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IDENTIFYING THE MAIN PROBLEMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS: LESSONS FROM ROMANIA

Constantin-Marius Apostoaie¹, Ruxandra Ionce²

Key words: environment; non-governmental organizations; financial capacity; political parties; Romania.

Abstract. Romanian environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGO) have to deal with a lot of issues when performing their activities, related in general to their form of organization, financial capacity, unspecialized workforce, over bureaucratic administration, political parties' unwillingness to cooperate, or mass-media's general indifference. Moreover, most public representatives (e.g., political parties) seldom (or never) ask for the ENGOs' opinions when designing environmental policies. Within this context, this paper aims to map the most important issues or challenges (in terms of financial capacity and with regard to the public sphere) that Romanian ENGOs have to deal with. The methodological approach is a mixed one (having a qualitative as well as a quantitative component). The study embodies a questionnaire based survey applied on 48 Romanian ENGOs. Unfortunately, the instability of financial resources still tops the Romanian ENGOs' list of issues. Moreover, the data reaffirmed the indifference of the majority of Romania's political parties towards protecting the environment (leaving ENGOs out of the political decision making process).

Introduction

As environmental degradation still occurs around the world, with significant and sometimes irreversible consequences on current and future generations, the society looks towards the public sphere for solutions to improve the quality of the environment. When these actors don't seem to react, we often ask for assistance from the civil society representatives. Within the sphere of environmental

¹ CERNESIM Environmental Research Center, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Iasi, Romania; marius.apostoaie@uaic.ro

² Association for Democratic and Ecological Initiative (EUDEMOS), Suceava, Romania; ruxandra.ionce@gmail.com

movement, non-governmental organizations or NGOs prove to be the most prominent voices (also known as ENGOs). In fact, for the European NGOs, protecting the environment is the most dominant area of interest, followed by CSR and health matters (SIGWatch, 2008). Their continuous and relentless lobbying and advocating for environmental protection brought visible changes in the public sentiment and convinced businesses, governments and decisional forums to listen to their demands. No matter their size and forms of creation and collaboration, many ENGOs play an important role in advocating for a better environmental quality.

No matter their various and diverse histories, profiles, structures, functions or missions, ENGOs around the world aren't perfect and their activities aren't carried out flawlessly. In fact, ENGOs have to deal with a whole lot of issues related to their nature (as non-profit organization), their main concern (protecting the environment, which sometimes comes in contradiction with the excessively orientation towards profit of some big companies), their lack of public support (from an over bureaucratic administration or from unsympathetic politicians) and sometimes the indifference of all others (mass-media, citizens, academia etc.).

Within this context, the purpose of this paper is to map the most important issues, challenges or problems (in terms of financial capacity and with regard to the public sphere) that Romanian ENGOs have to deal with. This article contributes to the growing debate on the importance of environmental non-governmental organizations in designing and implementing environmental policies (with a particular focus on the case of Romania).

The remaining of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 unpacks the notion of ENGO by presenting a brief literature review, section 3 offers insights into the civil society and the ENGOs in Romania, section 4 describes the method, section 5 reports on the results and section 6 presents conclusions and recommendations.

1. Current state of the art on ENGOs

Nongovernmental organizations or NGOs are institutions that exist within the sphere of the *civil society* (and the majority of the existing literature is in line with this statement), a concept whose meaning has long been debated by scholars, especially in recent years. When speaking about the civil society and its components, one must consider a wide range of variables that define the relation between the state and the society. As also pointed out by Gray (1999), when researching on the Vietnamese NGOs, the civil society 'is most often used without reference to the debate which has regarded over its proper definition and use'.

Diamond (1999, p. 226) makes a distinction between the civil society and the civic community. He defines civil society as being 'the realm of organised social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules'

(Diamond, 1999, p. 221). According to Meidinger (2001) civil society, in its broadest sense, has been characterized as a sphere of social life that is public but excludes government activities. Given that the focus of this research is not on the civil society, but on the NGOs, the authors do not intend to settle any of the essentialist debates on civil society; instead the paper adopts an existing position, that of Linz and Stepan (1996, p. 7) which state that the civil society is ‘an area of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests’.

