

Groningen, NL

Building a Constituency

A Strategy to empower Science Shops

by Dr. Maureen E. Butter,
Science Shop Biology, Groningen University, Netherlands



As working for marginal groups incurs the danger of being marginalized ourselves, I'd suggest to strengthen our position by strengthening our political impact. The Science Shops' greatest strength is that it generates knowledge at the local level. As such knowledge frequently addresses the implementation gap between national and international decision-making, it follows that such knowledge is highly relevant at national and international policy level. Yet, at the moment our results hardly have any political impact beyond the local level. Below, I will propose a strategy to achieve a stronger position, benefiting both the Science Shops and the community groups we serve.

Having worked over 20 years as coordinator for the Science Shop Biology at the Groningen University, the frequently-encountered complaints about funding problems, low status and lack of support hardly surprise me. Groups without the power and the means to fund their own research needs are not exactly notorious for funding prospects. Although it is good for a university's reputation to support one or more Science Shops, they will not want us big, unless there is money coming along. Now, where to find it? Current Science Shops' lobby relies heavily on the science and society part of the 7th Framework, but real Science Shop work is not about the ethics of decision-making, it is about the real problems of real people. I expect that philosophers and science & society research groups will benefit from the science and society part, and probably the Living Knowledge Network itself. On behalf of my clients, I would be more interested in the money for environment and health research, especially vulnerable groups such as children, which will also be part of the 7th Framework.

Money for community-based research has to come from public funds or charitable foundations, and there should be a good reason to channel it towards Science Shops. That means that we have to demonstrate our value, by making a stronger impact at society. We can do that, by engaging in partnership with NGOs that use our information in their lobby at the international level. Not just any NGO, but NGOs that serve the same constituency the Science Shops do AND have an impact at the international level.

NGOs and the international political arena

For the past seven years I have been involved in the international lobby of NGOs, mostly at global UN level but also in the regional and EU processes. There is an international po-

litical agenda, following the major UN conferences. Most comprehensive is Agenda 21 from the 1992 Rio Conference on sustainable development, meaning both environmental and social sustainability. Processes like the Beijing Conference on the position of women, the Cairo Conference on population and development, the Social Summit etcetera belong to the social sustainability track, the POPs convention, the Environment for Europe process, the WHO-led Health and Environment processes and the World Water Forum are more relevant to the environmental track. At the WSSD in Johannesburg 2002, the Rio agenda was updated and a time schedule was set for evaluation and implementation. Since the major UN processes follow a cycle of 10 years, with a mid-term evaluation, the CSD (Commission for Sustainable Development, the UN agency responsible for implementation of the Johannesburg summit) has scheduled its annual meetings in some detail for the first 5 years and more generally for the second 5 years. The EU agenda is scheduled by the European Commission, but it often works in synergy with the UN agenda.

NGOs with consultative status are involved in preparatory meetings and are invited to participate at the main events. Near the end of the preparatory process, large coalitions are formed, as NGOs are only allowed a limited opportunity for interventions. The larger NGOs nowadays are highly professionalized organizations with either their own research facilities or excellent contacts with reputed research institutions. Their strategy is to target specific campaigns to the political agenda and to collect information about implementation gaps and emerging issues by employing consultants. After the conference, they drop the subject and rush on to the next topic. They have to, their funding depends on the political agenda. Moreover, most NGOs cannot plan ahead for long, because there is generally little time between the (annual) decision on their project funding and carrying out the project.

The role of research

The research agenda too follows the political agenda, but with considerable delay. For example, at the WHO-led ministerial conference on health and environment (June 2004, Budapest), health of children was the central topic. Parallel to and in synergy with the Budapest process, the EU arrived at an Environment and Health Action Plan, the SCALE initiative,

based on Scientific evidence, focused on Children, meant to raise Awareness, improve the situation by use of Legal instruments and ensure a continual Evaluation of the progress made. This process involved four DGs: environment, public health, research and economic affairs. The main result from SCALE is a research and monitoring effort, for which no funding was available at the time of the decision. During the follow-up meeting in December 2004, member states agreed to reserve the necessary funding. Which means that results will be available in 5 years time or longer. When the subject is on the agenda again, which may take 10 years or more, the by then outdated results will probably serve as input for the next conference.

