

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing environmental awareness amongst stakeholders, individuals and communities within the Asian and Pacific Region. This increase in knowledge and awareness has been, by and large, the result of campaigns and education programmes run by major public interest groups concerned with the environment. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the international, regional and national levels, as well as groups concerned with the empowerment of marginalized sections of society, such as women, indigenous peoples, and youth groups, and other community based organizations. Such organizations have worked to foster grassroots-based approaches to the protection and preservation of the region's environment.

Major public interest groups are increasingly contributing efforts towards sustainable development through participation, advocacy, demonstration projects, monitoring and research, as well as cooperation and networking with other NGOs and government departments. This chapter reviews the contributions made by such groups to the promotion of environmental knowledge, awareness and action in the region.

## ROLE OF NGOS & MAJOR GROUPS

### A. Status and Trends

Traditionally, community based organizations played an important role in the management of common property resources such as forests and fisheries in the Asian and Pacific Region. Although over successive years their role was reduced by governments in some countries, recent years have seen a re-emergence of community involvement and the development and growth of NGOs, youth, women and indigenous people's groups and associations of farmers and businessmen.

NGOs have, in particular, played an important role in raising environmental concerns, developing awareness of environmental issues and promoting sustainable development. The encouragement of public participation in environmental management through legislation in recent years has also enhanced the role of NGOs and Major Groups. For example, in Thailand, Article 56 of the 1997 Constitution recognizes the rights of people to participate in the protection of natural resources and environment. Similar provisions have been made, for example, in the Philippines, New Zealand (Resource Management Act), Azerbaijan (EPA 1999) and the Australian Landcare and Coast Care programmes.

The roles and activities of major public interest groups in the Asian and Pacific Region are constantly evolving, as the issues they deal with change, and the political and social landscape they work within alters. However, between individual countries there are great differences in both the number and types of major public interest groups that exist and the way they operate, reflecting the diversity of cultures and political establishments, and levels of economic and social development. For example, in India, there are numerous NGOs and community-based organizations using a wide variety of means to raise awareness, and in Singapore, about 40 green groups operate under the umbrella of the Singapore Environment Council, an organization set up by the government to champion environment-related activities (SEC 1998).

In recent years, the range of activities undertaken by environmental NGOs and other major groups has broadened. They now undertake a much wider range of activities than simply raising environmental awareness and/or acting as pressure groups. Their activities now include environmental monitoring; promoting environmental education, training and capacity-building; implementing demonstration projects; conducting advocacy work in partnership with the government; and the promotion of regional and international cooperation on environment. Many also get involved in the practical management of conservation areas, and promote community or individual action and campaign for greater accountability on the part of the government and corporate sector. The majority of NGOs in the region now work concurrently on environment and development, thus acknowledging that environmental problems are embedded in economic and social systems (Oh 1998).

Unfortunately, the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s has adversely affected the financial position of many major public interest groups, particularly in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia and has curtailed much of their work. For instance, the Indonesian NGO *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup* (WALHI) has over 600 groups actively involved in a variety of work, including campaigning against the burning of the country's tropical forest, however, financial restrictions have caused the group to cease the regular publication of its investigative reports.

Despite this financial set back, the work of NGOs has won considerable credibility and appreciation in the region, which can be evidenced by the growing partnerships with government. For instance, NGOs and major groups have substantially increased their involvement in policy related work,

playing a key role in assisting government agencies to meet the requirements of environmental management. The conviction that NGOs and government agencies can and should work together in a complementary relationship has become stronger and the credibility that NGOs have acquired from successful campaigns has created strong and growing public support for their new advocacies. For example, in the Central Asian subregion, independence has led to the emergence of NGOs with very strong technical backgrounds, who play a substantial role in the formation of public opinion.

Established nationwide networking has assisted NGO advocacy at the national level to proceed, even during periods of political instability. In the Philippines, the Philippine Federation for Environmental Concern (PFEC) is the earliest network in the country for environmental advocacy, formed in 1979 at the height of the martial law period. Other networks such as the Green Forum have added strength to the overall advocacy work in recent years.

At the regional and international level there is evidence of an increasing networking of NGOs and other major groups. At these levels, they are concerned with the sharing of experiences,

influencing discussions and policy-making of regional and international inter-governmental bodies and raising concern over the globalization process. Active regional and international NGOs working on sustainable development concerns include: the International Organization of Consumer Unions (IOCU); the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC); Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD); and the Asian Alliance of Appropriate Technology Practitioners (APPROTECH ASIA). The Third World Network has also consolidated a regional stance especially on issues related to trade liberalization and globalization.

The new electronic forms of communication, principally e-mail and websites (Box 14.1) have greatly assisted in these endeavours. For example, in India, networks have been built between people's organizations, NGOs, and women and children's organizations in efforts to change attitudes towards environmental protection and conservation (ESCAP 1997). Networking efforts among NGOs within countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, the Philippines and Bangladesh have also resulted in expanding and strengthening of their activities.

#### Box 14.1 Harnessing the Power of the World Wide Web

One key feature of the last five years has been the increasing use by NGOs of information technology to promote conductivity. The rapid convergence of media, the growth of satellite communication and new technologies such as the E-Mail and the World Wide Web have all increased the scope and availability of environmental information resources. This has helped speed the development of networking and liaison groups – both between NGOs and with government agencies.

One example of an NGO network that has a strong presence on the web is the Third World Network, which shares a page with one of Malaysia's leading campaign groups, the Consumer Association of Penang and Pan Asian Networking, an organization which helps researchers and communities in the developing world find solutions to their social, economic and environmental problems. This page is used to bring people up to date with various campaign issues and publications and to link activists.

A website that has been specifically developed to facilitate regional networking is ECANET (Environmental Communication Asia Network, Website 21), developed and operated by AMIC. Support for this website has been provided by the ADB and UNESCO. The website disseminates information on environmental groups in the region, bibliography on environmental information (including websites) and environmental success stories written by Asian journalists. At international level, websites have been developed by UNEP in collaboration with other agencies. Chief among them is Infoterra, one of the most comprehensive environmental resource systems currently available which facilitates the exchange of scientific and technical information. This website has links with over 6 800 national and international institutions, NGOs, industrial and commercial enterprises, academics and experts from around the world.

