

Some Issues Facing Environmental Organisations in Developing Countries: A Case Study of the South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology and the Environment

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Abstract

The South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology and the Environment (SPACHEE) is a regional environmental Non Government Organisation (NGO) based in Fiji but serving twelve small island nations in the South Pacific region, and involved in both formal and non-formal environmental education. At present its membership base is very limited numerically, regionally and also in terms of its socio-economic make up. This article analyses SPACHEE's current membership and issues base and makes a number of recommendations as to how the organisation might broaden these. Some suggestions are also made as to how SPACHEE might link its work more explicitly to issues of equality and social justice. These suggestions may have implications for other environmental NGOs in larger developing countries in the region which face similar environmental issues, such as loss of rainforest, degradation of coral reefs and mangrove destruction.

Introduction and Context

There are now some 10,000 to 20,000 "Southern" NGOs who assist up to 100 million people. Yet despite the increasing scale of this sector and the growing reputation that NGOs have won for themselves and for their work over the last ten years, their contribution to development on a global level remains limited. Many small-scale successes have been secured, but the systems and structures that determine the distribution of power and resources within and between societies remain largely unchanged. As a result, the impact of NGOs on the lives of poor people is highly localised, and often transitory. One of the most important factors underlying this situation is the failure of NGOs to make the right linkages between their work at a micro-level and the wider systems and structures of which they form a small part (Edwards & Hulme, 1997). Consequently, effective development work on a sustainable and significant scale is a goal that has eluded NGOs. Bebbington and Farrington (1997) believe that many

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NGO's actions are restricted because of the limited size, unreliability and short-term nature of their funding. However, Clarke (1991) suggests that NGOs are often "valued" because there is an assumption that they embody organisational characteristics such as innovation, flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

This article provides a case study of a Southern Environmental NGO in the context of some of the issues raised above. The NGO in question is the South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology and Environment (SPACHEE). Specifically, the article examines some of the problems facing SPACHEE in terms of its membership base, its ability to address issues of empowerment, equality and social justice in relation to its work on the environment and its linkage to other structures within the South Pacific that might facilitate its work.

Environmental Issues in the South Pacific

The South Pacific Ocean contains 22 island nations in an area of 29 million square kilometres, though less than 2% of the total area enclosed by the Ocean is land. Many of these small island nations encompass unique cultures and ecosystems and the region is home to one of the world's most extensive reef systems, which supports enormous biodiversity. The South Pacific ecosystems are extremely fragile and as the island nations develop and their populations grow, these systems are coming under increasing pressure.

Modern economic development has brought considerable benefits for many of the people of the South Pacific such as greater life expectancy, more gender equality, more consumer choice and some extension of human rights and political freedoms. Although these benefits are not to be discounted, as increasing numbers of people in the region embrace some of the high consumption aspects of a Western lifestyle there are associated and mounting costs such as ecological degradation, social exclusion and loss of cultural diversity. Certainly, serious environmental problems are now manifesting themselves as a result of deforestation and erosion due to logging and slash-and-burn agriculture, overuse of marine resources, land and water pollution, plant and animal extinction, waste disposal and improper use of pesticides.

There are a number of Non Government environmental organisations in the region that attempt, through various projects, to minimise or even reverse some of the damage to the environment that results from rapid economic development. Some of these organisations such as the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme, receive major funding from United Nations bodies and the larger regional nations such as Australia. This enables them to enact large-scale environmental projects. However, there are also a number of much smaller organisations, more dependant on small grants and consultancy income, as well as funds generated through memberships subscriptions, which are also working to reduce environmental degradation in the region. One of these is the South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology and Environment (SPACHEE) and this article presents a case study of the work of SPACHEE and some of the issues it faces.

Data for this case study was obtained from a number of sources. Documentation produced by SPACHEE was examined and pertinent information extracted. Interviews were conducted with the chairperson of SPACHEE while the first author was employed by the University of the South Pacific, and further information was obtained by email once he had left Fiji. These data sources were intended to identify the key problems facing SPACHEE as a small regional NGO. Finally the first author was member of SPACHEE for a number of years and as such attended meetings and received a newsletter which provided considerable insight into the workings of the organisation.

The South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology and Environment – Some Background

SPACHEE is a non-profit and non-government organisation that was established in 1982 by lecturers and students of the University of the South Pacific and other interested persons from the South Pacific community. Since then, it has evolved into an independent organisation managed by Pacific Islanders.

SPACHEE's mission statement is as follows:

The South Pacific Action Committee for Human Ecology & Environment (SPACHEE) works to promote the preservation and improvement of human ecology and environment by facilitating the exchange of information and resources between local communities and environmental Non Government Organizations (NGOs) and other agencies at the national, regional and international level, thereby strengthening the capacity of individuals in the South Pacific region to be effective in this endeavour.

