



ESCWA



CAMRE



UNEP



DESA

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Expert Group Meeting on the Development of Harmonized
Environmental Impact Assessment in the ESCWA Region and
Thematic Round Table on Regional Preparations for the 2002
Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development
Beirut, 9-13 April 2001

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/ENR/2001/WG.1/8
6 April 2001
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

LIBRARY & DOCUMENT SECTION

**THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF NGO'S AS ONE OF THE MAIN ACTORS
ENGAGED IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

by

Emad Adly

Note: This document has been reproduced in the form in which it was received, without formal editing. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.

01-0386

The Role and Function of NGO's As one of the main actors engaged in the Sustainable Development

The role of Arab NGO's in the implementation of Agenda 21 in the Arab Region started long time before Agenda 21 was approved in Rio 1992.

The different NGO's at the national level in the different Arab countries were involved in the preparation of the Earth Summit (Rio 1992). Many efforts and activities were done to ensure that the countries would be effectively participating in the process of Rio and in the process of the implementation of the outcomes of Rio 1992.

One of the achievements that took place during the process of preparation of the 1992 (the United Nations Conference for Environment and Development) was the establishment of The Arab Network For Environment and Development (RAED) in November 1990. This step was a real landmark started to organize the regional non-governmental efforts for the Earth Summit.

The Role of the NGO's was extended to the preparation of Agenda 21 before and during Rio 1992, and also the Arab NGO's were very much involved in the NGO forum that was held parallel to the Earth Summit in Rio 1992. There is a special case in the region that many of the academia who are involved in the research and work as consultants for the governments are at the same time either leaders of NGO's or at least members of the active NGO's.

The "Alternative Treaties" process:

During the process of Rio 1992, the Arab NGO's with the other nations NGO's from all over the world have participated in the creation and the design of the so called "the alternative treaties". These treaties were the NGO commitment towards the sustainable development process at the local, national, regional as well as globally. The alternative treaties were designed in a way to enhance the partnership with the other NGO's from different parts in the world and has a condition of having at least 2 NGO's from the south with one NGO from the north. The treaties dealt

with all the issues related to the environment and sustainable development socially, economically, environmentally and culturally.

This process did not succeed to continue from the official point of view, but on the other hand it helped very much many NGO's to learn how to establish partnership ties with other actors, mainly NGO's. The Arab NGO's in this regard were very much gaining out of this process as it helped them to open the dialogue and the communication with other NGO's from the different parts of the world. Moreover the international NGO community became aware of the Arab Region and the role of the civil society in the process of sustainable development. Many wrong ideas about the Arabs have also changed specially in relation to women, religious and political issues in our region.

After Rio 1992,

Arab NGO's at the national level as well as at the regional level became actively participating in the implementation of the Agenda 21 which is considered as the main tool of achieving the Sustainable Development. This practice was done through their presence in the different mechanisms happening in the different countries.

NGO's are also active in Sustainable Development by their engagement in different activities, projects, and campaigns. By monitoring and participating in the evaluation of the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level.

This role is far from the expected goal as the process of Sustainable Development in the region is still very slow and also the number of active and experienced NGO's is very small for the different functions they need to perform in the implementation of the Sustainable Development.

The responsibility for empowering the role of NGO's in the process of Sustainable Development is shared by both the Governments and the Civil Society. There are other actors that need to help in this process like media, international organizations specially the United Nations.

The Role of NGO's in the implementation of Agenda 21 in the Arab region:

Agenda 21 has clearly identified the important role of NGO's. This role should start from the time this agenda is designed at the national level. There are some good examples of the active participation of the National NGO's in the process of designing the Agenda in some countries like Tunisia. In some other countries the Agenda was done by consultants and did not go for consultations with the civil society.

NGO's in many countries in the Arab region have shown many successful actions that prove their responsibility in sharing the implementation of Agenda 21 for example their different projects in awareness, environmental education, capacity building, lobbying, advocacy, and networking.

Also in the area of field projects, many NGO's in the Arab region have developed many initiatives in the areas of (bio-diversity, new and renewable sources of energy, climate change, international water, desertification, etc., etc...). The UNDP Global Environment Facility - Small Grants Program that is operational now in five Arab countries and will start in the sixth country very soon, financed many of these projects.

The GEF-SGP is adopting almost the same process in the different countries where it operates by designing a Country Program Strategy that should be in line with the National Environmental Action Plans and derived from the priorities of the country.

Through the SGP process NGO's have proven their capacity to deal with many activities at the grass-root level as well as at the National level. They were and still are dealing with the different challenges of Sustainable Development. In many projects of the SGP, a partnership relationship was developed between NGO's and other partners specially governments. The SGP is aiming at coordinating between its activities and other initiatives at the national level specially those funded by the big GEF.

