land, is shared by people in Canada and the United States. The region is made up for the most part of the Great Lakes and St Lawrence River. The two national governments began to co-operate this century, first to recognise each other's rights to peaceful navigation, more recently to respond to large-scale problems of water pollution in accordance with the Canada-US GLWQA (Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement), agreed in 1972.

A complex array of organisations and individuals involved in Great Lakes Water Quality now forms an evolving governance structure or international regime made up of bilateral institutions, federal, state and provincial agencies, professional and informal networks of scientists, native activists, environmental advocates, financial and industrial and tourism interests, hunters and anglers, the press and others.

A major development since the 1980s has been the increasing importance of environmental NGOs in the negotiations that periodically attend GLWQA. Particularly prominent has been GLU (Great Lakes United), the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation. In the negotiations leading to the 1987 amendments, these three were invited by the State Department to be observer-members of the US delegation and the Ministry of External Affairs invited two representatives of GLU onto the Canadian delegation. The NGO representatives did far more than observe. For example, they placed on the agenda and won requirements for public participation in GLWQA implementation. They argued for stricter and narrower definitions of 'point source impact zones', arguing that no industry exceptions be made in the commitment to virtual elimination of persistent toxic substances throughout the Great Lakes. They successfully insisted on a redefinition of critical pollutants and the elimination of gender-specific language from the GLWQA. They were instrumental in expanding the range of subjects covered under the Agreement to include airborne pollutants, pollution from agricultural and land use activities, contaminated ground-water and wetlands protection.

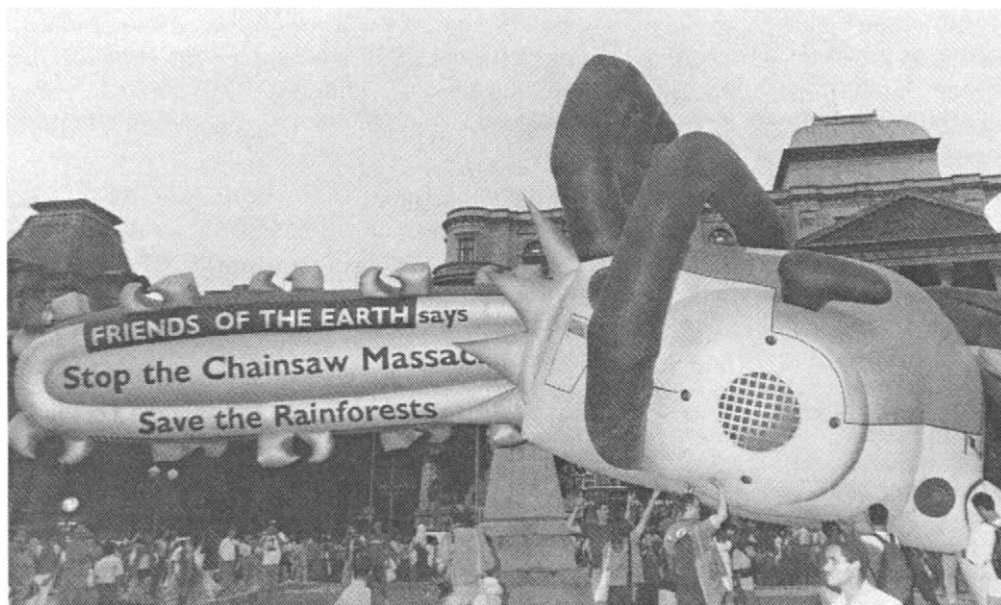
Environmental NGOs have clearly played a major role in the development of environmental policies affecting this region. Not only is it impossible to understand US and Canadian environmental relations without considering the strategies and actions of the NGOs but, even more important, the activities of neither the NGOs nor the nation states can be understood apart from the geographical realities and the changing ecological characteristics of the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem itself, which ultimately shape the region's economies, demarcate its political boundaries and affect all enterprises within its realm.