No matter how the civil society is defined, the term itself is generally used to encompass persons, institutions, and organizations which usually assume a goal of advancing or expressing a common purpose appealing to various ideas, actions, and demands on governments (Cohen and Arato, 1992). As to the exact components of the civil society, one can say that the membership is quite diverse, ranging from individuals to religious and academic institutions to issue-focused groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The *environmental movement* (phenomena well analysed, among others, by Jiménez, 2007; Carmin and Jehlicka, 2005; Koutalakis, 2004; Cellarius and Staddon, 2002; Keck and Sikkink, 1998) has grown in importance in the last half century, especially after the publication of *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962), impacting today on businesses, government, and the general public through various channels. The ‘riders of the environmental wave’ appeal to ‘moral suasion’ and using various civil society structures as ‘vessels’ address fundamental beliefs and values in order to bring a change in the way we handle the environment. Individuals, various forms of civic organizations – from small informal neighbourhood groups to larger formal organizations –, research institutions, governments, businesses, and international regulatory organizations have all come forward and assumed an active role in environmental issues.

Within the sphere of environmental movement, NGOs proved in general to be the most prominent voices. In fact, for the European NGOs, protecting the environment is the most dominant area of interest, followed by CSR and health matters (SIGWatch, 2008). Their continuous and relentless lobbying and advocating for environmental protection brought visible changes in the public sentiment and convinced businesses, governments and decisional forums to listen to their demands. No matter their size and forms of creation and collaboration, many ENGOs continue to play an important role in advocating for a better environmental quality (for a detailed analysis see Sale, 1993).

2. Civil society and the NGOs in Romania

Prior to 1989, the third sector of Romania's socialist economy was almost inexistent and authorized forms of establishment were out of everyone's reach. Now, more than 25 years later, although the situation has evolved and Romania's civil society is becoming more of a like living organism, there are areas where the synergies between some of its members and the public and private partners are shadowed by the historical background.

Once democracy was rediscovered, Romania's civil society blossomed in the form of political parties, free syndicates and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Grouped under various names like nongovernmental or non-profit sector, civil society, social economy, all these members of the third sector are involved in various fields ranging from education, social protection or culture to environmental protection. Nevertheless, the process of democratization brings not only freedom and opportunities, but also challenges and competition. This is way short after their launch, NGO's faced a harsh competition from other members of the civil society, especially from political parties which became a more attractive form of engagement in the state affairs. This was also stated by Pickvance (1999) who noticed that the population turned away from social movements and NGOs during the emergence of a new democratizing political system. But once this system stabilizes and reaches a certain level of maturity, it is expected for NGO's to grow in influence (O'Brien, 2009).

Civil society organizations have evolved in the past two decades and have become one of the most active players in environmental activism. Being backed up by external financing – which is often the driving force behind non-governmental organizations – many of them have successfully achieved their goals by using the tools they were provided (general flexibility and creativity in the process of law implementation and policy-making) in order to make visible changes. UN's environmental performance reviews clearly show a significant evolution of the NGOs' roles (Hassan and Forhad, 2013). The possibility of other international organizations to become involved both as leaders and as partners in Romania was a valuable impetus for the further development of domestic NGOs. Romania's accession to the EU was probably the most influential event, adding more responsibilities and more power to the civil society organizations. EU's focus on NGO participation in policy and decision making has generated a continuous shift of power from government bodies to the civil society. The NGOs have become the "working class in implementing European standards of environmental protection" especially after 2007, the year Romania became a EU member (Fagan and Carmin, 2011). Not only were the NGOs provided with more financial support but also with a much clearer and homogenous set of goals.

In the majority of the European post-socialist countries, the rise of democratic systems of government was soon accompanied by a growth in the nongovernmental sector (including environmental actors). Within this context, the newly borne environmental NGO's had to face the challenges that a rising democracy poses, among which *self-administration*. Among the works that raised the issue of '*self-administration*' and considered it in their analysis along with other challenges that ENGOS have to face, one could look into: Jancar-Webster (1998), Green (1999), Lagerspetz *et al.* (2002), Carmin and Fagan (2010) as well as other important works.

3. Methodology

3.1. Premises

In 2008, a study was performed by the Soros Educational Centre (CES) with the financial support of the Coca-Cola HBC. The study entitled "Environmental Organization in Romania. National Evaluation Report" mapped the situation in the environmental nongovernmental sector in Romania and most important, identified the main problems that ENGOS are facing. Among the results, two interesting facts stand out:

a) the *lack of financial resources* tops the list of issues that Romanian ENGOS have to deal with (Cosmeanu, 2008, p. 7);

b) there are serious *problems in the relations with representatives of the public sphere*, given by their: distrust in ENGOS (28%), lack in communication and transparency (24%), lack of interest in real environmental issues (16%) or just plain 'bad habits' (corruption, arrogance, greed, insincerity etc.).

