

# Living in a Time of Change

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Chris Church qualified as an environmental biologist in 1977 and since then has been active in the environment field. After working for Friends of the Earth UK he now works independently. He acted as UK coordinator for the Earth Summit Tree of Life project, worked as an advisor to the BBC-TV One World season of programmes and launched the Environmental Law Foundation. He is currently Development Director for Global Action Plan - UK which aims to empower individuals to take effective environmental action in their homes, workplaces and communities.

*Individuals are at the forefront of change whether it is through political or economic pressure or by example. In the past, particularly where environmental and development issues are concerned, individual effort has often been portrayed as eccentric or even dangerous. Yet many of the changes which have taken place over the last twenty years must be accredited to the efforts of individuals who have demanded through positive action, that those in a position of power take note of their views and instigate change.*

As nation states and international organisations seem to become ever more powerful, it is easy to forget how many of the key social changes throughout history have been down to the inspiration and commitment of just a few people.

As the power and scope of the international bodies reach further and further, so an individual now has access to ever more information and can make direct contact with other people around the world in a way that would have been inconceivable fifty years ago. Rather than being swept away, the power of individuals to bring about change is as great or greater than it was when the United Nations was created.

The growth of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been one of the most important social developments of this century. In 1900 there were just a handful of independent groups working for change at an international level – now there are over 5000. There is no doubt that their influence on policy, especially in the fields of environment and development, has been profound. In the northern nations citizen action groups have scored some impressive victories using a variety of tactics.

The first major international victory for the environmental groups – the campaign to save the great whales of the world – started at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment. That campaign brought together coordinated political lobbying, high-profile direct action, action by workers in whaling-product industries demanding the development of alternatives, and individual consumers, who would no longer buy the products that contributed to the destruction.

These tactics have been repeated again and again.

Action in the south has been every bit as impressive. Groups who have lacked the financial resources, and in some cases, the multi-party systems that make effective political lobbying possible, have built people-based campaigns that through their simplicity and commitment have caught the attention of the world's media. From high-profile activities such as the Narmada Dam campaign or the Altamira gathering of the indigenous peoples of the Brazilian rainforest to lower-profile urban or rural development projects, activities across the poorer parts of the world have shown how individuals everywhere can mobilise and be effective.

This flowering of activity was never clearer than at the Global Forum when groups of every shape and size imaginable came together to monitor the Earth Summit, to plan joint campaigns and above all to learn more about each other. Out of the Forum, and out of the flawed but crucially important declarations of the Summit has emerged a new basis for action. With that comes a whole new range of challenges, both for individuals and NGOs.

NGOs need to develop better ways of working together and to look beyond policy change to effective implementation. They also need, in many cases, to examine how they can help their individual supporters to become more effective. For here is one of the challenges for individuals: as NGOs become larger, more effective and more concerned with the global agenda, so less attention is paid to resolving the more mundane day-to-day problems. Some individuals now find themselves being offered little to do in support of their chosen cause other than to provide funds.

Yet the lesson that has been learnt from so many effective development projects is that involving people at all stages is crucial to success. When this does not happen so people may become alienated and feel unable to contribute. And many do feel distant from the need for change – in western nations never more than a small part of the population has been actively involved in campaigning on environment or development issues. There are passive



supporters who will donate or may change their purchasing habits, but the radical agenda that is emerging out of the Rio meetings will need more active citizens than ever before, especially in those rich nations where patterns of resource use must change.

So why do people not get involved? It is easy to point to lack of time or funds, but at the root of much of the apathy is a feeling that it is all someone else's problem. People may refuse to tackle a problem because:

**The Government will take care of it**

It is what we pay our taxes for, after all ... In fact the experience of the last twenty years

is that governments only take action on environmental issues when pushed into it by public opinion. Despite the recognition of the growing importance of these issues they rarely get far up the agenda, and in battles between short-term profit and longer-term environmental health, the short-term all too often wins out. But it has been said, and shown to be true on many occasions, that when the people lead, the leaders follow.

For any individual, helping maintain the pressure on their government is one of the most important ways to secure a sustainable environment.