Small NGOs and CBOs particularly in rural areas of Asia and the Pacific are slow in harnessing the benefits from internet and world wide web. It is important to strengthen their capacities in this respect so that they could take full advantage of the growing information technology which provides tantamount opportunities not only for networking both nationwide and worldwide, but also for strengthening the capacities of major groups, especially NGOs.

Source: <http://www.capside.org.sg/> and <http://iisd1.iisd.ca/50comm/commdb/list/co8.htm>

## NGO ROLES AND ACTIVITIES

Local, national and regional NGOs have emerged as major players and partners in both development and conservation activities in the region. At the community level, they are in the front line in providing assistance in the acquisition of basic needs and amenities; in identifying issues, raising awareness, and providing information to grassroots communities; in articulating the communities' problems and needs and bringing these to the attention of those who can affect change; in defending both the environmental and developmental rights of communities and building the capacity of communities to manage their natural resources; and in dealing with sustainable development concerns. NGOs that work at the national level focus mainly on policy work, playing a vital role in the identification of the weaknesses and gaps in current policy or legal frameworks; in information gathering and educating the public, private sector and government; and, in certain cases, in activist lobbying and protest movements.

### A. Awareness-Raising, Campaigning and Advocacy

Across the region a large array of groups work to raise awareness of environmental issues and push for changes in policy and development programmes. These groups carry out environmental awareness raising and campaigning locally, nationally, and internationally, with some campaigns operating simultaneously at all levels. In India, for example, the *Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad* (KSSP) has earned international recognition for its work in mobilising public opinion among people's organizations in the State of Kerala (United Nations 1995). The KSSP is regarded as one of the best-informed and best-organized grassroots movement in India, with over 20 000 members.

In Pakistan, the Society for the Conservation and Protection of the Environment (SCOPE), established in 1988, is particularly successful at national environmental campaigns, whilst giving priority to developing linkages with local NGOs, research institutes, universities and government departments. In addition SCOPE motivates grassroots groups and undertakes public interest litigation and advocacy work (Non Governmental Liaison Service 1997).

Scientific and technical NGOs are assisting in bridging the gap between science, policy makers and the citizenry. Their research and education work is proving a vital addition to the decision and policy-making process. In India, for instance, the Centre for Science and Environment publishes

'Citizen's Reports on the Environment' which focus on specific environmental issues, such as urban pollution, and flood management. Written in non-technical languages, these reports enable the general public to better understand the issues.

Many of the more established NGOs in the region work on major national campaigns using a range of promotion activities, from grassroots awareness-raising, through to lobbying and media campaigns (Box 14.2). Such campaigns are multi-faceted, involving research, awareness-raising, education and lobbying. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Malaysia, for example, has launched the Species 2 000 Campaign to mobilize effective national action to conserve Malaysia's wildlife. (WWF Malaysia, *Website 6*). In doing so, WWF Malaysia has forged partnerships with many groups involved in conservation, from Federal and State government agencies to universities, other NGOs and local community groups. Similar alliances have been made by environmental groups in India, Malaysia and Philippines to raise the awareness of governments and the general public with regard to the loss of fauna and flora species and consequences for biodiversity.

One of the great challenges for NGOs campaigning on environmental issues is to involve as many people as possible and, particularly where religion plays a major role in everyday life, getting the environmental message across to key religious groups. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) has been working internationally with many faiths to forge new, practical models of religious involvement with environmental issues. The group espouses the Ohito Declaration of 1995, a declaration on religions, land and conservation that states "for people of faith maintaining and sustaining environmental life systems is a religious responsibility" (Xiamin and Halbertsma 1997). The Ohito Declaration and the work of organizations such as ARC has led to the re-discovery of 'holy ground' and the concept of the need for Man to preserve and protect the environment by all the major religions of the world.

The scope of ARC's network activities is shown in the involvement of the Taoists, who formally joined ARC in 1995; the ninth faith to do so. Following meetings with WWF/ARC staff, the Taoists asked ARC to join them in launching a campaign to protect their sacred holy mountains in China, which were threatened by changes in forestry, agriculture, urban development and, of late, tourism.

Beyond national frontiers, many environmental NGOs have joined forces to campaign internationally. WALHI, Indonesia, for instance, worked alongside international NGOs such as WWF to bring the plight



### Box 14.2 NGOs Working to Improve Media Coverage of Environmental Issues

The media is a vital conduit for environmental campaigns and programmes, however there is much need for improvement in the way the regional media handle and report the key issues. Many NGOs across Asia and the Pacific are working to support the media and improve coverage of environmental issues.

For example, in Bangladesh, the Nature Conservation Movement (NACOM) and the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) have worked closely together to establish a multimedia centre focusing on sustainable development. The organizations have extensively researched and reported on forests, indigenous people, human rights and other environmental issues. They are building information bases on these issues for the use of public, social entrepreneurs, journalists, and local communities and are also making an effort to improve the standard of investigative journalism – through training on in-depth reporting, providing information bases to journalists, members of other media and undertaking research activities. SEHD founded in 1993, is a non-profit organization dealing with environment, development, and multilateral development bank and human rights issues. NACOM-Nature Conservation Movement – is a national nature conservation research and management organization which is particularly experienced in biodiversity research and non-formal environmental education and awareness building projects.

Another NGO that is deeply involved in communication about environmental issues is the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC), headquartered in Singapore. AMIC conducts seminars and workshops for media practitioners, publishes books, produces broadcast and audio-visual materials which are used to alert audiences to environmental concerns. AMIC's environment-related activities have mobilized communication educators and media practitioners to promote environmental conservation and protection.

Journalists themselves have mobilized to ensure that the environmental message is given maximum coverage. Leading this initiative is the *Asia-Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists* (AFEJ), currently headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka. This group coordinates the efforts of 15 national forums of environmental journalists. Its work programme includes specialized regional training workshops on environmental reporting, publication of books, technical assistance to members, journalist exchange programmes and awards for excellence in environmental reporting. The AFEJ's constituent members are also very active at both regional and national levels. For example, the Sri Lanka *Environmental Journalists Forum* (SLEJF) has compiled and published 20 success stories written on the environment in Sri Lanka. The SLEJF was also the principal organizer of the *Sixth World Congress of Environmental Journalists*, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from October 19 to 23, 1998. This meeting resulted in the formulation and adoption of AFEJ's *Five-Year Strategic Management Plans*.