Opportunities for the Science Shops

Science shops have one major asset: they address the local level, the place where the real problems are, many of which are addressed in international decision making. As the political field is compartmented, politicians and NGOs alike are compartmented. They specialize in a certain field, for example energy and scarce resources. They may know everything about energy and nothing about health. That's why we are stuck with energy and materials efficient houses, poorly ventilated and made from recycled materials, that are not exactly conducive to good health. Similarly, the Budapest Conference stressed the need for adequate house warming in poor regions, without any reference to the type of energy preferably employed. A good recipe for future problems!

In real life, that is, at the local level, environment, health, infrastructure, social rights and economic opportunities are all intertwined, as we from the Science Shops are well aware. The implication is, that local level knowledge, addressing the contingencies between sectors, in so far as they are not yet an issue, have the best chance to yield politically relevant information. For example the intersection between gender, health and environment is interesting as well as under-researcher, addressing both social rights, mechanisms and outcomes in terms of health and environment. But we need NGOs to bring our results to the political arena.

Suitable partner NGOs

The natural partners for the international Science Shop network are NGO networks that basically serve the same constituency as we do: community groups. They should be interested in issues of integration, thus cover a broad array of issues. They should have a great number of members, involved with the local level. And they should have influence on international decision-making. I invited two networks meeting this specification to the Seville Conference, ANPED and WECF. ANPED, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, is a democratic network of over 100 local and national NGOs, national NGO networks, and environment, development and consumer groups. ANPED works to empower Northern Civil Society in creating and protecting sustainable communities and societies world wide. It provides a platform for its member organizations, where

they can identify common concerns, take advantage of each others expertise and develop a common position. It helps to build capacity in a broad range of issues and it represents its members in processes of international decision-making.

WECF, Women in Europe for a Common Future, is a similar network of 63 organizations in 27 countries, focusing on achieving real improvement in the daily life of citizens. They adopt a strong gender perspective and are very much aware, that local sustainability involves a lot of integrating effort, linking up issues of health, environmental degradation, poverty and economic opportunities in a host of settings. Apart from the advocacy and capacity building activities, which are quite similar to ANPED's, they also engage in a broad range of practical projects with local partners, like ecosanitation in Rumania and Ukraine, improving local democracy in Russia, organic agriculture in Uzbekistan and many others. They often take local NGOs to the political platform (for example the UN World Water Forum), thereby enormously empowering these NGOs.

NGOs like WECF and ANPED can help to get us more political support, to empower researchers doing relevant work by inviting them to high level meetings and to raise funds for specific projects. But even more important: they can have an impact to the research agenda, since the research agenda follows the policy agenda. So, if we think some type of research is important, for example green technology in a variety of settings (urban, rural, Eastern European, arctic, U.S. and EU), we can do some student projects in these areas and ask WECF and ANPED to lobby for green technology at the CSD and the Environment for Europe agenda. That will place us in an excellent position for larger projects as soon as it is in the research programmers.

Developing common ground: the next conference

The next conference provides an excellent opportunity to build such partnerships. It should not only address the current research policy agenda, but two or three other policy platforms as well. It should not only involve a skill share and networking between Science Shops, but also a skill share between NGOs, and between NGOs and researchers.

We should not only aim at a joint research agenda, but also to making joint policy recommendations for the research agenda and the political platforms in which the NGOs are involved. We should aim at the long term, and target persistent problems, as well as cross-sectoral issues. Important too, is taking the disadvantaged groups seriously, which means incorporating their experiences in our research.

Contact: Dr. Maureen E. Butter, Science Shop Biology, Groningen University, Netherlands, M.E.Butter@rug.nl

