

The Role of Environmental NGOs in the Changing Tropics: Networking for Community Empowerment

Jose Roberto Borges
Project Support Coordinator, Amazon Program,
Rainforest Action Network

ABSTRACT

The Rainforest Action Network (RAN) has grown over 10 years to its present size and status by being committed to networking. Close contact with local communities has enabled RAN to promote effective action, both in those communities and in consuming communities. Political and technical support in the rainforest is complemented by persuasion and boycotts of destructive companies. This coordination is made possible through true partnerships with local rainforest organizations. Ultimately, this structure allows the agendas of local people to be heard internationally, and permits effective coordination against destructive multinationals.

Good morning everybody. I am thankful to be here at this great encounter. I wish that I had the time to meet every one of you, so that we could learn of each others' experiences. I have already met some great people here, and I am sure there are many more of you.

I am going to be talking about a slightly different kind of technology, of perhaps the oldest kind of technology: networking. We have been networking since we got out of the caves. The purpose of this presentation is to generate some constructive reflection on the role of environmental organizations networking with Indigenous and other environmental organizations in the tropics. This presentation will be based on the concrete experience of Rainforest Action Network in recent years.

I will start with a very brief introduction to what the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) is all about. We were founded in 1985 by Randall Hayes, who is still the executive director. RAN is a San Francisco-based non-profit environmental organization working to conserve the cultural and biological diversity of tropical rainforests worldwide. We have grown quite a bit. Today, with the support of an active 25,000 membership and 50 Rainforest Action Groups nationwide, RAN is one of the leading organizations in the US working on behalf of the rainforest and the human rights of its traditional inhabitants. Through political and technical support, financial assistance, and educational campaigns directed at consumers in industrialized countries, RAN supports the efforts of Indigenous populations and other forest communities in securing their traditional livelihoods while helping to halt the destruction of their homelands.

In the past few years RAN has developed successful campaigns around the world. In Hawaii RAN campaigned against geothermal development and in the continental US it persuaded several Holly-

wood studios to stop using Lauan plywood for movie sets. In Costa Rica, RAN helped to stop the Stone Container Corporation from building a large chip mill in the rainforest. In Brazil, RAN joined collective efforts which led to the demarcation of 5.28 million acres of extractive reserves and the creation of the Yanomami Park, while in Ecuador, RAN funded the Quichua, Achuar, and Shiwiar Indians' march to the capital city of Quito, resulting in the demarcation of 2.5 million acres as Indigenous territory. In the Philippines, RAN was partially responsible for stopping Scott Paper from converting rainforests into Eucalyptus plantations. In Papua New Guinea, we successfully pressured Chevron to modify its operation to provide for greater environmental protection.

RAN has also financed the efforts of several organizations and community based projects through its "Protect-an-Acre" Program. This is an alternative to "Buy-an-Acre" programs — a different approach. As an organization we don't endorse the purchase of land as a conservation mechanism because we believe that it takes the responsibility of the state to implement important changes such as the demarcation of Indigenous lands, extractive reserves, and other conservation areas. The Protect-an-Acre Program is an attempt to direct financial resources to very site-specific grants. The maximum for a grant is \$5000, so it is a small contribution but it can go a long way.

RAN's Protect-an-Acre Program has been an extended effort to contribute directly to forest communities struggling to defend their most basic human rights and to protect the rainforests — the natural resource base they rely on for survival. The Program has already successfully contributed to several important projects throughout the Amazon Basin and other regions. These are projects that are primarily aimed at achieving land rights for forest communities and implementing sustainable development activities to improve their standards of living, while securing the ecological integrity of the forest.

Presently, RAN is devoted to strengthening long-term programs in three major areas: corporate responsibility, natural resource use, and support for Indigenous rights and sustainable development at the community level. At the corporate responsibility level, RAN pressures multinational corporations causing destruction in the rainforests into practicing socially and environmentally sound business. I like to see it as an issue of corporate responsibility rather than just boycotts — I think you have to be more grounded. We are trying to invite corporations to practice socially and environmentally sound businesses, but sometimes that is not enough. Our present focus is on Mitsubishi and Texaco. We are in fact launching

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a boycott on both because their track records haven't been very respectful to the environment or to traditional peoples.