SPACHEE has six priority programme areas of work through which it aims to achieve its objectives and targets. These are summarised in table 1.

Although, at first sight, this appears to be an impressive list, many of SPACHEE's activities are of necessity rather *ad hoc*, due to its limited budget and staffing. For example, school visits are only occasional and usually in response to specific requests from schools rather than as part of a coherent school environmental education programme.

Structure and Funding for SPACHEE

Most of the administrative activities of the organisation are carried out by its executive committee that consists of a chairperson, vice chairperson, treasurer, secretary and four other members. The majority of the work is done on a volunteer basis and the pay of the employees mainly comes from consultancy fees. The bulk of SPACHEE's projects are funded from international and regional agencies. Agencies that have provided financial support over SPACHEE's history include the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Volunteer Programme (UNV), the British Government, Pacific Conservation Development Trust (PCDT), Australian Aid (AUSAID), Women's International Development Agency (WIDA), and the Fiji Government.

Membership Base

SPACHEE has a staff of three people and just over 100 members. At present SPACHEE's membership shows a significant bias towards women who make up over 60% of the organisation's numbers. Only 20% of the members are regional, that is, members from other Pacific islands outside of Fiji, and the regional membership has declined over recent years. The situation was not helped when SPACHEE moved out of the University of the South Pacific campus since most of their regional members had been students and lecturers at this regional university. The organisation states that extending the regional membership base is now a priority. The membership is also predominately tertiary educated with 65% of members either working towards or holding tertiary level qualifications.

SPACHEE charges a subscription fee to members. At present this is F\$10 for an individual, F\$20 for a family, F\$5 for a full-time student and F\$50 for an institution.

TABLE 1: The six priority programme areas of work undertaken by SPACHEE

Programme	Details
Environmental Education	SPACHEE works with schools and local communities to raise awareness, understanding and concern for the environment. In doing this, it hopes to develop skills and attitudes necessary for working towards workable and sustainable solutions to current and projected environmental problems.
Environmental Information	This programme aims to help people make informed decisions about matters relating to the environment. SPACHEE publishes a quarterly newsletter, 'News Alert' and is networking with other NGOs through information exchange.
Community-Based Resource Management	SPACHEE assists communities in developing and aiding in the implementation of projects related to the improvement of the environment. The programme assists communities to minimise waste through recycling goods, through crafts and utilising rubbish compost.
Women and Environment	SPACHEE encourages the involvement of women to analyse their use of natural resources and the consequences that their actions have on the health of their families and the well being of island ecosystems. Specific activities have focused on household waste management, women and forests, women and fisheries, traditional medicine and income generating activities. SPACHEE has a full time officer co-ordinating Ecowoman project aimed at enabling grassroots women to understand and use appropriate science and technology concepts, including local knowledge to improve women's lives, communities and the environment.
Human Resources Development	SPACHEE recognises the need to assist islanders to develop an awareness of their environment and skills that will enable them to manage and protect their natural resources. Through its work programme, SPACHEE trains environmental specialists to work with communities.
Consultancies	SPACHEE carries out Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for projects and also carries out marine and socio-economic research.

Key Issues Facing SPACHEE

Analysis of the documents, direct communications (visits and email) and background information received from SPACHEE indicated a number of concerns for the organisation. These include:

- (i) under-representation of non-tertiary educated members;
- (ii) relevance of current projects to the lives of the majority of members;
- (iii) gender imbalance; and
- (iv) declining regional membership.

Many of these concerns are linked to the issue of empowerment, equality and social justice. As this is a crucial issue for NGOs working in developing countries, it is important to examine it more thoroughly before making specific suggestions as to how SPACHEE might address its specific concerns.

Empowerment, Equality and Social Justice

According to Cherrett and Middlebrook (1995), a number of approaches for NGO action have been traditionally identified and characterise a spectrum of approaches to taking environmental and development action in the field. They are termed:

- Charity and welfare/social service.
- Reform/community development.
- Transformation/community organisation.

The “charity and welfare/social service” approach is the most traditional and is characterised by the giving of services and financial assistance, however, Cherrett and Middlebrook believe that this approach fails to tackle the root causes and often creates dependency.

The “reform/community development” approach seeks to make functional improvements within the existing social, political and economic fabric of a given society. NGOs here are often involved in areas such as education and health and have a community (micro) focus. They try to improve existing structures rather than addressing why such structures have failed.