**The NGOs will take care of it**

There is no doubt that the environment and development groups have won some important battles, changed many damaging policies and are widely trusted by the public. The damage would be far worse were it not for those victories, but the destruction continues. More fundamentally, there is the challenge of putting those new policies to work and that needs action at the community and individual level.

Agenda 21 may have set new national targets; local agenda 21s are now needed for communities around the world that can involve everyone in turning them from words into action.

**The United Nations will take care of it**

Some of these problems – desertification or climate change – seem so large that it is hard to see how any one nation can make a difference. The idea that the UN can mobilise the resources needed for effective change is a tempting one for many, but the states that make up the UN all have their own agenda, and its ability to act is constrained by those agendas. The UN can act as the focus for the transfer and spread of information and ideas, and over the next few years a key role must be to ensure that its member governments give due priority to citizen-based initiatives.

There is one more idea that many people cling on to:

**The planet will take care of itself**

The planet has indeed looked after itself for millions of years, but in the last few decades humanity has done damage that will take centuries to repair. If this process continues much longer the damage will be irreversible – for that reason alone the next few years are crucial ones. A person may get ill because of disease but often it is because of an unhealthy lifestyle. Restoring the planet to good health means accepting responsibility for the unhealthy behaviour by people around the world that has caused the problems.

At the root of all these excuses for inaction is one more underlying problem, fear. Be it fear of the unknown, fear that things will change for the worse or simply fear of change, for many individuals that fear outweighs the concerns they may have about the long-term future for their community or their planet. Fear can paralyse: in society it is

manifest in a desire to focus on safeguarding individual interest and in so doing to encourage isolation.

In America and Western Europe that isolation has been particularly emphasised by an increasingly car-dependent culture that leads to widely-scattered communities with no central focus; the images of poverty and environmental destruction that enter uninvited through the television often reinforce that fear and isolation. In poorer nations the environmental crisis itself can create isolation – Kenyan writer Celestous Juma tells of an Africa “full of lonely peasants; millions of people alienated from one another by the destruction of nature.”

If individuals are to use their power for change to good effect, then part of that power must go to overcoming that numbing isolation and developing new ways of collective and participative working – ways in which individuality is recognised and valued but in which the whole must be much greater than the parts. The ultimate lesson of all this is that it is, in the last resort, up to all of us – an over-repeated truism, but one that will not go away.

Organisations, from the United Nations or the World Bank down to a tiny village, are usually slow to change. When change does come it is usually due to people – the only effective agents of positive change. The change can be brought about by political or economic pressure, but it is sometimes easy to forget the third means of change – change by example.

Politicians, business managers and community leaders all have a key role to play: not through pontificating about the need for change or about what should be done, but by involving themselves in the change and by being seen to take an active lead. At a local level this means not merely attending the first planting of a community woodland, but putting time aside to make a regular

The very concept of leadership has become devalued during the last century: the leader as one who leads, who takes risks who is exposed but in so doing sets a powerful example is a rare model these days. Today’s leader is more likely to be seen surrounded

by aides walking from the limousine to the boardroom to take decisions affecting the lives of people he or she will never meet.

The starting point for any individual keen to bring about change has been and will be, time and time again, to reclaim that role of leadership from the administrators, the directors and the managers. This is no easy task, for any high-profile leader who challenges the status quo is bound to be a target for criticism and mockery. In rich nations in the 1970s environmentalists were portrayed as eccentric, dangerous or frequently both, yet the first faltering policies of some of those pioneers are now embedded in international policy.

Any individual can take on leadership at this level: this can be done through initiating a practical project or a new organisation, through bringing new energy and direction into existing structures or by using any of the media tools to publicise issues and ideas. The ultimate function of any such leader-by-example must of course be two-fold: to make themselves redundant by solving the problem that they set out to tackle, and most importantly, to inspire and empower new leaders.

In the aftermath of the Summit, all organisations from governments downwards face new challenges. But whatever their agenda, one priority for those organisations committed to making sustainable policies a reality must be to encourage and empower those individuals who support them to take a positive lead in bringing change to their communities. The real question is how can that best be done?