The Wood Conservation Campaign highlights RAN's approach to natural resource use. This campaign seeks the reduction of wood consumption in the United States by promoting alternatives such as the cultivation of kenaf and hemp for paper, while calling for a ban on all tropical hardwood products not harvested in an environmentally benign and socially beneficial way. RAN's Amazon Program provides direct political and institutional support for Indigenous and other traditional forest communities in the Amazon Basin in Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru. The Amazon Program will expand to other Amazonian countries when resources are available. In addition to its main programs, RAN also functions as an information clearinghouse, disseminating the facts on the current state of the rainforests and the different efforts to stop its destruction.

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RAN'S TRADITIONAL PEOPLES PROGRAM

I am going to focus my talk here on our traditional peoples program. We promote traditional peoples' goals by finding institutional and political support. I am in charge of institutional support for the Amazon program, which means reaching out for financial resources for community based projects and other initiatives coming from those organizations working with Indigenous and other traditional peoples. We also try to connect communities to researchers or scientists so as to access technical know-how.

RAN has accomplished a great deal in the past few years. To cite two of our many successes, RAN has worked closely with the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Pastaza (OPIP) in Ecuador and the Indian Research Center in Brazil. Through a five-year partnership with OPIP, we supported their efforts in gaining autonomous control of 2.5 million acres of traditional lands. We are now providing financial and political assistance in their historic negotiations with Arco Inc. to secure environmental and social safeguards in oil prospecting in the region. In Brazil, we have been providing financial and technical support for the Indian Research Center for the past six years. The Center combines traditional Indigenous knowledge with modern technology in pursuing alternatives to unsound economic development. Projects include work on the recuperation of degraded lands, self-sufficient Indigenous enterprises, and integrated resource management.

We have been developing a database of institutions doing research in appropriate technology, and various kinds of appropriate energy sources, such as hydroelectric and solar. For example, we

have arranged a program with Trimble Navigation in California, who have agreed to lend a GPS unit to the new Instituto Socioambiental, the Social and Environmental Institute, in Brazil. They are doing very important work in demarcating Indigenous territories as well as the integrative management of resources found within those territories. So Trimble Navigation ended up donating two GPS units, which have been used in work with the Waãpi Indians in Pará and in constructing preserves in the Xingú.

DEFINING A NICHE

The most important first step in understanding your role as an active participant in the framework of organizations contributing to conservation efforts in the tropics is to determine your own niche as an organization. This apparently easy task is sometimes difficult to accomplish because of a lack of understanding of what really goes on in the tropics or due to simply not knowing which direction to take. Rapidly increasing demands may overwhelm you even before you get started and the vast array of possible ways to contribute leads many well-intentioned people to duplicate efforts unnecessarily. In order to find your niche, you must first clearly define your organizational goals, resources, and commitment.

Effective organizational goals should promote real partnerships with organizations in the rainforest countries. This will not only avoid paternalistic and unilateral relationships, but will also foster equal participation in implementing solutions. In fact, equal participation should be considered a pre-condition for networking with any organization in the tropics.

At RAN, we recognize the critical importance of developing real partnerships with forest communities who suffer from unsound government and corporate development policies on a daily basis. Our strategies are designed in close consultation with the legitimate associations that represent the communities' needs and rights. Through years of experience working with forest communities we have learned to identify how seemingly local problems are essentially caused by macroeconomic forces. Therefore, we enable local communities to understand how foreign economic interests affect their lives and help them to devise ways of organizing against development practices that jeopardize their traditional livelihood and resources.

Thus, RAN's niche in halting the destruction of the tropical rainforest is through direct support of its traditional inhabitants and by applying pressure on the corporations and institutions in the North that are partially or fully responsible for the destruction. All

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the while, we are also being constructive by pursuing alternative models for natural resource use.

One of the projects we have financed through our Protect-an-Acre Program is a bilingual education program for the Yawanawá Indigenous peoples of the Alto Juruá region of the western Amazon. The Yawanawá kicked out the missionaries from their territories some years ago. Now they have started a new village, where they are implementing some marketing initiatives, including a contract with Aveda. They are producing materials for lipstick and shampoo. This slide shows their nursery and that is their final product, urukü. Sharon Flynn's presentation gave me a lot of enlightening information about the role of green products — I left disturbed. I need to think about it...