The “transformation/community organisation” approach addresses such issues as poverty and political marginalisation. In particular it looks at why existing structures have failed and how what exists can be transformed to provide a broad and egalitarian base of social, political and economic provision. The underlying concern is one of inequality and injustice.

At present SPACHEE appears to be located somewhere between “charity and welfare/social service” and “reform/community development” on this spectrum. Certainly much of SPACHEE’s efforts appear to be concentrated on raising environmental awareness and enthusiasm for conservation as potential answers to ecological sustainability through formal and informal education, and this approach may well appeal to the organisation’s largely educated and middle-class membership.

However, if SPACHEE is to make a greater impact by moving towards the “transformation/community organisation” end of the spectrum, then issues of empowerment, social justice and equality need to be more explicit in the organisation’s work. This view is espoused by a number of authors (Kothari & Parajuli, 1993; O’Connor, 1989) who see the achievement of social justice as the prerequisite to ecological sustainability. Kothari and Parajuli argue that unlike conservationists, who primarily propose national parks and sanctuaries as sites of protection and survival, ecological struggles combined with social justice defend “social nature”. They also claim that peoples’ position as defenders derives not from the concept of “nature under threat” as does that of conservationists, but rather from a relationship with the land, water and forest as the fundamental basis for their own elemental struggle to survive.

O’Connor (1989) concurs, stating that ecological problems result from uneven patterns of development and unchecked development for economic purposes. Such development results in ecological degradation, the human victims of which are typically the rural poor, for whom ecological questions are a literally matter of life and death, and the unemployed and under-employed in the cities. These types of development result in social injustice because their victims are the poor in both rural

and urban areas. Thus, solutions to ecological problems must be linked to equality and justice. In fact, Bullard (1993) argues that environmental crisis simply cannot be solved effectively without social justice.

Third World First (1990) have raised the issue of relevance in relation to social justice. This organisation believes that social justice and environmental justice are synonymous. They argue that, in general, it is middle-class people who are in possession of the "privilege of concern" as they have the financial ability to look beyond their own livelihood and explore what is going on globally and make the connections. However, they believe that if people from lower socio-economic groups are involved in a practical and direct way with their local environment, they too may go on to make the wider connections.

This is clearly a major issue and there is a limit to what a relatively small organisation can do in terms of improving economic conditions for less privileged groups in the South Pacific. However, SPACHEE should, as Third World First (1990) suggest, be able to make itself more relevant to groups outside the educated middle classes of the South Pacific and at the same time expand its membership base. Hodson (1997) believes that there is a moral case for the aggressive pursuit of growth on the part of NGOs although in the medium term such growth can result in a great deal of stress for such organisations. He argues that the problems engendered by aggressively pursuing growth will be greatly outdone by the additional good achieved and points to the example of OXFAM which he argues has become a greater force for good in the world as a result of its rapid and sustained growth, despite the internal tensions and associated management problems this growth has created.

The remainder of this article will examine the four areas of concern highlighted earlier and make suggestions as to how SPACHEE might address these. Where possible, specific reference will be made to how SPACHEE might make explicit links between these suggestions and greater equality and improved social justice particularly in relation to the relevance of its work to lower socio-economic groups.

Under-Representation of Non-Tertiary Educated Members

This aspect of the membership profile is closely linked with the issue of relevance of SPACHEE's work to the lives of its members and these two issues will be discussed together in this section.

Given the nature of the geographical area that SPACHEE covers, the organisation faces some unique problems in attempting to increase and broaden its membership base and disseminate information. However, there are lessons that can be learnt from environmental organisations in other countries. For example in Britain, some environmental organisations, notably the Conservation Society and Friends of the Earth, tend to have a majority of members from groups with higher incomes and much higher levels of education when compared with a sample survey of the general public. Membership is also drawn disproportionately from the personal service professions such as teaching, social work and medicine (Lowe & Goyder, 1983). Thus, a major criticism of these environmental organisations has been that their members are predominantly middle or upper middle-class and that their values are unrepresentative of lower-class interests.

This issue of relevance has been raised by Agyeman (1993, p. 20) who argues that:

Typical agenda issues such as global warming, threats to tropical rainforests and the ozone layer, serious though they may be, are hardly the most relevant environmental issues to the rapidly growing numbers young and old, in inner urban Britain who suffer "environmental poverty", their basic needs being unmet, their lives spent in drab, system-built environments strewn with fly-tipping, litter, and drug paraphernalia.