Another interesting study performed in the same year confirmed the fragile relation between ENGOS and the public sphere (in Romania). The research was conducted by Terra Millennium III Foundation and Alma-Ro Association (2008), with the financial support of the CEE Trust. The study entitled "Think green policies!" aimed to support the development of environmental policies in Romania. Through this project the initiators wanted to encourage politicians to include in their future electoral agendas and manifestos the people's concerns with regard to environmental protection. Moreover they wanted to increase the responsiveness of political parties towards closer consultation and cooperation with environmental NGOs. The study involved a sociological research on the active ENGOS from Romania (the sample included 93 such ENGOS). Among the conclusions drawn, one, at least, is intriguing : almost 72% of the respondents (or 48% of the total sample if we account for the 33% who didn't answer at all) consider that *none of the political parties enrolled in the 2008 general elections promote environmental protection*. Only the UDMR party seems to have something close to such a preoccupation (according to the 12% of the questioned ENGOS).

Building on these existing insights (we consider these being the two most important studies on the subject in Romania), and considering the framework that was just outlined in the above sections, the aim of the research is to identify the main problems that Romanian ENGOS are currently dealing with in terms of financial capacity and with regard to their relations with the public sphere.

3.2. Data sample and method

An official database where one can find all the Romania's NGOs that have been legally established is provided by the Ministry for Justice, within the NGO National Register. At the time of data collection (February, 2016), in Romania there were 74311 associations, 17948 foundations, 1109 federations, 710 unions and 30 foreign legal entities. The Civil Society Development Foundation reveals that there are currently 365 active Romanian NGOs in the environmental field (number subject to change). Thus, following detailed mapping of Romanian ENGOS, a comprehensive database of 365 ENGOS was compiled and subsequently surveyed to provide quantitative data. Among these, 48 responded the questionnaire.

The study used a questionnaire survey to gather the necessary data, which, after it was designed, it was pre-tested and piloted according to well-known methods in the literature. The questionnaire is divided into three sections: a) organizational description; b) financial capacity; c) the public sphere and the political environment. Responses on the questions included here provide the data for the current analysis.

4. Discussion of Results

4.1. Respondents description

Of the 48 ENGOS included in this analysis, 89,6% are associations while the remaining 10,4% are foundations; unfortunately, no federations responded to the questionnaire. With regard to their sphere of activity and influence, there is a fair distribution among the participating ENGOS, 37,5% being local, 25% regional, 29,2% national and 8,3% international. Nevertheless, most of these ENGOS have their headquarters in a city (56,3% of them) and only some of them reside in the capital (20,8%), in a town (6,3%) or in a rural area (16,7%). Moreover, with regard to the scope of their activities, the participating ENGOS operate in the North-East Region (47,9% of the ENGOS declared that some of their activities are performed in this area), followed by the Centre (27,1%) and the North-West (22,9%) as well as the other macro-regions of development.

Collectively, the ENGOS have founding dates that span over 25 years, the earliest being created in Romania's early days of democracy, but most of them having 'birthdates' after 2000 (73%). With respect to the human capital involved, the majority of the participating ENGOS register: 3 founding members (41,6%), no employees or 1 at most (54%) and rely mainly on volunteers (ranging from 1-10 volunteers per organization, in 40% of the ENGOS, to over 100 volunteers).

4.2. Financial capacity

The majority of the 48 ENGOs participating in the study have modest incomes. Cumulated, 50% reported that their annual budgets are less or equal to 10.000 EUR, 18,75% rely on budgets over 10.000 EUR but bellow 50.000 EUR while the remaining 31,3% have budgets that exceed the threshold of 50.000 EUR. From the last category, the majority of the organizations have a national or international sphere of activity. Nevertheless, the budget is generally considered to be affected by fluctuations (65,1%), the majority of the NGOs claiming a lack of constant and coherent financing for their environmental activities and a difficult bureaucracy which limits their access to funds. Only some of the respondents consider themselves as having a good or very good financial capacity (14,6%). It is important to mention that what constitutes a serious problem is not the lack of environmental solutions, but the social and economic impediments arising in the process. This fact reveals a low level of knowledge and the lack of a solid culture regarding the dependency of the economic and social systems on the natural ecosystems together with an evident incapacity to quantify the real value of ecosystem services (for which evaluation practices lack in Romania).