The power of television is not ignored. The Asia-Pacific Institute for the Development of Broadcasting (AIBD), headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has worked with regional and national NGOs in conducting courses for broadcasters on popularizing environmental issues, and the Television Trust for the Environment (TTE), located in Colombo, Sri Lanka, works closely with organizations such as UNEP in producing television and video documentaries about environmental issues. These efforts, contributing to media coverage of environmental issues, are likely to improve the situation even further with their multiplier effects.

Source: Khan 1997 and Wickramaratne 1998

of communities affected by forest fires to international attention. WALHI also brought together the protests of thousands of affected villagers to highlight the involvement of big business in forest destruction, and led a court action against plantation and logging companies implicated in the fires.

NGO groups have also had international success in the campaign against the trade in endangered animal products. Although most Asian and Pacific Region countries have ratified the CITES Convention (see Chapter 3), an active trade in endangered species still exists. NGOs are active not only in lobbying governments for effective enforcement of existing legislation to protect endangered species, but also in raising the awareness of the general public with regard to the importance of conservation. The power of the media has also been used effectively in this arena by the Asian Conservation Awareness Programme (ACAP), using graphic images of animals being slaughtered for their

tusks, fur and gall bladders in a series of hard-hitting TV, cinema and poster commercials. Through such international and national campaigns, NGOs in the region have been trying to persuade the general public to change their habits with regard to exotic food and clothing and in getting the government to implement the provisions of CITES.

Increasingly, regional NGO groups are taking part in global campaigns, such as Greenpeace China and its much-publicized campaign against potentially toxic phthalate-containing PVC toys and children's products. In November 1998, following the campaign, Toys R Us announced a worldwide product withdrawal of phthalate-containing teething, rattles, and pacifiers. Throughout the region, NGOs also work with regional and international agencies to also observe special days – such as *World Water Day* (March 22), *World Environment Day* (June 5) and *World Habitat Day* (October 1).

Green political parties are entering the formal political arena in some countries, such as in the Philippines, where the Philippine Federation for Environmental Concerns (PFEC) is organizing a Green Party modelled on those in Europe. During the last election two groups, the Green Philippines and the Philippine Greens, linked efforts to list candidates. Elsewhere in the region, Green Politics are an established strand of the party political system. For example, the world's first recognized "Green Party" was the Values Party of New Zealand which, although subsequently absorbed by the political mainstream, provided a political platform that led directly to the adoption of progressive environmental legislation by the New Zealand governments of the 1970's and 1980's.

## **B. Environmental Monitoring and Reporting**

Many NGO campaigns are based on research that highlights or monitors specific environmental issues. At the local or community level, NGOs are in a good position to keep track of critical issues on a continuing basis and, in many cases; NGOs complement the work of government institutions and cooperate with law enforcement authorities.

### *1. Environmental Reporting*

In Bangladesh, for example, about a dozen NGOs cooperate to produce periodic "State of the Environment" reports, and in India, the Centre for Science and Environment publishes Citizen's State of Environment Report. In many instances, these broad assessments are supplemented by specialized reports that facilitate debate on key environmental issues, promote public awareness and encourage active community participation in environmental protection.

In addition to State of the Environment Reports, Investigative Reports on the specific environmental issues are also increasing in the region. In order to assist in such endeavours, the Asia-Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists (AFEJ), with ESCAP support, has published a book entitled "Reporting on the Environment: A Handbook for Journalists". AFEJ affiliates are active in a number of countries in the region (including Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand) and has published Citizens' Reports on the Environment, as well as newspaper reports. AFEJ associate members such as the Asian Institute of Development Communication and the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre have helped conduct workshops on environmental reporting. PINA, the Pacific Islands News Association and its Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists have established the PINA Pacific Journalism Centre in Suva, Fiji,

which runs a regular environmental news service distributed to the 22 countries and territories in the South Pacific.

### *2. Environmental Journalism*

Environmental journalism can play a vital role in creating market reactions in the international stock markets. For example, studies in the U.S. and Canadian stock markets have shown markets react significantly to environmental news. Gains from good news and losses from bad are in the range of 1 to 2 per cent. World Bank researchers examined whether the same trends hold true for developing countries (Argentina, Chile, Mexico, the Philippines) and found that 'good news gains' average 20 per cent whilst 'bad news losses' range from 4 to 15 per cent. (World Bank 2000)

### *3. Environmental Monitoring and GIS*

Environmental monitoring and reporting by NGOs have contributed substantially to environmental protection across the region. For example, a reef monitoring and evaluation project undertaken in Pangasinan in the Philippines (United Nations 1992, *Website 2*) resulted in improved protection of the coral ecosystem and, ultimately resulted in increased catches for local fishermen. It also stimulated community-based action where villagers of Cabaongan (province of Bohol) formed a *Bantay Dagat* ("Sea Watch") group to apprehend illegal commercial fishing boats.

A number of NGOs have embraced Geographic Information System (GIS) technology to help them with environmental monitoring. For example the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) (United Nations 1999, *Website 3*) has established a decentralized network that collects, stores and disseminates key bio-physical and socio-economic data. Other groups doing similar work include the enhancement of GIS training at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji (United Nations 1999, *Website 4*).

At the national or regional level, NGO monitoring can track the effectiveness of legislation, and investigate issues such as the movement of hazardous waste, the migration of species, the trade in endangered or restricted animals or plants or research on the state of rivers, forests or other ecosystems. NGOs use this type of work to influence practical actions, and to develop campaign strategies or propose policies. For example, Greenpeace China's monitoring of the country's trade in toxic waste led the banning of hazardous waste imports into or through the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Greenpeace, *Website 5*).

The availability of reliable information on the environmental impact of development and economic policies is a critical requirement for robust environment decision making. A number of NGOs and other groups are working to present information to influence government decision-making. Singapore based, the Economy and Environment Programme for Southeast Asia, or EEPSEA, operates across the region, coordinating and supporting a network of researchers who investigate the environmental impacts of policies. It works in close partnership with a range of organizations, including the Vietnamese University of Agriculture and Forestry, the University of the Philippines, Los Banos and the China Centre for Economic Research, Beijing. The research undertaken by EEPSEA and its associated network has influenced the outcome of a range of issues including pollution in People's Republic of China, water supply in Manila, the impact of international law on farmers in Sri Lanka and developing policy for Thailand's National Parks (EEPSEA 1998).

