

The Baring Foundation

Beyond Environmental Audits - 29th April 2008

Martin Findlay welcomed everyone to this meeting and handed over to David Cutler who introduced the paper he had circulated before the meeting. This presented the topic - how non-environmental voluntary organisations can be helped to explore the impact climate change will have on their primary charitable purposes.

The idea being explored

The charitable purposes of non-environmental voluntary organisations have direct and significant links with the implications of climate change. Acting on climate change is not just about an organisation examining its own carbon footprint. Action is needed to address the systemic and political dimensions of problem. This means organisations acting downwards to users and wider society to change behaviour and to create pressure upwards on policy makers and business. It is helpful to re-cast environmental change as an issue of social justice. The traditional boundaries between the environmental and other parts of the third sector are meaningless in relation to climate change.

The practical ways in which climate change is an issue of social justice

Climate change is a driver rather than an issue in itself. The effects of deteriorating air quality will be felt most in the poorest areas. Rising food and energy prices will make it more difficult for those on low incomes to make ends meet. If the UK population increases to 100 million by 2050 through the arrival of environmental refugees then this will impact on the core concerns of every charity. This is an issue of global solidarity, opposing the idea of treating people as disposable. Decisions are currently being taken on who will be excluded from flood defences both in developing countries and here. HM Treasury is deciding now on the risks it will pay for. It is also about promoting the positive benefits of good public transport systems, efficiently heated homes and so on, rather than saying we are protecting the poor by not acting now. It is about rallying cooperative action on putting forward alternatives to the current unsustainable ways of living.

Issues / barriers to organisations making these connections

Non-environmental voluntary organisations asking 'is this our job?'

This view is changing rapidly, particularly in the last year. Organisations increasingly make the link with the social and economic implications of climate change and realise that the effects will be most felt in the poorest areas. Some organisations may find it hard to sell this within the organisation though Stern showed that we cannot afford not to address this.

Do organisations really understand the links?

People don't understand the implications of International Panel and Climate Change reports. It would help if they did understand the link with e.g. rising food prices. The Carnegie UK work on the futures of civil society identified the pressure on global resources as the biggest threat – using these terms resonates more with immediately with people's lives.

Organisations may not have the skills or knowledge to do this

Organisations may agree that this is an important issue, but not know how to tackle it. There is, however, precedence in most cases for working with beneficiaries on issues beyond the immediate remit of the charity e.g. in criminal justice – work with families and health issues. Organisations acknowledge the arguments around 'sustainability' as applied to the organisation as well as the

communities they work with. Organisations will need to think how already alienated groups will not feel pressurised further in being encouraged to act differently.

Organisations not having the money to do anything about this
There are extra costs involved.

The scale of the problem and the need to act fast

Focusing on education and awareness may be too soft. 70% of people say they are concerned about climate change but only 7% feel it is within their power to do something. We need to ask what we can do this year. How can we change 40 organisations now? There is a wider culture of inaction. Ken Livingstone as Mayor of London went systematically sector by sector in London asking how are you going to cut emission by 60%.

What are examples of organisations making the connections already?

Ruralnet supports rural communities interested in producing their own energy. This is, in turn, providing a catalyst for greater community cohesion. Tear Fund, one example is its work on the impact of refugee camps in Darfur on the local environment and on the environmental issues connected to refugees' return. See the work of Christian Aid, Women's Institute (which holds a particular terror for politicians), Oxfam, Transition Towns.

Comic Relief trustees accepted in 2006 that their whole vision and mission was affected by climate change and has worked on making voices heard in Britain to get the message across and given grants in Africa to raise the voice of Africans in relation to the social justice issues as well as to develop adaptation policies. A recent Friends of the Earth report charts the burst in local grassroots activity. Peabody Housing has a project in south-west London focusing on energy efficiency but also community cohesion through car clubs, LETS (Local Exchange Trading Scheme). The Development Trusts Association is developing its thinking on community assets and sustainability.