NETWORKING AND EMPOWERMENT

Once an organization's niche is established, one should identify its partners — the individuals, associations and organizations that will collectively design the objectives and strategies to be accomplished. Here, one should always be aware of the legitimacy of the parties involved to avoid establishing deceptive partnerships.

The number of organizations and individuals working to implement both the social and biological conservation in the “changing tropics” is immense, probably in the tens of thousands. However, finding a handful of trustworthy partners does not have to be that difficult. The general rule is networking. Just contact those people you already trust and try to identify a well-established organization working in the region or on a particular issue. Often, you will find ways of collaborating with other groups instead of trying to reinvent the wheel.

LEGITIMACY

In addition to general networking, it is our practice at RAN to visit frequently the regions where we are developing programs. This allows us to meet directly with the members of different organizations, visit forest communities, and talk to the local leadership. Many times we participate in community meetings, which are especially helpful in revealing how a particular community reacts to a given problem. We believe that regular field visits are the best way to learn how representative our partner organizations are at the community level. For example, in a recent trip to Aguaruna and Huambisa villages along the Marañon River in Peru, we were able to verify that those communities had exactly the same opinion about

oil development on their lands as the organization which formally represents them in Lima, the Aguaruna and Huambisa Council (CAH). So, CAH can be seen as a good example of an organization that is well connected to the base, the grassroots level. The degree to which an organization is connected with its constituency is usually a good indicator of how representative and legitimate it is.

At RAN, we really try to identify and work with those organizations that are also working at the community level, for we believe they are more legitimate and effective. Through supporting these kinds of organizations we reach out to a much larger number of people, empowering not only those individuals working within the organizations, but communities as a whole.

COMMITMENT

Long-term commitment is another essential component in networking with organizations in the tropics. No matter how capable your partner organization may be, reliable and effective networking can succeed only if based on a long-term commitment. The lack of long-term commitment on the part of Northern NGOs to their co-workers in the tropical South is a frequent cause of unfulfilled expectations, disillusionment, and failure. Northerners should not take on issues just because they are convenient. I recently heard a comment by a senior staff member of a respected Northern environmental NGO who said the Amazon was no longer an interesting issue for the World Bank and US NGOs. Whether he was joking or not, this is exactly the kind of attitude that leads many people in the tropics to believe that northern environmentalists are not fully committed. The Amazon, home to one third of the world's remaining rainforests, is and will continue to be an extremely relevant issue to the North for years to come. It is only through dedicated long-term commitment to serious and equal partnerships with Southern NGOs that we have a chance of going beyond the rhetoric of conservation in the tropics.

Long-term commitment provides for solid partnerships with organizations in the tropics, strengthening their infrastructure and their ability to respond to issues effectively. Through our Amazon Program, for instance, RAN provides both financial and political support for Indigenous communities, rubber tappers, and other forest dwellers who have traditionally inhabited the Amazon rainforests in an ecologically sustainable fashion. We strongly believe that empowered communities are the best caretakers of the Amazon Basin. Hence, RAN is devoted to help forest communities achieve control of their traditional territories.

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In addition, RAN's Amazon Program researches how US-based corporations cause social and environmental destruction in the Amazon Basin and the governmental policies that allow this to happen. By monitoring these macroeconomic dynamics we are able to determine which companies should be held accountable for causing social distress and environmental degradation in the forest communities we work with. We also engage legal mechanisms to pressure such companies into practicing socially and environmentally sound business.

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Clear goals and long-term commitment are the keys to building a strong organization that will not only be effective in supporting its partners in the tropics, but will also develop a very respectable profile here in the North.

In its ten years of existence RAN has devoted itself to strengthening its niche and establishing long-term commitments with organizations in the tropics. With the support of a dynamic network of hundreds of organizations and individuals, we have been able to improve the infrastructure of many organizations in the South in order to optimize our communications and their ability to deal with local needs. This process, in turn, has enabled RAN to access strategic feedback from its partner organizations in the tropics when designing and implementing our campaigns.

The contribution of Rainforest Action Network in the "Changing Tropics" has been to secure the ecological integrity of the rainforests and the respect for the human rights of their traditional inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples and other forest dwellers. To achieve this goal, RAN works through a dynamic network of organizations and individuals, with a long-term commitment to partnerships. We seek to provide organizations in the tropics with direct access to information and resources, so that they can be empowered and implement their own vision of development.