Rio + 5,

The Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED) is constantly trying to be active in the implementation of Rio 1992, which of course includes Agenda 21.

In 1996 and for the preparation of Rio+5, RAED has gone through a process of reviewing the achievements and impediments of the implementation of the 1992 conference. This process was done in a complete cooperation and with a financial support from the Earth Council.

NGO's in 12 countries were able to produce national reports on the status of the implementation of the Agenda 21 in the respective countries. In 7 of these countries the NGO's organized National Consultations. In those consultations the different actors were participating, governments, academia, and also local authorities and local elected people.

At the end of this process at the national level in different countries, a big consultation at the regional level was organized in Lebanon by the end of 1996, where all the national reports were presented and the different opinions were exchanged. As a result of this exercise a regional report was delivered for the Rio+5 NGO conference in Rio de Janeiro March 1997.

Rio + 10 and the National Commissions for Sustainable Development:

The same process has started in the year 2000 to prepare for Rio+10 World Summit for Sustainable Development, which is going to be held in Johannesburg in the summer of 2002. This time RAED in cooperation with three big mechanism and organizations, the NGO Steering Committee for the CSD, the UNED Forum and the Earth Council, is going to do the following:

- The participation at the CSD meetings and the Preparatory Committees for the Rio+10 conference.
- The participation in the South NGO Conference which is going to be held in Algeria in October 2001.
- The information and awareness process to prepare the public for the important event.
- The capacity building of many NGO's to be able to actively participate in the different activities related to the WSSD.
- The evaluation and negotiation on the status of the National Commissions of Sustainable Development in five countries.

A special emphasis is done for the NCS in 5 countries, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

The NCS D's is the official forum that should be in charge of looking at the Sustainable Development process at the national level. NGO's are an integral part of those commissions in case they are established. The NCS D's have multi-stakeholder participation from all different actors.

Since Tunisia is almost the only country that has established a National Committee for Sustainable Development, so RAED is studying this unique model and is trying to encourage the other four countries to initiate similar actions. In Morocco there is a National Council for Environment that could be modified and enhanced to act as a NCS D.

In the other three countries the process still need to be elaborated and the provision of establishing the NCS D to be examined and then hopefully adopted.

RAED in the five countries and in full cooperation with the Governments will organize national Workshops to discuss, evaluate, study the process of NCS D's. Learning from other experiences will be one of the objectives of these national workshops.

At the end of this process, a Regional Conference is proposed to disseminate the results of the national workshops as well as to exchange the experiences of the different countries in the area of successes and the lessons learned. The outputs of the National Workshops and the Regional Conference will be the regional feedback for the WSSD.

Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable Development:

This model is unique by all measures. The Mediterranean Countries (7 of them are Arab Countries) within the framework of the Barcelona Convention, established the MCSD. The TOR and the composition of the MCSD are showing the partnership atmosphere that could exist in the region. NGO's are treated on equal footing with Governments inside the commission. NGO's are taking the responsibility of leading some task groups within the activities of the commission. We need to see similar processes at the national level and also hopefully at the Arab League level.

Within the MCSD, some Arab NGO's were able to participate in the Commission's activities.

United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development:

This is another example of the involvement of the Arab NGO's (RAED and others) in the events and activities of the UNCSD since 1993. The number of Arab NGO's involved in the CSD is very small if we compare it with other regions. However, with the weak level of participation NGO's were able to participate in the different meetings and to learn about the progress in the different fields of Sustainable Development.

Sustainable Human Development:

In 1998, RAED in cooperation with the Arab League and UNEP-MAP and with the support of Friedrisch Ebert Stiftung in Egypt FES, organized a regional conference on the Sustainable Human Development. The issue was found to be very important to be discussed as this is at the end is the main challenge of the NGO's in the region. It is very important to highlight here poverty, education, health, the right to be informed, the right to participate and many other means of achieving the SHD. NGO's with their different backgrounds should be basically focussing on the importance of looking at these issues when they deal with the Environmental Sustainable Development.

In this regard, the Sustainable Livelihood concept is adopted as a main element in the process of any of the projects that are funded by the different UN agencies since we are aiming at the end the communities and the human beings.

Gender:

The emphasis on the gender issue was not developed properly in the beginning of the NGO work in the region. Nowadays, the issue has become very obvious to most of the actors, however from the experience we had within the different countries, a lot of work should be done in this area. The linkage of this issue with the implementation of the Sustainable Development should be a more exercised by NGO's and other actors.

In Egypt, since its establishment, the National Council for Women NCW has developed from the early times the relation between the issue and the Sustainable Development.