See the Third Sector Declaration on Climate Change. MIND runs a project called Ecominds, for people with experience of mental distress to become involved in projects that improve mental and physical health, and community environments. This was funded by Big Lottery's Changing Spaces programme. ACRE adopted the peak oil issue arising from work with rural communities. The Tenants Participation Advisory Service has looked at environmental issues from a social housing and community perspective. Capacity Global has championed the environmental justice cause. The Charity Finance Directors' Group is working on incorporating an environmental and social reporting standard into annual financial reports.

New Economics Foundation has looked at the impact of climate change in the UK. The Education Centres Association is including environmental learning in its adult learning strategy to increase skills in lobbying. Arcola Theatre recognised the opportunity to use theatre to engage communities and policy makers. It has had the added benefit of raising the theatre's profile generally.

From the US, the Rockefeller Foundation has been engaging new constituencies including farmers, hunters, students and anglers. Also the Ella Baker Centre has worked on the idea of green collar workers. International Alert is working on conflicts caused by climate change. The Sierra Club harnesses the skills of the Indian diaspora in California.

How can we support the next 10,000 of these organisations?

Ideas

- Funders can play a role in encouraging organisations to think about this. City Bridge Trust has included a question about climate change in funding applications.
- Organisations need to reduce their own carbon footprint so they can engage in the debate and build constituencies with legitimacy.
- City Bridge wrote to the Charity Commission to explore how documents like the 'Hallmarks of Effective Charities' or SORP, or even legislation could promote action. This is one possibility that would not cost much.
- Produce a guide for non-environmental organisations on how they can engage in a meaningful way with climate change issues without shifting their purpose. The guide would include a narrative to make the issue relevant to that audience, offer ideas and possibilities beyond internal action and signpost to other resources. Carnegie UK is keen to engage with others on convening focus group discussions on this.
- Hold up to four big conferences for a wider group than the usual suspects to examine current practice and the implications of a low carbon world. Give interested organisations the opportunity to think through opportunities for engaging, funding and lobbying. Hold this over three days, giving proper time to work the issues through.
- There are whole ranges of groups potentially easily mobilised. This can be stimulated by putting significant money into individual organisations able to lead their sectors.
- Hold an event that provides a vision of life in 20 years when we are dealing with the impacts of climate change. Perhaps based on the model of the event held for US funders showing how global trade policy affected every one of their grantmaking interests. This would be a welcome opportunity for organisations to step back from the day to day to think about the future. Civil society organisations have the skills to do this, not just in a single issue way, but holistically. This needs to be clever too to manage messages e.g. if the prison population is likely to increase then this should reinforce an agenda opposed to migration or fuel fear of crime.
- Hold workshops with the top 5 most promising areas in the sector to explore in a meaningful way the connections between climate change and charitable purpose. Build on this to make the connections for government. So if the exercise examines criminal justice, take the findings to the Home Office and tell them how it relates to e.g. the Civil Contingencies Committee.
- Involve different civil society organisations in changing individual behaviours relating to the environment.
- Create a national group of CEOs of civil society organisations to influence policy makers and businesses.
- Consider supporting wider use of environmental kite marks (as with Investors in People). These do make organisations take time away from the coal face to examine what you do.
- Make use of approaches like We Are What We Do and The Green Thing that are engaging new audiences and helping people to become part of a visible community that is committed to this.
- There is less merit in traditional audit approach where someone comes and says you need recycling bins. We should have changed the lightbulbs five years ago. At best, we should give people the money and just say do it.
- We should engage the Office of the Third Sector.

We need to incorporate thinking on models of change and how to use structures more aggressively to make things happen more quickly. How do individuals get converted? Al Gore managed to flick the psychological switch for many. Any initiative should develop organisations' own motivation for action, rather than be pressed on them.

We need to be able to test any initiatives against the criterion that it will accelerate the response of politicians.

Matthew Smerdon