Tab. 1: Distribution of the funding sources for ENGOs

Funding sources	Percentage of total budget from source				
	ND	<5%	6-20%	21-60%	>60%
Revenues collected through the 2% clause	1	29	10	4	4
Sponsorships from various sources	1	23	12	9	3
Governmental grants donations (from RO)	4	22	16	3	3
Governmental grants donations (from EU)	3	20	5	8	12
Governmental grants donations (outside EU)	4	31	7	2	4
Private companies grants donations (from RO)	5	32	7	1	3
Private companies grants donations (from EU)	6	38	2	0	2
Private companies grants donations (outside EU)	6	40	1	0	1
Grants donations from foundations (RO UE non-UE)	5	31	8	1	3
Grants donations from citizens (RO UE non-UE)	4	38	4	1	1
Revenues collected from membership fees	3	32	8	4	1
Revenues collected from various sources	3	26	10	6	3

Note: N=48; ND – non-determined; Various sources: services, consultancy, research, education.

A considerable part of the organizations' budget, used for the purpose of their own activities and for co-financing the implementation of environmental projects, originates from EU grants and governmental donations (25% of the respondents declared that this type of financial source accounts for more than 60% of their annual budget). Another significant financial resource is given by the 2% clause, which represents donations from the income tax from natural persons, or sponsorships (see distribution in Table 1). The non-EU grants and governmental donations also bring significant resource for the ENGOs' financial capacity. Unfortunately, the financial resources which originate in Romania (in the form

grants and donations from the government, private companies and foundations as well as from citizens) barely touch the 10% ceiling within the total annual budget (as declared by more than 80% of the participating ENGOs).

At the end of the questionnaire's second section, the participating ENGOs were asked to answer the following "Which are the main problems that your NGO is facing, with regard to financial capacity?". Being a single 'open-ended response' question, the ENGOs had the possibility to list their main issues with regard to financial capacity and raise awareness on some delicate subjects that were not touched so far. This on the other hand enabled us to perform a qualitative assessment of the respondents' opinions on the previously discussed topic.

According to the respondents, the most encountered problems with regard to their financial capacity refer to:

- **financing programs**

Although some financing programs exist via project competition, many of the respondents complained about: a limited access to this kind of EU-funded sources given by high co-funding rate, narrow scope of activities or network required (in the 2007-2013 period, only 434 projects proposed by NGOs received financing, with a cumulated values of only 2,15 billion RON); a volatility of the financial resources and inconsistency in time; lack of cash-flow to support the implementation of this kind of projects; (expensive) experts needed in writing and successfully implementation of well-funded projects; conditions referring to financial guarantees; expensive audit reports; most of the EU-funded projects for NGOs are not orientated towards environmental issues.

- **low credibility in the relation with banks**

Some organizations have argued that there is a lack of credibility from their part when dealing with the banking system. Generally, banks regard with skepticism the request of NGOs for funds to assure their cash-flow needed for regular payments (utilities, salaries) and/or for properly implementing approved projects. Moreover, the respondents declared that banks usually request significant guarantees and are inflexible in terms of negotiating prices.

- **high costs with experts**

Another group of ENGOs have raised attention on the high costs required by professionals to access EU-funded projects (see the 'financing programs' issue) and/or by specialized staff to look for and access EU grants and donations from governments and companies. Specialists that ENGOs badly need to solve their financial problems are usually hard to find and most often costly.

- **bureaucracy**

Many ENGOs, regardless of their size and scope, complain that when they have to perform their activities in Romania and need to interact with the public sphere they encounter a highly bureaucratic system and inefficient public servants.

Jepson (2005) also mentions that besides diverting some resources from the cause, the government respondents sometimes with “knee-jerk, one-size-fits-all regulations that will not do anyone any good” (Jepson, 2005, p. 517).

■ **other problems**

Other problems regarding their financial capacity and that have been reported by the questioned ENGOs refer to: lack of stimulus for donors, significant waiting time for specific EU-funded projects (the Calls are very rare), important costs with forming the personnel that afterwards leaves the ENGO for a better paid job, the local projects for ENGOs have very small budgets and are few at number (plus the non-eligibility issue of salaries), lack of diversity with regard to financing resources, assuring financing requires dedicated personnel.