Youth,

Again this issue is very crucial in the process of Sustainable Development. RAED has also touched upon this issue in cooperation with UNEP-ROWA and the Arab League. In 1997 a regional workshop was organized and a Regional Strategy for the Participation of Youth in Sustainable Development was created and was sent to all governments as well as the UN agencies in the region.

Youth can take the lead in the process of SD. The Youth Organizations have to be recognized by the different actors including the NGO's.

Children,

In the same direction, in 1998 RAED has organized a Regional Workshop on Children and Environment. The main element of Sustainable Development is to deliver enough resources for our next generations. Also, investing in this area will be the cornerstone for any change in the future.

Identification of Gaps, Constrains, and Obstacles relative to NGO's engagement in Sustainable Development:

In general, NGO's in the Arab region are much less professional than in other regions such as Latin America, or Asia. And even more if we make the comparison between them and the European and North American NGO's.

However it is very clear for any observer that the number of the NGO's at the national and at the regional level is increasing year after year, and day after day. But still the problems that are facing the Arab NGO's in the Arab region are almost the same with the different circumstances from one country to another.

Main challenges for NGO's will be:

Legal: Laws in many ways affect the flexibility and the strength of the NGO's' activities in the region We notice the progress in different countries to change the NGO's laws. Some new laws might help in encouraging NGO's to be more active.

The level of awareness: the number of people who are aware about the environment is increasing however still we are facing the problem of awareness in the region (there is not enough awareness to face the problem). We need to get the transformation of this awareness into new environmentally sound attitudes.

Resources: this includes human and financial resources

Priorities: The most important element is that environment and sustainable development is still not the priority of the development process. The economic growth is considered as a priority and of course since the sustainable development is putting the economic, social, and environmental concerns as the main elements for sustainable development, so in most of the cases we find that the economic element is more dominating than the social, and environmental.

Most of the NGO's who are working in the area of environment, are always thinking about general environmental issues, and they don't focus on special environmental problems (Example in Egypt, the number of NGO's working in the area of bio-diversity or international waters are very small in number and of course this does not reflect the severity of the problem). The gap here is that sometimes we have an urgency to deal with the problem but we don't have at the same time a good number of NGO's that can work in this area and can implement projects to face this problem.

Practical Proposals and Suggestions of innovative approaches to augment NGO's participation in implementing Agenda 21:

First, We have to approve at the national level the dialogue as a principle tool to deal with the sustainable development issue. This means that without the dialogue between the different actors (the government, the private sector, and NGO's) we cannot have a real partnership in the process of Agenda 21.

Second, We have to develop very carefully with the different partners the national Agenda 21 in the different countries, and to operate these Agendas because we are not aiming at only putting a new document on the shelf but we need to operationalize it.

Operationalization of Agenda 21 at the national level means that it should include:

Operational guidelines

A time frame

Follow up, monitoring, and evaluation.

Third, NGO's should have their own cooperation, and coordination among themselves, between themselves and the other actors. Meaning that NGO's should not be working in isolation of other partners and vice versa.

Fourth, Local national resources should be considered as state resources, meaning that by considering NGO's a real partner in the process of the implementation of Agenda 21; they can have an access to the national resources and wealth. Depending only on foreign resources will hinder their participation in the implementation.

Fifth, NGO's should put more emphasis on the capacity building of the NGO's themselves, and in gaining experience from each other.

Finally, Donors and international agencies should play a more active role in involving NGO's in the process of sustainable development as well as of helping new NGO's to be created to help in the filling of different gaps.

Partnerships with the Governments, the Arab League and UN Agencies in the Region:

Traditionally non-governmental work existed in many of the Arab nations before even similar activities started in other regions of the so called now the developed countries.

However, due to the political, economic and social changes the reality has changed somehow. Sometimes, we notice the lack of trust between the two identities (NGO's and Governments). During the process of Rio and after the adoption of the report (Our Common Future) and the adoption of Agenda 21, it became very clear that without the full participation of the civil society and NGO's no real sustainable development could be achieved.

Different practices were developed at the national and regional levels to encourage, enhance, and develop the partnership between Governments and NGO's.

The involvement of the NGO's in many of the national fora and councils are proofs for the growing of this partnership. Although in many cases the government still take the right to choose her partner from the NGO's nevertheless, it is better than not having NGO's at all.

The Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED) in a democratic and transparent process was chosen (by the NGO's themselves) to represent the Arab NGO's in the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment CAMRE. This step is one of the steps towards the partnership between Governments and NGO's.

Many activities were jointly organized jointly between the Technical Secretariat of CAMRE and RAED. This partnership was very much a helping factor for both partners to deal with many issues related to Environment and Sustainable Development.

The same is very much seen with the UN Agencies in the Region. UNEP ROWA, UNEP MAP, ESCWA, UNDP, UNECA and other agencies are very much supporting these partnerships to grow and become more strong.