In terms of monitoring the urban environment, a number of NGO initiatives have been launched through the United Nations Development Programme regional offices. These include *Asia-Pacific 2000*, an initiative to help NGOs address the urban environment challenge, and the Urban Governance Initiative. Both these programmes have worked closely with regional and national NGOs in organizing activities to promote knowledge and awareness of urban environmental issues. Various publications have been produced, such as *Our Cities*, *Our Homes*, which is an A to Z guide on human settlement issues, and a community action guide called *Water Watch*, published in collaboration with a regional NGO Asia-Pacific People's Environmental Network (APPEN).

#### 4. New Research

In the last few years a number of areas in water resource; solid and hazardous waste management; and biodiversity (genetic engineering) related fields have gained importance. New NGOs are emerging in the region to promote knowledge and awareness of these issues, while more established NGOs are responding to the new challenges by re-focusing their research efforts. For example, in India, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) was instrumental in convincing 28 selected pulp and paper mills to provide data similar to the USEPA's "toxic releases" database. The results of the survey showed that only two companies were in compliance; however, it also showed that a mill with sound ecological sense is more likely to maintain steady profits than other plants. The project prompted nine of the companies

to improve pollution controls. The CSE plans to introduce green ratings to two sectors annually with India's automotive industry as the next target. (Asia Week 2000).

In the Philippines, the Pasig River Movement, a coalition of NGOs advocating the clean-up of Metro Manila's major river, regularly gathers data on companies discharging waste in the river. The ten worst polluters of the year are given the *Lason* (Poison) Award, which receives wide media coverage, and has led companies to set-up effective wastewater management facilities. Several "poison" awardees have since redeemed themselves and became "environment" awardees the following year.

#### C. Education, Training and Capacity Building

An increasing number of NGOs have also been using education to encourage participation in conservation activities (see Box 14.3). One of the most active international NGOs working in the field of environmental education in the region is the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural resources (IUCN). The IUCN exercises this function through its Commission on Education and Communication (CEC), which has sought to develop environmental expertise among teachers in the region by focusing on providing information, training, capacity building and networking (CEE 1997).

Other NGOs have worked extensively with governments to help develop and implement national environmental education strategies (see Chapter 15). For example, in Nepal, NGOs have collaborated on the implementation of the environmental education element of the country's National Conservation Strategy and have provided technical assistance to government agencies in running the programme.

#### D. Government and NGO Partnerships

Government and NGO partnerships are being encouraged in a number of ways. In some countries laws exist to ensure community and major groups participation in developing regional and national policies and plans. For example, in Thailand, the 1992 Environment Act delegates the work on environmental management to provincial and local authorities, and encourages people's participation through environmental NGOs (Government of Thailand 1992). As countries put into practice formal policies requiring public participation in decision-making, the influence and potential political power of NGOs increases. For example, in the Philippines, the EIA regulations and implementing rules relating to the Mining Act and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act require the voluntary informed consent of indigenous peoples before projects can proceed. In many cases, people have little experience or access

to information on the issues involved, and NGOs undertake to advise on hearings and consultations, and on negotiation and settlement strategies. However, elsewhere within the region, the influence of unaccountable public interest groups within their own political agenda has given cause for concern, and in some cases has led to their loss of credibility and/or sanction. Elsewhere, governments have made moves to formalize the role of independent NGOs within the decision making institutions by giving them representation.

#### 1. *Institutionalization of NGO-Government Partnerships*

The participation of major public interest groups is also being institutionalized through formal representation in decision making and management bodies. For example, in the Republic of Korea, the Environmental Preservation Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, was established by the 1990 Basic Environmental Policy. The committee reviews all major environmental policy decisions and includes not just government ministries, but also representatives of environmental associations. The Philippines has a similar body in its Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) that is chaired by the Director-General of the National Economic and Development Authority and submits high level reports through its meetings with the President. There is equity in the decision-making between government and major group (civil society) representatives in the PCSD; major issues are only deemed resolved when there is a consensus between major group (civil society) representatives and government counterparts.

In India, the National Environmental Council has five representatives from NGOs as well as the National Consumers Federation. Sri Lanka also has inter-agency committees with NGO participation for the formulation of environment policy and in implementing action plans to meet its obligations under international environmental conventions. NGOs in the Republic of Korea also participate in environment-related decision-making processes through the National Council of Environmental Organizations.

The mandate for civil society participation has also been provided through the development of programmes that facilitate direct community-based management of the environment and natural resources. India, for example, promotes people's participatory institutions like *Panchayati Raj* institutions, co-operatives and self-help groups. Similarly, Indonesia recognizes indigenous mutual-

help and community participation mechanisms such as the water user's associations *Subak* in Bali and *Mitra Cai* in West Java. Thailand's Water Resource Utilization Promotion Project has organized water resource users to establish Water Resource Utilization Groups for water resource management.

Programmes related to community forestry have been another way to recognize and support community user groups. India's Eco-Development Programme involves local communities in the maintenance of designated buffer regions surrounding protected areas (see Chapter 3). The Hill Community Forestry Project in Nepal hands over accessible hill forests to user groups that are willing and able to manage such forests. Thailand, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka also have similar policies promoting the active implementation of community or village forestry.

Some countries have recognized the role of indigenous peoples in sustainable development. The Philippines has released "Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims" over more than 2 million hectares of land and waters, many of which are in protected areas, where no project can proceed without the voluntary and prior informed consent of the ancestral landholder. Similarly, Fiji recognizes traditional fishing rights and has a policy that no commercial fishing activities can proceed unless the consent of the chiefs and the people with the right to fish in these areas is obtained.

The Mongolian Government co-operates closely with NGOs, such as the Mongolian Association for the Conservation of Nature and Environment, to coordinate the voluntary activities of local communities and individuals to protect nature and wildlife. The government also works with the Green Movement that promotes public environmental education in support of traditional protection methods (MNE, UNDP and WWF 1996).