I will just leave you with a Brazilian saying: "O saber do povo é a sua vida" — The knowledge of the people is their life. Thanks much.

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JOSE ROBERTO BORGES

Born in São Paulo, Brazil, Borges' career began as a mountaineer and ecotourism guide in Brazil while he pursued a degree in applied chemistry. In 1993 he received a BS from University of California at Berkeley in Conservation and Resources Studies with an emphasis on Integrated Resource Management. Since 1990, Borges has been with the Rainforest Action Network, where he developed their Brazil (Amazon) Program and has acted as a liaison to Latin American non-governmental and Indigenous organizations. Currently Borges is the Project Support Coordinator for the Amazon Program.

Jose Roberto Borges Working Group

The main themes stressed in this workshop were the need for long-term commitments from NGOs, better coordination among all parties, the identification of people with whom it is most effective to work, and the dangers of representation by non-Indigenous professionals. These themes are intertwined. For example, coordination among organizations (North-North, North-South, and South-South) can help identify true Indigenous community leaders and evaluate proposed business ventures. Coordination also mitigates the danger of Indigenous people either having to rely on only one source of information, or getting conflicting advice from various NGOs. Sharon Flynn suggested that coordination would be more effective between staff members than between whole organizations due to competition over resources.

As for identifying the most effective people to work with, Mr. Borges suggested that Indigenous leaders may possess a bias different from the community at large. Terry Turner added that some professional Indigenous leaders represent developing bureaucracies more than they do communities.

It was generally agreed that non-Indigenous professionals should not attempt to represent Indigenous communities. Rather, it is better that they merely present cases. For example, the goal of the Rainforest Action Network is to empower the Indigenous peoples to make decisions by providing information, not to represent them outside the community.

The need for long-term commitments from NGOs and green capitalists was illustrated with several examples. It is particularly important for enabling a cultural understanding adequate for identifying a community's needs.

The following excerpts expand on some of these themes:

Gary Dunning, Yale F&ES: How do you establish the legitimacy of the organizations you work with? What factors do you look at to find out if they are truly representative organizations?

Beto Borges: Well, we visit the region and try to ascertain the historical process of the formation of the organization. We have to beware of biased leaderships who are advancing their own goals that may not necessarily be the goals of the community. We contact other environmental groups working in a region, and we have found that networking with one trusted group can help identify other collaborators.

Terry Turner: I'm interested in the relationship among Aveda, RAN, and the Yawanawá .

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BB: Our involvement is extremely limited in that all we do is support the Indigenous groups by providing information so that they can make informed decisions about their own futures. We try to find out what these companies are all about and supply this information to the Indigenous associations, who are the ones who decide whether or not to get involved. Personally, though, I'm a bit critical of these relationships, because I am not convinced that any of these companies are making sincere, long-term commitments to a given area or group.

In the Aveda case, they wanted exclusive access to the product, and this was stipulated in their contract with the Yawanawá in exchange for 5% of the proceeds derived from that particular product.

I think that while it's important to be critical of these relationships, you also need to realize that, in many cases, these companies represent the only chance for a cash income from sustainable, traditional activities.

Chico Ginú: I went to a meeting in Panama in November where some Indigenous groups were represented by anthropologists. I thought this was very strange, because, though the expertise of social scientists and biologists and the like is extremely important in this context, how can they possibly claim to represent Indigenous people?

BB: Yes, this is a problem for two reasons. First is the problem of allocation of resources — more time and money needs to be spent actually in the communities so that Indigenous people can be empowered to speak for themselves. Second, there is the ethical problem of trying to speak for someone else. I have seen instances where researchers get too wrapped up with people they are working with, and lose their scientific distance and presume to speak for these people.

Sharon Flynn: I've been in conservation for three years, and I think there's a huge amount of waste and inefficiency that goes on. Nevertheless, all of these organizations have the same goals, in the sense of creating the conditions for positive change. Though each group has its own flavor and location across the political spectrum, the degree to which they are all working towards the same thing creates a situation in which there is the potential for cooperation. Cooperation at the organizational level is often cumbersome and unproductive because of a competition over resources, but at the staff level it can be extremely effective. Networking on the level of you and I speaking to one another every once in a while can go a long way towards eliminating redundancy and increasing effectiveness.

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