The need for participation has already been mentioned, as have some of the personal barriers that prevent that participation. The most effective way in which organisations can help remove those barriers is by making sure that the participation is not a top-down directed exercise, but that all concerned come together at the same level and that the national or international bodies recognise the needs and values of the communities where they are working. Change will only be successful if it meets the perceived needs of those affected by it.

The Earth Summit itself stood accused of failing on this issue: it was suggested by

southern nations that the central items on the agenda – forests, biodiversity and climate change – represented the priorities of the richer nations, and that the root causes of environmental degradation and poverty were being ignored. Hopefully this lesson is starting to permeate international decision-making processes: there is now a need to apply the same process at a local level throughout the world.

A good model for this has been the Primary Environmental Care (PEC) programme developed by OXFAM and other groups. This approach has three key elements: popular empowerment, securing basic rights and needs, and caring for the environment. Real lasting environmental improvement will only come about by dealing with the first two issues. The logic behind it is inevitable and not surprising: what is perhaps surprising is the way in which it has been ignored in so many cases.

PEC attempts to integrate these concerns and has already demonstrated an impressive track record, from rubber tappers developing extractive reserves in Amazonian forest to NGOs working with the landless poor in Bangladesh. OXFAM’s role in these projects is to supply resources and education to help with both environmental care and social reform.

It is also clear that PEC is as relevant in the northern nations as in the south – in fact the need to emphasise basic rights may be even more important in some northern industrial cities that are drifting into decay after decades of prosperity. Despite high levels of consumption, millions in European and American inner city areas face long-term unemployment and relative poverty yet lack the community organisation that can stimulate self-help. In poorer countries it is often different. Dominican Republic activist Dionisia Acosta puts it succinctly: “We, the poor, have to organise because we have no alternative. The poor must help the poor and hope that society will change.” Primary Environmental Care offers an important tool for effective urban regeneration.

Even the most motivated individuals can drive themselves into the ground in attempting to improve their environment if no support is available. How best to deliver



that support is the key to people-centred sustainable development, but the first step must be a commitment to genuinely provide support rather than management. In this way small innovative projects that may not fit in with some centrally generated strategy can nevertheless come to fruition to meet the needs of those who initiated them.

Good examples can be seen in certain Latin American *favelas* or shanty-towns. Some authorities see *favelas* as unplanned problem areas to be bulldozed in the name of planned developments: the more far-sighted are now, where appropriate, encouraging and

supporting the initiators of these new communities by providing water, sewage, health care and other essential services, and in this way encouraging the self-development from shanty-town to suburb.

Another pioneering way forward in Amazonia has been the work of the Gaia Foundation where a small central fundraising office works with a network of individuals who can in turn work with villagers on developing and funding 'micro-projects' – small scale developments that meet the needs of communities but are often too small to qualify for funding from

larger agencies. The Foundation does not run projects but has an impressive record of assessing requests for support and providing funding on a time-scale that would be impossible for larger agencies.

Standing back and letting innovators innovate is one way forward: another is to provide a framework for that energy. In the wake of the Summit many nations are starting to develop national targets for sustainability and looking to see how these targets can be met. Yet national targets of this nature may be meaningless to community organisations struggling with their own problems or to individuals looking to make changes in their lives but unsure of what to do for the best. An effective way to stimulate individual action will be turning those targets into a local framework for action. Communities can then see how resolving their local priorities also contributes to national objectives.

One organisation – Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP) – is already working on this in Europe and North America. Individuals are encouraged to examine how they can cut waste and limit consumption with the aim of meeting specific targets – regional and national offices assist by running a feedback system that shows each individual what they have saved (be it litres of water or tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>) and the total amount saved. Through projects like this, those people around the world who made pledges of personal action for the Tree of Life at the Global Forum will be able to monitor their own progress while seeing how individual drops really do fill the global bucket.

From cutting wasteful consumption in the richer regions to planning strategies for survival in the poorest ones, individuals are at the forefront of change. Yet personal contributions are often ignored, not least because the mechanisms do not exist to record or value them. Just as women's labour in agricultural communities throughout the world has been consistently undervalued, so little recognition has been given to the voluntary efforts of countless individuals. If empowerment is to mean anything it must involve not just helping people plan to take action but also helping them to see how they have made a difference.