In many countries, NGOs also co-operate closely with government organizations and other civil groups in formulating programmes and plans. In Bangladesh, for example, the national environmental management action plan was prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in collaboration with the Forum of Environmental Journalists of Bangladesh (FEJB), environmental NGOs and other civil society groups (ESCAP 1997). IUCN Pakistan helped the government in preparing Pakistan National Conservation Strategy and finalising the draft Pakistan Environmental Act. In Sri Lanka, NGOs are involved in the development of forestry development plans and have provided assistance in enforcing the prevention of illegal logging.



## 2. *Provision and Validation of Environmental Information*

The provision and validation of information forms the basis for successful collaboration between governments, NGOs, community representations and other stakeholders, including project proponents, the private sector, the scientific community and the press and broadcast media. In circumstances where NGO/major groups are formally involved in inter-agency bodies (i.e. Councils for Sustainable Development) and in public consultation processes, as in the Republic of Korea, India, the Philippines, Pakistan and many other countries, information exchange and dialogue is a continuous process that allows ongoing verification and clarification between parties, thereby facilitating progress and reducing the need for conflict resolution.

## 3. *Provision of Funding Support*

Many governments in the region provide or facilitate, funding to strengthen NGO activities in environmental protection and natural resource conservation. Governments, donors and NGOs have also joined together to form endowment funds to support environmental projects. Examples are in Bhutan (Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation), Indonesia (Indonesian Biodiversity Foundation or *Yayasan KEHATI*), and the Philippines

(Foundation for the Philippine Environment). Additionally, Japan's Fund for Global Environment, based on contributions from the government and the private sector, was established to provide assistance for the global environmental conservation activities of NGOs.

The Global Environmental Facility (GEF) recognizes that civil society has become an important force in implementing Agenda 21 (GEF 1998). About 20 per cent of the funds expended by the GEF involve NGOs in the design, planning and/or implementation of these projects. The GEF also supports a Small Grants Programme (SGP), implemented through the UNDP, and has started a Medium-Sized Grants Programme where NGOs can access up to US\$1 million for biodiversity conservation projects.

## E. *Regional and International Cooperation and Networking*

NGOs in the Asian and Pacific Region are increasingly working together to deal more effectively with transboundary issues and to improve the impact of associated campaigns. One high-profile grouping is the Third World Network (TWN) based in Malaysia, which is an independent non-profit international network of organizations and individuals involved in issues relating to

### Box 14.3 Using Education to Encourage Participation: Success Stories

#### Reef Education

In Australia, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is managed primarily through the community's understanding and acceptance of zoning and other management practices. An education and information programme run by the Marine Park Authority (GBMPA) provides educational, advisory and information services. The strategy has marshalled strong public support for the marine park concept and high levels of public participation and cooperation in developing zoning plans.

#### Global Concerns

Global Concerns is an organization within the United World College of Southeast Asia (UWCSEA) which integrates awareness of issues associated with development and the environment into the school's education programme. A key part of its work is providing material support for a wide variety of projects in Asia. Students and staff are encouraged to visit the projects and work with the local community. This not only provides feedback for the group's fund-raisers, but also allows the projects to be included as part of the UWC's normal teaching programme. In this way, the group instills in its students a knowledge of the role they can play in serving society. Projects which the organization has supported include a community-development based conservation programme in Kenong Rimba Park, Malaysia, a self-sufficiency project in a village in Sarawak, Malaysia and an agro-forestry project in Bali, Indonesia.

#### Recycling Awareness

The city of Bangalore in India faces a massive resource management and waste challenge with hundreds of tonnes of garbage remaining uncollected every day. To help to address this problem, the *Centre for Environmental Education, Southern Regional Cell* (CEE South), has run a major hands-on education programme in the city to create awareness among urban people about the need to reduce wastage of water, fuel and other natural resources. Volunteer Communicators have been trained to run courses on recycling, composting, health issues and anti-littering. The programme has resulted in much increased awareness and participation in waste reduction and litter clean-up.

Source: United World College of Southeast Asia 1997



development (TWN 1999, *Website 10*). TWN conducts research; publishes books and magazines; organizes and participates in seminars; and provides a platform representing the interests and perspectives of developing countries at international fora, such as United Nations conferences.

SUSTRANS (Sustainable Transport Action Network for Asia and the Pacific) is another informal network of interested government officials, transport and urban planners, NGO representatives and academics. It is dedicated to promoting transport policies that foster socially just and ecologically sustainable mobility. The SUSTRANS network is based in Penang, and allows for the sharing of information about current transport plans and problems, for joint campaigning and for cooperation with other NGOs working in related areas such as air-quality and housing rights. Other networks provide links between international counterparts,

both within the Asian and Pacific Region and globally (see Chapter 15).

#### **F. Management of Resources and Environment: Community Based Projects**

With the revival of community involvement in management and policy issues, many public interest groups have become involved in community-based field projects. For example, the Philippine Federation for Environmental Concern (PFEC) has undertaken community forestry projects in partnership with local communities, whilst the Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) has assisted in promoting forestry and sustainable agriculture in the northern areas of Pakistan. Box 14.4 highlights further examples of community participation in the management of resources and the environment and how the work of religious groups is increasingly involved in finding practical solutions to social problems.

#### **Box 14.4 Community Based Projects**

To address the specific needs of local communities, many NGOs are working to directly solve problems at the grassroots level. One example is a programme run in Phang Nga Bay, on the Andaman sea coast of Thailand. Organized by the Andaman Sea Fisheries Development Centre Organization (AFDEC), Phuket, Thailand and the FAO/Bay of Bengal Programme, Chennai, India, the programme addressed the over-exploitation of fish and degradation of the natural environment which was causing a reduction in fish catches and incomes. The project brought representatives of many of the 114 villages of Phang-Nga Bay together for regular monthly meetings to discuss, initiate and monitor management activities. These included the promotion of cage culture of finfish; the banning of the use of trawls and motorized push nets within 3 km of the shoreline, and; the installation of over 40 artificial reefs at the entrance to the Bay. The project has increased resource health and productivity, raised the production of shrimp and crabs and achieved a strong support for the implementation of community-based decisions.

Another similar project in Thailand is run by the Yadfon Association, based in Trang. The Association works with local fishing villages to promote community-based coastal resource management and sustainable fisheries management. Fish in the region thrive on seagrass and mangrove swamps which are increasingly threatened. In response, the Yadfon Association has worked with local fishermen to responsibly manage mangrove forests and develop seagrass conservation projects – while organizing activities to supplement income and reduce the use of destructive fishing equipment. The project has resulted in considerable environmental improvement, which, in turn has generated a positive impact on the villagers' livelihoods. Even after the initial project funding ceased, activities continued through a network of fishing villages involved in participatory management of coastal resources.