Clearly for any environmental organisation which is reliant on public membership, it is crucial to match the issues it pursues with the interests and concerns of its membership. The membership of SPACHEE is similar to that reported for organisations in Britain, with a high proportion of middle-class well educated individuals compared to members from lower socio-economic groups with lower levels of education. However, as Taylor (1989) as well as Lowe and Goyder (1983) point out, environmental concern cuts across all social classes and as such, there is a need for greater inclusion of the lower socio-economic groups by environmental organisations such as SPACHEE. Although SPACHEE does have some projects that specifically target rural subsistence communities, there is a significant lack of project work targeting the growing population of urban poor in the South Pacific region. Bryant (1993) states that the urban poor in Pacific cities face issues of social change, overcrowding and high housing density, environmental degradation and growing inequities. This urban community may well not view SPACHEE's work as particularly relevant to its problems and has little incentive to join.

Clearly other factors may be involved in the low representation of non-tertiary educated individuals. Many individuals may not be aware of the organisation and its work, particularly outside of Fiji where it is based. Perhaps more crucially, many will also be deterred by the subscription fee, which although relatively small for individuals from the middle classes, represents a significant sum for many Pacific islanders.

If SPACHEE is to address this area of concern and attempt to broaden its membership base by making it more inclusive of lower socio-economic groups, then it needs to look closely at how it can disseminate information about its activities more effectively. At present SPACHEE deals with a number of high-level organisations from whom it draws financial support such as UNDP and CIDA. This is consistent with the analysis of Cherrett and Middlebrook (1995) who believe that small southern NGOs often depend on larger northern NGOs and parastatal bodies for much of their funding. While these links to larger NGOs and parastatal bodies are important to its survival, in terms of its efficacy, SPACHEE, as Edwards and Hulme (1997) point out, may be failing to make the right linkages between their work at a micro-level and the wider systems and structures of which they form a small part. Certainly it appears to have overlooked the impact which certain grassroots NGOs might have in their ability to disseminate information. Key amongst these in the South Pacific is the Church. Church membership and attendance in the South Pacific remains very high in both urban and rural areas. Furthermore, church attendance is not skewed towards any particular class or gender. Ministers are still extremely influential in their local communities and churches have effective national and even regional communications systems.

If SPACHEE was to engage with different denominations within the Church this could be an effective way to raise the profile of the organisation amongst a large sector of the Pacific population, in particular those without tertiary education. This could help address the issue of equality if SPACHEE was to embrace issues of concern to church communities.

SPACHEE might do this by conducting needs assessments within rural and urban communities to identify environmental issues of concern to the local churches and their members. Based on this information, training workshops could then be planned for clergy at a local or national level to show them how environmental problems might be reduced. Furthermore, information packs might be provided to explain the role that the clergy and their parishioners can play in protecting the local environment and ultimately how this can benefit local communities. For example, many coastal communities are removing or damaging local mangrove plantations, unaware that these represent important breeding and nursery areas for the fish stocks on which they

ultimately depend. This issue is obviously very relevant to coastal communities and as each community has at least one church, the clergy could play a significant role in helping conserve and even regenerate mangrove forests.

Such a strategy would require careful planning, but by consulting local communities and allowing local people to voice their concerns, rather than simply dictating to them, there would be a greater chance of achieving co-operation and really tackling environmental problems.

If this strategy proved successful in increasing the membership of SPACHEE, particularly amongst non-tertiary educated individuals, it could be extended to collaboration with other NGOs such as the trade union movement. Input from organisations such as the church and trade unions should also assist SPACHEE in broadening its issues base and increasing its relevance to groups that at present it appears to be failing to reach. Furthermore, offering organisational membership to these groups would negate the need to charge individuals a membership fee.

SPACHEE might also broaden its influence by targeting primary schools more effectively. Most children in the Pacific receive a full primary education, however, although secondary education is universal in some countries, e.g., Fiji, in many others, e.g., Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, it is still highly selective. Thus, in these countries secondary school students are effectively an elite group. Furthermore, secondary schools often receive a disproportionate amount of government and aid funding (Kings & Taylor, 1998). Thus, primary schools are often left very short of resources. A newsletter, specifically targeting the primary school sector, that provided primary teachers with a variety of cross-curricular teaching ideas on environmental themes could help expose large numbers of children to environmental issues, and might help to give them an appreciation of their local environment at a formative age.

Such a newsletter is not without precedence. The Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific, previously published and circulated newsletters entitled *Ocean Voice* and *UPEGA* (Samoan for net) disseminating marine and science and environmental information to all primary schools in the Pacific. This was made possible through sponsorship from BP Oil and proved to be relatively low cost.

At present SPACHEE does produce a newsletter, but this is a general publication for members and is not specifically targeted towards schools.