4.3. The public sphere and the political environment

With regard to the quality of the relations with state authorities, many of the participating ENGOs in the study have reported a bad to very bad one especially with National Authorities, Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests, other bodies or governmental agencies as well as with the county council (see Figure 1). Good to very good relations were reported by the ENGOs mainly with local councils, town halls, other agencies from the local administration as well as with local or regional environmental groups (ex., GALs etc.). A fact that stands out is the more local the bodies are, the better the relations with ENGOs are – probably given the fact that the more local the bodies or agencies are the more they can provide tailor-made assistance and fulfil assumed obligations.

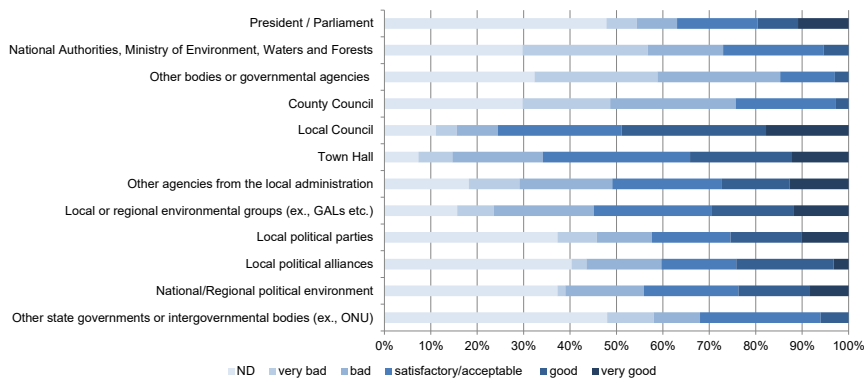


Fig. 1: The nature of the relation between ENGOs and various public bodies

With regard to the involvement of the ENGOs in the decision making process, most of the participating organizations (47,9%) take part only in the ‘informative’ stage. This step usually consists in providing information in a one-way direction (from the public authorities towards NGOs). The next step, entitled

‘Consultation’, implies that the public authorities call for the opinions, comments, reactions of NGOs on specific environmental issues. Only 22,9% of the ENGOs are involved in this phase. Even fewer (16,7%) are involved in the ‘general dialogue’ phase which implies a two-way communication process built on mutual interests and shared objectives. A share of 10,4% of the questioned ENGOs declared that they participate in the ‘collaborative dialogue’ where the process of working-together is built on mutual interests for a specific policy development resulting in recommendations, strategies and legislation. Only 1 ENGO reported the involvement in a ‘partnership’, the last stage of the decision making process.

When asked about the main deficiencies / problems in the relationship between the environmental NGO and state institutions (an ‘open-ended response’ question), the most encountered answers referred to:

- many decisions are taken ‘politically’;
- lack of professionalism of public servants, a general lack of specialists;
- lack of transparency in the public bodies;
- lack of interest in real environmental issues from state authorities;
- unwillingness to request consultancy;
- late responses and an overbureaucratic system;
- lack of communication or an inefficient one from state authorities;
- inefficient/inappropriate legislation;
- ENGOs are invited to participate in meetings with state authorities only in a former manner and not invited to participate in the dialogue;
- lack of willingness from state authorities to establish real and productive partnerships with ENGOs;
- a high level of bureaucracy, not only with regard to the financial aspects (as already highlighted above) but in all aspects concerning an NGO’s functioning.

When finally asked to express their opinions about the importance of the environment and its pollution for the existing political parties (from their point of view as supplier of specialized consultancy on environmental matters), the respondents tend confirm the insights offered by the Terra Millennium III and Asociatia ALMA-RO (2008) study.

As a result of the fact that the political sphere strongly interferes with the public institutions – the leadership of the local public administrations consisting mainly of representatives of certain political parties – and based on the correlation with the above mentioned issues, the vast majority of the respondents consider that no significant political party in Romania focuses on environmental protection issues; the political parties merely consider certain economic aspects, but show no real support for social issues (see Figure 2).