NGOs are no less active in cities, where they are often called on to fill in where municipal support services fail. One group which shows the type of work undertaken is The Clean Ahmedabad Abhiyan project. This programme was formed by concerned citizens, women's and voluntary organizations and the municipal corporation to research and find permanent and sustainable solutions to the health hazard and sanitation problems caused by the decomposing garbage on urban roads. Through a concerted public awareness campaign, households were involved with segregating wet and dry garbage. A special bag with three compartments was developed to segregate and store recyclables – paper, plastic and miscellaneous. The programme has resulted in improvement in the health standards of the community as well as providing income and increasing the amount of waste recycled.

One example of a multi-faceted campaign, which embraces awareness raising and action, is a project undertaken in the Punjabi town of Anandpur, which has been set up to reduce the environmental impact of the festival of Hola Mohalla. This festival draws over two million Sikhs to the town and creates many environmental problems. At the heart of the project is a Sikh Heritage Centre stressing the centrality of faith to the whole undertaking. Alternative energy sources, such as solar power, will be used, public transport will be made a priority and low energy housing and small industrial units to manufacture environmentally-friendly goods such as fuel efficient stoves will play a key role.

*Source:* United Nations 1999, *Websites 12 and 13*; Xiamin and Halbertsma 1997

## THE ROLE OF OTHER MAJOR GROUPS

### A. Gender

Women play crucial role in helping the communities and societies of the region to improve the condition of the environment and achieve sustainable development. Indeed, as farmers, housewives, mothers or social mobilizers, women are at the heart of issues and often bear the brunt of problems resulting from environmental degradation.

The role of women in sustainable development and the environment has been highlighted since the 1980s. However, over the last decade, three key initiatives have provided an international and regional framework within which women's issue may be viewed: the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, 1992; the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, 1995, and; *ASEAN's Vision 2020 Statement*, 1998. These documents have set the tone for, and determined the shape of, environment-related programmes at national, regional and international levels. The Beijing Platform, for example, proposes specific actions to promote women's access to education, inheritance, economic resources and decision-making.

Women's NGOs utilized the opportunities arising from these international and regional initiatives to revive, reactivate and strengthen movements at the national and local levels. Follow-up meetings have been organized by women's associations in countries such as Malaysia and Thailand to review and develop initiatives for women to promote sustainable development. The Singapore-based women's organization ENGENDER has actively participated in meetings at national and regional levels to monitor and encourage women's participation in environmental issues. A number of NGOs are also actively involved in projects aimed at empowering women in communities for the management and protection of the environment. Examples of such projects are given in Box 14.5.

Women's organizations have proved themselves as some of the most potent environmental campaigners in the region. One of the most well known success stories of women's participation in environmental protection is the Chipko movement. This grew out of grassroots opposition to the destruction of India's forests, which saw villagers seeking to protect this vital resource through the Gandhian method of non-violent resistance. In the 1970s and 1980s, the movement achieved a 15-year ban on green felling in the Himalayan forests of Uttar Pradesh, stopped clear felling in the Western Ghats and the Vindhya and generated pressure for a natural resource policy which is more sensitive to people's and ecological requirements.

Women have also played a key role in uncovering the negative health impacts associated with environmental contamination. For example, rural women in Bangladesh have been among the most vocal groups calling for action against arsenic contaminated water, a major and widespread problem (see Chapter 4). During the early 1990s women living in these districts realized that their children's health was being seriously affected. At the April 1997 Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, the Women's Caucus raised the issue of the arsenic case to increase international attention on the problem. Since then, women's groups have played an important role in working with communities to survey and monitor the effects, generating media attention and mobilizing national and international initiatives.

### B. Role of Children and Youth Groups

Taken as a whole, the percentage of children in the Asian and Pacific Region has steadily increased over the last decade. Demographic statistics reveal that children under 15 comprise nearly one-third of the world's total population, with 60 per cent of them living in Asia. Because of this, children and youth groups are becoming major factor for involvement in environmental work. In Bangladesh, for example, one third of the total population is between the age of 15 and 30 with approximately 90 per cent unemployed, illiterate and poor. The National Federation of Youth Organizations in Bangladesh (NFYOB) works to empower youths by providing training in livestock, poultry farming and the establishment of small-scale income generating projects. Many youth groups also work directly on environmental campaign issues aimed at increasing environmental awareness and participation amongst the young. Activities include: workshops in schools and colleges; integrating environmental issues in syllabi of subjects taught in schools; formation of youth environmental clubs; and action projects at grassroots level involving youths in the conceptualization, planning and execution of these projects. For example, in Viet Nam, the Viet Nam Youth Union (VYU) has collaborated with government agencies in implementing an UNDP-funded project on the promotion of environmental awareness and, as 80 per cent of the population live and work in rural areas, radio was used as the main medium for promoting public awareness of environmental issues (ESCAP 1997). Another child-centred initiative that originated in Australia and New Zealand and has been adapted in some Asian cities is "making cities children friendly." This has been initiated by the Asian Network on

## Box 14.5 Empowering Women

Women's NGO groups are working to empower women and improve their standing in the decision making process. One example is the (Indian) Community Development Society (CDS), Alappuzha (Alleppey). This is a successful model of women in development that has now been replicated in 57 towns and one entire district in Kerala State. The objective of the CDS is to improve the situation of children under 5 and of women age 15 to 45 years. CDS work includes literacy programmes, income generating schemes for women, provisions of safe drinking water, low cost household sanitary latrines, kitchen gardens, food-grain bank, immunization, and child-care. The CDS has resulted in the empowerment of women and the building of community leadership. It is a unique example of community based poverty eradication efforts by women. Since its small start in 1993, the CDS has grown to a large-scale women's movement with membership of 357 000 poor women (20 per cent of poor people in the State) from both rural and urban areas.

