

LESSONS LEARNED

Grassroots Environmentalism and the Demise of Economies of Scale

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In the cloud forests of the Intag region of Ecuador, grassroots environmentalists have for decades resisted mining exploration by international companies. In lieu of large-scale resource extraction, they argue for environmental sustainability, equity, solidarity, food sovereignty, security, and a balance of individual and collective rights. In the words of Mariano Guachagmira, a farmer and activist from the community of Cerro Pelado, “What we must do is care for our needs—not for those who wish to take away our riches. If we do this we will leave a good inheritance. If we look after the soil, the air, the water, the forest, we can count on a secure future, not only for one family, but for the entire country.”

Intag groups have successfully advocated for expanding health care and education and have launched myriad small-scale, community-based enterprises, including ecotourism, crafts, and coffee production.

In times such as these, when economic bases around the world have been shaken, grassroots environmental action is not a footnote to development. It is a critical survival strategy. Thus, increasing philanthropic resources that make it to the grassroots is an important way not only to protect the environment but also to ensure economic survival.

Recognizing and Connecting with Grassroots Groups

The Greengrants Alliance of Funds has supported hundreds of communities around the world through making small grants directly to grassroots groups that enable environmental action. In our discussions with these groups we hear a message of opportunity as well as of trepidation about economic hardship to come. Because of declining production and investment, such groups feel less immediate pressure from large-scale environmentally destructive industries, but they also know they will bear a large part of the burdens left behind.

What precious dollars remain in the philanthropic pot can be very effective if they are directed to the initiatives of grassroots groups. Of course, we need to continue to address environmental issues from all



Photo: A. Scott Dupree

Yayasan Karang Widya organic gardens, West Java, Indonesia

sides, but strengthening our support for small-scale, grassroots activism is one of the roles we should play over the course of this economic crisis.

Grassroots environmental support must be thoughtful and strategic if we are to advance healthy local processes. Knowing how to recognize and connect with grassroots groups is a key step. Along these lines, some lessons we have learned are:

- Look for smaller-scale activities, often obscured by economies of scale, which offer viable local alternatives for economic development and environmental health;

- Promote the ability to adapt and innovate so much in demand in the current climate;
- Encourage grassroots dialogues that help communities to rethink environmentally destructive practices.

Promoting Organic Farming...and Much More

This combination of promoting viable alternatives, adaptation, and social dialogue is illustrated, for example, by a small-scale organic farming and education project in Java, Indonesia. Despite having some of the richest soils in the world, Javanese farmers make considerable use of pesticides and fertilizers. From the point of view of one local group, extension agents, universities, and markets have colluded in the perpetration of a chemical-based system that must produce large quantities of crops for both local consumption and export in order to be profitable.

Several years ago, the group began to ask how they could help farmers create organic farming alternatives to the agro-industrial techniques they felt had become almost unchallengeable. Their answer was to reach out to street children and unemployed youth who were unable to find work in the formal economy. They opened a school to provide them with a three-to-six month training course in organic farming methods—which was largely unavailable at Indonesian universities. Direct experience in working the land gave the youth confidence and encouraged them to innovate with new techniques.

One of the important results of this initiative was that these youth found employment from farmers across the island seeking to break free of debt-reliant farming methods. The move toward organic farming has thus stimulated new local jobs, brought innovation and sustainable methods to food production, and contributed to expanding a dialogue across the island about development and the environment.

Advantages of Grassroots Economies

Governments are responding to the current economic crisis by investing in the rehabilitation and restructuring of banks and manufacturing industries. But we must also fortify the grassroots.

Grassroots groups offer resilience, resources, and assets that should not be underutilized, all of which will determine the extent to which we can find new balances and establish economies that have more diverse foundations. Rampant development, profit at



Yayasan Karang Widya organic farming school, West Java, Indonesia

Photo: A. Scott Dupree

any cost, and short-sightedness have driven us to the edge of a cliff. The real effects are being felt by real people in many places who are losing low-paying jobs that barely supported them to begin with, only to find themselves discarded by factory-based and resource-hogging economies.

Community groups do not have the option of moving elsewhere in the world when local resources are depleted. In the face of continued challenges, their resilience is based on the determined commitment to the health of their communities. They tend to make sound decisions over the use of local resources, thinking in the longer term and concerned with both sustainability and justice. They can, of course, also make mistakes, but such mistakes are much less damaging when they are not magnified through the lens of economies of scale. These mistakes are also less common when there are strong community-based institutions in place to make decisions and manage resources.

Community groups' smaller scale leads to better understanding and management of the local environment, provides models that emphasize sustainability, and helps real people to find shelter from the economic storm. These groups spark the creativity we need to weather the economic downturn and address unsustainable resource use for the long term. Given common cause, grassroots groups can be at the forefront of finding solutions. We need these laboratories of alternative ideas and forges of solidarity if we are to survive rough terrain on the road ahead and arrive with sustained and rejuvenated environments. ■

The Greengrants Alliance of Funds (www.greengrants.org) is a partnership of nongovernmental, nonprofit organizations composed of the Center for Socio-Environmental Support (Brazil), Global Greengrants Fund (United States), Samdhana Institute (Indonesia and Philippines), and Solidarity in Action Fund (Mexico).