

## **“Tackling Barriers to Participation and Engagement”**

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The notion of sustainable development is one which necessarily reaches across the social, economic, and environmental domains. It is therefore imperative that efforts at actualising sustainable development are equally wide-ranging, cutting across various sectors of society to include the cooperation of all relevant stakeholders. Governing for sustainability, in other words, demands the meaningful participation of all members of human society.

But while the need for public involvement in formal policy-making is one that has been recognised in Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration (and further reflected in Principles 20, 21 and 22), having also been identified as a ‘fundamental prerequisite’ for achieving sustainability in *Agenda 21*, major barriers to participation and engagement remain. This is especially true in most parts of the developing world, where rampant corruption, weak rule of law, and an endemic lack of transparency in government have meant that access to information and decision-making processes are largely closed off to the public. In the region where I work (China and mainland Southeast Asia), governments here continue to be highly averse – and even hostile – to civil society activism. The murder of environmental activist Chut Wutty in Cambodia and the recent disappearance of Sombat Somphone in Laos serve as potent reminders of how, even when there is a desire to engage, channels of participation remain greatly restricted by the state. That said, one also cannot take for granted the existence of public willingness to engage in the first place. Lack of awareness on how broader environmental problems can directly affect one’s community and livelihood, not to mention the threat of physical harm in more extreme cases, can work to deter active involvement from the broader public. This is, of course, not to mention other structural impediments like gender inequality. Directly linked to social justice and environmental rights concerns, it is frequently noted how society cannot afford to marginalise the role of women in advancing the cause of sustainable development within their families and communities. Yet despite how, for instance, in different parts of Southeast Asia women have contributed considerably to fisheries and aquaculture, moving from recognition to actual policies that enable women to play a greater, more ‘visible’ role has proven difficult, largely due to embedded social norms and value structures that under-appreciate the extent of women’s contributions to local development and natural resource management.

So how are we to tackle such permissive barriers to bring about more inclusive governance structures for a sustainable future? What would be some

practical pathways forward? And how can we ensure that the outcomes and impact of public participation and local engagement are themselves *sustainable*? What mechanisms should governments and the international community seek to revise or put in place? While I cannot purport to answer any of these in full, I would like to start off the discussion by suggesting three possible pathways:

1. Cultivating transnational advocacy networks – that is, knowledge and action-oriented networks that encourage learning from the experiences of NGOs and civil society groups in other parts of the world, and which can help to provide moral and material support to such organisations operating in countries where socio-political circumstances are unfavourable to grassroots activism. In the case of mainland Southeast Asia, for example, there are signs suggesting how a nascent transnational advocacy network within the region has been critical to raising awareness as well as to mobilising and assisting local resistance against ecologically-hazardous resource development projects.
2. Disseminating practical knowledge which contributes to proactive – as opposed to reactive – participation; that is to say, communities are mobilised to act not simply on the basis of problems that have already emerged, but in a way which pre-empts and prevents future problems from arising. Here, both formal and non-formal forms of education constitute an important means through which effective community engagement can be encouraged and facilitated. One good example of this is Living River Siam’s village-driven ‘Thai Baan research’ programme, which is succeeding in reintroducing the value of indigenous learning to local water resources management, as well as in forging stronger collective sentiments of environmental responsibility. Indeed, a common complaint heard among grassroots NGOs is how pro-sustainability policy frameworks at the international level end up having little traction at the local level, where communities are more receptive to actual, on-the-ground projects that embody sustainable development *practices*.
3. Mainstreaming positive action in sustainable development initiatives, explicitly for the sake of those groups prone to marginalisation (i.e. women and indigenous peoples), so as to highlight the critical role they play in ecological governance at the national and local levels. A key component here would be programmes aimed at capacity-building for women and indigenous populations to build up their confidence to participate as equal and constructive members of their respective communities.