Similar work in empowering women to play an active role in environmental improvement and development is done by the Aurat Foundation in Pakistan and Seikastu Club in Japan. The Aurat Foundation works to help women acquire greater control over knowledge and resources; to facilitate women's greater participation in political processes and governance; and to transform social attitudes and behaviour to address women's concerns and development. The Foundation works directly at a grass roots level on environmental issues. It has facilitated meetings between peasant women and policy makers, planners and political representatives, as a result of which the women were able to express their concern about the impact of environmental degradation on their livelihood and their lives. The Foundation has also lobbied with Government about the concerns of peasant women and has championed the demands of rural women to the technology transfer and agriculture extension departments in Punjab. This has led to the development of demonstration and training projects designed to improve the productivity of peasant women.

In Nepal, a local NGO, Women in Environment (WE), attempts to counter both environmental degradation and poverty by getting women actively involved in environmental projects. Working with women social workers, environmentalists, women's rights advocates and other volunteers the organization has successfully mobilized women to work on such projects as National Park buffer zone management, river bank stabilization, kitchen garden development and the creation of revolving loan fund for environmental work. The Sindh Rural Women's Uplift Group in Pakistan owns 108 acres (43 hectares) of fruit orchard in which they use "organic and sustainable cultural practices" to fight against the use of synthetic pesticide and insecticide. The Group believes in maintaining soil and plant health to reduce disease attacks – and to reduce environmental contamination.

Another example of an NGO group which works with women to develop sustainable solutions to environmental problems is the Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU). This is a large organization with over 11 million members, which promotes the role that women play in Vietnamese society. In order to promote energy self-sufficiency for rural families with no access to the electrical grid the VWU has joined in the Rural Solar Electrification Project, in conjunction with the Solar Electric Light Fund (SELF) – an American non-profit NGO which promotes rural electrification. The project has provided electricity – from solar photovoltaic cells – for 240 households and to 5 community centres. This is an especially timely initiative, since Viet Nam is in the process of designing a national rural electrification master plan with the World Bank in order to integrate renewable sources of energy into an overall rural power delivery system.

Source: United Nations 1999 Websites 16 and 17

Promoting Awareness of Environmental Issues among children (See Box 14.6).

In Pimpri Chinchwad, a major industrial city in India with over 2 000 engineering, chemical, rubber, pharmaceutical and automobile companies, environmental education and awareness are deployed through children's programmes. Several NGOs working in the area, (including the "Centre for Environment Education" (CEE), "Regional Cell for Central India", and the "World Wide Fund for Nature" – India (WWF-I)) have long recognized the need for environmental consciousness, especially among those living without adequate housing or amenities. However, with adult members of these households employed in different sectors, it has traditionally proven difficult to develop effective and targeted strategies for environmental education and consciousness. Thus children became the focus of a

series of initiatives aimed at 90 municipal schools, which led to the development of Nature Clubs and the beginning of an environmental education resource centre and project newsletter, "*Shrishti*" (Creation) (United Nations 1999 Website 21).

In order to enhance interest of youth in environmental protection and management, eco-clubs have been initiated in schools in a number of countries of the region. For example, "Young Zoologist" Clubs in schools are encouraged in Sri Lanka. Similarly, over 3 000 Educational Environmental Clubs have been set up in various parts of Pakistan. Thailand has an Environmental Development Campus to help children understand and implement environmental conservation activities and in Japan, the Junior Eco Club project has been active since 1995. The main regional agency that has worked to strengthen and foster groups involved in



### Box 14.6 NGO Contribution Toward Making Cities Child-friendly

Sporadic urban growth in many cities in Asia and the Pacific poses significant risks to the well-being of children. Research commissioned by UNICEF has noted that the health and often the lives of more than half of the world's children are constantly threatened by environmental hazards, in their home and surroundings and in the places where they play and socialize. The research also indicates that 40 000 child deaths occur each year from malnutrition and disease, and that 150 million children a year survive with ill health, with retarded physical and mental development. More and more young people are being admitted to hospital with asthma due to car fumes, while other pollutants are linked with a whole range of other health problems in the young. Shanty town dwellings with inadequate basic facilities exposes children to diseases and dangers, while traffic claims many young lives on a daily basis. Because of such problems, one of the greatest challenge for urban administrations in the new millennium is in the area of child development and protection.

In Malaysia a number of concerned NGOs have got together to try and address this challenge. In September 1996, The Malaysian Council for Child Welfare (MCCW) and the National Council for Women's Organizations (NCWO) organized a National Conference on the Right of the Child in Kuala Lumpur. The Conference was supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Malaysia and received technical cooperation from Asia-Pacific 2000, which is a Project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

At this conference, serious concerns were raised about the quality of life of the urban child, who is often caught between his or her own needs and aspirations and that of his parents. Subsequent to this meeting, on 5th July 1997, the MCCW, NCWO and the Management Institute for Social Change (MINSOC), with technical support from Asia-Pacific 2000 and UNICEF, organized a follow-up national workshop on 'The Urban Vision 2020 Initiative: Making Urban Areas Child-Friendly'. Involving over 150 participants from government departments, tertiary institutions, non-governmental organizations as well as interested individuals, the workshop concluded with concrete proposals on improving the socio-economic environment of children, addressing issues that arise within the home, school or community pace and the safety and health of urban children.

Out of these deliberations, there emerged the Malaysian Charter on Making Urban Areas Child-Friendly and its associated Ten Strategic Actions aimed specifically at urban local authorities. The Initiative then commissioned the development of a child-friendly survey instrument – 'The Child's Report Card' as a tool for children to assess the friendliness of their own neighbourhood environments.

The Malaysian Child-Friendly Cities Initiative is a complement of the International Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) which was launched during the International Workshop on Children's Rights. The objective of the CFCI is to help translate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), into concrete actions that can be implemented at the local level, by just about everyone.

Source: Saira Shameem (Compiler) 1998; Satterthwaite 1996

children and youth activities is UNICEF. One of the key follow-up areas in UNICEF's response to Agenda 21 is enhancing partnership with NGOs, research institutions and community groups to initiate innovative activities that take account of the concerns of children and young people. UNICEF has assisted each of the countries in the region in organizing activities whereby children and young people become focal points for environmental awareness raising.

#### C. Role of Indigenous People

There are still a large number of communities in the region, inhabiting remote areas, in close proximity to nature, practising traditional farming, fishing, agricultural and forestry techniques. Conserving the environment is a part of their way of life. The age-old traditions and experiences of these communities (usually termed "indigenous people") can help improve the efficiency of resource use and it is for this reason that a number of NGOs build on traditional or indigenous knowledge systems. These knowledge systems are researched and disseminated so that the wider public can learn from them.