Gender Imbalance

SPACHEE has a significant gender bias in favour of females. To some extent this is in accord with the views of Shiva (1989) who believes that women are drawn to environmental organisations because of a perception that women and nature are intimately related, and their domination and liberation similarly linked. She states that the women's and ecology movements are therefore one and are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment. SPACHEE presently funds two programmes, *Ecowoman* and the *Women in Fisheries Network*, which specifically target rural women. Both these projects aim to increase the participation of women in the decision-making processes at the local community level. They also hope to increase the participation of women in sustainable development projects to raise income-earning opportunities for women.

This approach is in keeping with Jackson's (1994) view that it is crucial to involve women in conservation as fully as possible because interventions in support of the environment will benefit women. Furthermore, Davidson (1993) argues that women's efforts to resist environmentally damaging policies and to restore and protect the status of women will be decisive for the protection of the environment and natural resources.

While these are important issues, especially in the patriarchal societies of the South Pacific, it could be argued that for SPACHEE, the gender imbalance may ultimately have a detrimental effect on its impact, particularly if the imbalance becomes any greater. The very fact that the South Pacific is patriarchal results in male dominance of the decision-making processes. It is therefore vital that in the short-term, SPACHEE continues to attract male members who can be made more aware of the environmental consequences of their decisions. Furthermore, it is essential that males in positions of power are educated about the importance of the environment so that future development decisions are made with sustainable development as the objective.

Regional Membership

SPACHEE clearly recognises the importance of reversing the decline in its regional membership. As already stated, regional membership has so far been made up largely of visiting students from other South Pacific countries, but to be a truly regional organisation SPACHEE needs to extend its influence into the region more actively.

The nations of the South Pacific face many similar environmental problems (Taylor, 1994), and it is important that SPACHEE increases its influence in the countries it serves outside of Fiji. At present the approach to the regional countries is rather *ad hoc*, with occasional mail shots to government ministries. There appears to be a need to identify and appoint individuals who will act as co-ordinators or "focal points" for information dissemination in each country. Such individuals are likely to have to work on a voluntary basis but funding might be sought to provide them with computer and email facilities to assist their administration. Identifying and supporting such individuals for each country would allow SPACHEE to deal more directly with local governments and NGOs rather than having to communicate from a distance. Furthermore, having a co-ordinator in each country may again help to identify environmental issues of local concern on which SPACHEE can act, thus increasing its relevance to the local population.

One other strategy that SPACHEE might employ to raise its regional profile, broaden its membership base and also address relevant environmental issues, is the use of radio information spots. Nearly all South Pacific families own radios (Taylor, 1994), and short radio broadcasts offer a relatively cheap (in some countries free) and effective way of communicating with people, particularly as on many islands there is no newspaper.

Finally, at present SPACHEE does not possess its own website and although internet usage in the South Pacific is still limited, it is growing. A number of educational institutions and government departments throughout the region already have internet access. The development of an internet site, while not immediately intended to broaden the membership base, could have long term benefits for SPACHEE. This would be particularly true if the site provided information about Pacific ecosystems and environmental initiatives that might be relevant to students throughout the region.

Concluding Comments

All of the initiatives mentioned above would require additional funding, but all are relatively low cost. If they resulted in a significant increase in membership across the various socio-economic groups, this would increase internal funding and help SPACHEE attract extra funding from external sources. This in turn would allow the organisation to take on further staff to strengthen its administrative base, something which Hodson (1997) claims is extremely desirable for NGOs. Certainly at present the administrative base is very small and inadequate if SPACHEE is to become a truly influential regional NGO. Furthermore, as an organisation involved in formal and

non-formal environmental education it is vital that SPACHEE is able to communicate with and make itself relevant to lower socio-economic groups within the South Pacific region. This might help SPACHEE become a "transformation/community organisation" more able to address underlying issues of inequality and social justice, something which Cherrett and Middlebrook (1995) regard as vital for NGOs to be truly effective. Unfortunately, at the moment with its existing structures this appears to be unlikely.

The authors feel that there is an important role for small environmental NGOs in developing countries, however, it is vital that they are able to target a broad spectrum of the society and not just the middle classes who are often already well informed about many of the important issues, as this in a sense is "preaching to the converted". It is vital that they also consistently reach people from poorer backgrounds who, as Third World First (1990) argue, are not in possession of the "privilege of concern". These groups, both rural and urban, need to be offered tangible reasons why they should not continue to damage the environment in their struggle to make a living. Furthermore, they need to be provided with practical alternatives which will reduce environmental degradation without making them poorer. This is an enormous challenge in which local environmental NGOs can play a key role if they can identify ways of broadening their membership base and communicating effectively with those groups beyond the urban middle classes.

Keywords: Pacific; environmental Non Government Organisations.

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