As one can see in Figure 2, the two political parties that some ENGOs consider most relevant (by considering environmental issues as important or very

important in their agenda) are the Green Party (PV) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). Nonetheless, the majority of the respondents consider that all the political parties disregard the importance of the environment (18 to 20% of the participating ENGOs consider that the political parties give no importance to environmental issues). When asked to express in a few words their relation with the political parties' representatives, some of the most encountered key words were: 'inexistent', 'absent', 'very bad', 'awful', 'catastrophic', 'cold'.

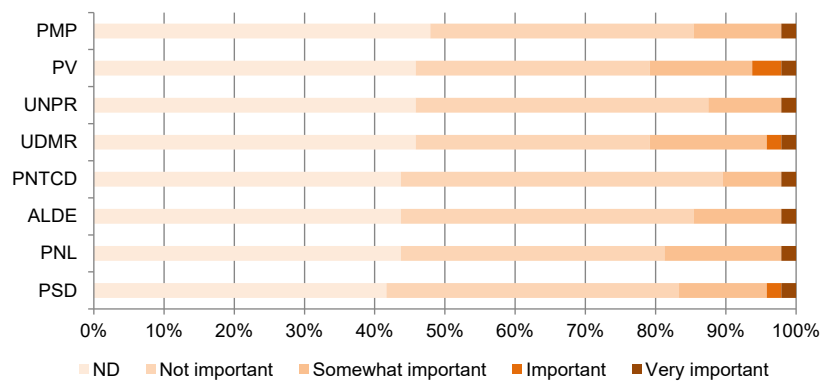


Fig. 2: The importance showed by specific political parties for the environment

Conclusions and recommendations

As stipulated in one of the paper's premises, ENGOs are the key actors in environmental protection project implementation and have the greatest potential in promoting environmental policies and consolidating an ecological culture among the civil society. They are also the only actors that offer the closure necessary to overcome the general predispositions of the Romanian society in terms of environmental protection. This reveals a low level of knowledge and the lack of a solid culture regarding the dependency of the economic and social systems on the natural ecosystems, together with an evident incapacity to quantify the real value of ecosystem services (for which evaluation practices are lacking in Romania).

Faced with *financial challenges* (available funds), some ENGOs had to adapt by increasing their resources through membership subscriptions, private philanthropy, public sector grants and/or corporate contracts by engaging in mainstream politics and public service delivery (Jepson, 2005, p. 516). In this way, several ENGOs have transformed themselves into organisations with international reach and influence. Our respondents also confirmed that financing resources are becoming fewer and fewer and hard to manage (in the sense that there are many projects and so few resources to engage them), being backed by an increasingly

lower interest in NGOs. Despite their evident efficacy and their closure to the civil society, NGOs are becoming non-eligible for the funds they want to access. And this is even harder when banks or public servants don't offer the necessary or professional support that ENGOS badly need. On top of that, experts that would help ENGOS overcome their lacks in terms of financial capacity are hard to find (and expensive when they are recruited).

Richards and Heard (2005) also highlight the limitations that ENGOS have to exceed in terms of capacity and resources (such as finances, membership and staff). In this regard, they propose that NGOs must be selective regarding the issues they focus on and the tactics they use to achieve their goals. It is probable that for a limited number of ENGOS enthusiasm and expertise can compensate for a lack of finance (at least in the short term), especially for small groups with modest impact. Nevertheless, in the large arena and on the long run, only those ENGOS with sound finances generally have greater opportunities in terms of campaign and strategy selection (Coxall, 2001, p. 141). As shown in the study, ENGOS are mostly efficient on a local level, being able to make and maintain close relations to the local public institutions. The relational component is a very important prerequisite in the process of cooperation both with the society and with the public institutions. Provided that most respondents named bureaucracy as being particularly burdensome in the process and that political affiliation is the most important engine behind most of the public decision-making, the relational closure with various actors should be speculated as being one of the most important assets ENGOS possess.

One form of surpassing all these challenges is for ENGOS to explore innovative forms of networking through regional coalitions, integrate environmentalist organizations into transnational networks and develop innovative practices and institutions. This would provide the framework for considering a multitude of voices from various developing countries and will increase the effectiveness of the civil society's involvement in governance.

The usefulness of this study is many folded: the ENGOS become alert by their problems and the need to solve them in a collaborative manner, the citizens become more aware of the civil society's presents and involvement in the political decision making process, the representatives of the political class take notice of the potential that they could harness from the collaboration with the ENGOS

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