Major groups in indigenous communities themselves are also active in environmental protection. An example which illustrates how local indigenous groups are actively involved in conservation work, is Soltrust, one of the major local indigenous organizations in the Solomon Islands dedicated to promoting sustainable forest management, where logging operations are a major concern for both the government and the indigenous peoples. Despite many awareness campaigns on sustainable development, both the number of logging companies, and the unsustainable rate of harvesting of timber resources have been increasing. Established in 1986, the group's more recent work has involved the Rarade Community of the Isabel Province, and island province that has been out of reach by loggers until recently. A partnership between Soltrust and the community was created as a model for future eco-forestry activities, not only in Isabel and in the Solomon Islands at large, but also for neighbouring countries facing similar situations (United Nations 1998).

In many parts of the region, rapid industrialization, the development of suburbs and the conversion of land for agricultural purposes has encroached upon the traditional homeland of indigenous people. At the same time greater numbers of indigenous people have either become displaced because of development or have moved into urban areas in pursuit of education and/or employment. This has resulted in the reservations and sanctuaries shrinking in size and often being hemmed in by developmental projects, with negative consequences for their once pristine environment. However, indigenous groups are now beginning to organize resistance movements. In Australia, for example, aboriginal communities in states such as Queensland have joined forces with environmental groups to prevent the further depletion of their land and forest reserves by logging and mining concerns. In New Zealand, people of Maori descent have banded together to assert claims to their land and also to protect them from further environmental damage. A number of tribes have petitioned the courts in order to reclaim their tribal lands. In the northern part of Thailand, the increasing mobility of traditional people poses a serious threat to the “sustainability” of the hilltribes distinct cultures. The threat comes from the influx of consumerism, lack of land security and large migrations to the cities. In order to counter these threats the “Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association” (IMPECT) was founded with the intention of supporting, promoting and revitalising the traditional belief systems, agricultural traditions and cultures of the hilltribes. To make the children and youth proud of their culture, the relationship between the traditional lifestyle and the conservation of their natural surrounding has been promoted through a locally developed curriculum. In response there has been an increased feeling of the value of traditional knowledge among the children and youth in the target villages.

The close links between some NGOs and indigenous communities, especially vulnerable groups, also provides for the representation of such groups at the national and international levels. This is important for resolving issues, especially those related to globalization and its homogenizing influences that endangers indigenous cultures and cultural diversity.

#### **D. Role of Farmers and Agricultural Groups**

The primary economic activities in most countries in the Asian and Pacific Region are subsistence based. Farmers and agricultural groups, alongside traditional ‘hunter-gatherer’ and fishing communities, include some of the least advantaged

sectors of the population in these countries. Many NGOs and community organizations have been established to champion the cause of these disadvantaged groups, particularly in the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Such NGOs include Development Alternatives, which was set up in India to undertake and support programmes where rural people, primarily farmers and agricultural groups, are consulted on developmental and environmental issues. Among these are projects that adapt new technologies in shelter, textiles, energies and biomass that enable agricultural communities to increase their productivity and simultaneously minimize the negative effects upon the environment. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), provide another example, which has done commendable work in improving the lives of farmers and agricultural groups.

At regional level, the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) has collaborated with national and regional agencies to ensure that the perspectives of farmers and agricultural groups are adequately reflected in programmes that promote sustainable development.

#### **E. Role of Workers, Trade Unions and Business NGOs**

Corporate groups and business associations have also started to work on environmental issues (see Chapter 13). At the international level, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has put together a document titled the ICC Charter for Sustainable Development, which has been translated into more than 20 languages and publicized throughout the world. In the industrial sector, the ICC is affiliated to the World Industry Council for the Environment (WICE) and has collaborated in transferring environmental technology from the industrialized countries to institutions in this region.

Private sector-NGO partnerships are also developing in the region. For example, in 1993, United Nations Development Programme approved a project to prevent and manage marine pollution in the seas of North and Southeast Asia. Among the project’s major activities is a demonstration project at Batangas Bay in the Philippines. Responsibility for the project activities is given to the Batangas Bay Environmental Protection council, which includes representatives of government, community organizations, local NGOs and an industry-based NGO, the Batangas Bay Coastal Resources Management Foundation (BCRMF) which represents the private sector. The involvement of BCRMF has been cited as a major factor in the success of the project’s efforts.

In recent years, workers' organizations have also started to focus on the environment, and as a result, issues such as the awareness of the link between employee health and safety and the environment have come to the fore. Organizations such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) have urged constituent member unions to promote knowledge and awareness of the environment among members. At national level, however, the strength and influence of trade unions varies considerably across the region.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that public concern for the state of the environment in the Asian and Pacific Region is increasing. This has been reflected not only in the increase in the number of public interest and community groups involved in environmental activities, but also in the scope and diversity of such activities. It was reported that there were about 1 500 Asian and Pacific NGOs represented at the Earth Summit in 1992; in recent years the number of active groups has increased to nearly 10 000. In addition, the increase in the range of their activities reflects not only the increasing professionalism with which major groups are fulfilling their obligations and responsibilities, but the greater recognition and credibility accorded to them by national governments, regional and international organizations.

A number of public interest groups have also strengthened their participation at grassroots and community levels, and have played a vital role, not only in awareness-raising and campaigning, but also in education, training and capacity-building. They have made considerable headway in their attempts to promote the concept of sustainable development, particularly among women, children and other NGOs throughout the region. Their activities show that they effectively use all media of communication, traditional as well as the new communication technologies, to disseminate information to the grassroots and to strengthen networking.

The accountability and professionalism of NGOs and civil society groups is crucial if they are to become established as appropriate representatives of the needs and concerns of those members of society who are disadvantaged, disenfranchized and poorly informed. The important role that such groups provide needs to be founded on robust information as well as the direct needs of the 'client' community. Mechanisms that can best be utilized to ensure balanced and equitable networking among NGOs need to be identified, and a focus maintained on the interests of indigenous people, women, children, youth and other disadvantaged sectors.

It is of paramount importance that NGOs in the region strive to build capacity within, and amongst, themselves and to strengthen their capacity to organize dialogue and act as public advocates with governments and regional and international bodies.