The Great Lakes example shows how the biophysical properties of an environmental policy can set up unusual political arrangements which can enhance the power of environmental NGOs in policy-making contexts. The examples also illustrate, once more, the importance of technical expertise. As the author dramatically states:

The issues on the table were highly technical and difficult to understand for almost everyone in the negotiations except the environmental agencies and the NGO representatives. The environmentalists, both the government professionals and the NGO representatives, shared a common vocabulary and certain assumptions drawn from their shared understandings of the environmental sciences and their political implications. Career diplomats and bureaucrats from such organisations as the US Office of Management and Budget were likely to defer to those who were fluent in the language of environmental science and regulations. The NGO representatives involved in this case, all highly articulate and knowledgeable, had an influence in the negotiations perhaps disproportionate to what, according to conventional measures, might have been considered their actual political clout. Their particular skill was an ability to translate the language of environment into the language of politics. (Manno, 1994, pp.106–107)

Finally, the environmental NGO sector is distinct from others in the policy-making arena because of its striking *transnational* dimensions. The prevalence and variety of such linkages between NGOs has already been noted. To be able to draw upon such widespread support can enhance the influence of environmental NGOs beyond what one would normally expect. That this would be so when NGOs are trying to influence intergovernmental negotiations related to an international environmental problem is obvious enough. The Great Lakes case is an example. Other examples would include the intergovernmental negotiations related to ozone, global warming, biodiversity, toxic and radioactive wastes. But transnational linkages can also figure importantly in NGO efforts to influence the policies of agencies within nation state boundaries. Northern NGOs will call on the support of Southern NGOs in their coalitions or alliances when campaigning against a state-level policy-making body in the North. Southern NGOs send 'action alerts' directly to foreign NGO friends, who then alert their members to write letters to environmental policy makers in a Southern country.

Even very local level NGOs will 'go global' when campaigning against policy-making targets in their own country. For example, a local NGO in British Columbia campaigning to preserve the remaining temperate rainforest there was making no headway against the forest policies of the provincial government and Macmillan-Bloedel (the main business enterprise logging the forest for pulp and paper products) until it 'went international' by urging Greenpeace UK and other European NGOs to enter the campaign, which led later to certain European companies cancelling contracts with Macmillan-Bloedel, thus putting pressure on the policy makers back in British Columbia. Another example: a local environmental NGO in Karnataka (South India), called Samaj Parivartana Samudaya, was working to try to change the policies of an agency in the Karnataka government whose major programme adversely affected the environment and was being funded substantially by the ODA (Overseas Development Agency) of the British government. They thought nothing of communicating



**Plate 2.3** The parallel conference held by NGOs during the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro, 10 June 1992. A giant chainsaw-shaped blimp floats in front of the National Library in downtown Rio as environmental organisations stage a protest against the deforestation in Brazil's Amazonian jungle. Photo: ANP Foto

directly with supportive NGOs in London, urging them to 'educate' ODA about what was happening on the ground in Karnataka, thereby hoping that ODA would put pressure on the Karnataka government.

The way people think and act within the NGO sector generally in the 1990s can be strikingly international. Once again, one sees how an assessment of the influence of NGOs on environmental policy needs to bear in mind their unusual characteristics. These can sometimes give environmental NGOs more political clout than the normal social science analyses of interest groups would suggest.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

NGOs have been defined, their diversity noted, their growth remarked upon. Two sets of factors have been considered which together can help to explain why NGOs have more or less influence on environmental policies. First, there are structural constraints and opportunities within which NGOs act, e.g. the particular environmental issue concerned, the target organisations and policy networks confronted, the nature of the political structure in which an NGO finds itself. Second, there are various actions an NGO engages in, with criteria for assessing their effectiveness, including political expertise, scientific and professional expertise, use of the media, political support and complementarity of NGOs working together in coalitions, alliances and networks.



All that may appear reasonably straightforward. However, various difficulties are involved in reaching an unambiguous assessment of NGO influence. Reasons for this include the absence of clear objective measures of influence, the problem of mistaking correlation for causation, competing theoretical explanations of NGO influence, explanations used in the North not working in the South and unusual features of the world of environmental NGOs that can affect an assessment of influence, e.g. time lags, special characteristics of environmental problems, transnational links between NGOs. In short, assessments of NGO influence on environmental policies require making informed judgements based on incomplete evidence, bearing in mind the unusual complexities involved.