

Abstract

Friends of the Earth International: Negotiating a North-South Identity

Investigator

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Aims and objectives of research

The aim of this project is to assess the relationships between Southern and Northern environmental groups within the Friends of the Earth International (FOEI) network.

The objectives of the project are:

1. To gather new empirical evidence of network ties, resource and information flows within a trans-national environmental network
2. To explore the varieties of ways in which environmentalism, social justice and social transformation are articulated within FOEI.
3. To assess the degree of common ground between Northern and Southern nodes of the network.
4. To explain the boundaries of the collective identity of FOEI.

Key research questions/hypotheses and methods

FOEI plays a key role within the transnational environmental movement as the most significant semi-institutionalised network including large numbers of groups from both North and South linked by shared commitments to environmental justice.

Recent arguments within FOEI have exposed divisions of ideology and strategy over North/South issues. To examine this we will carry out a survey and network analysis, in order to assess patterns of interaction within the network. This will be complemented by qualitative research at FOEI meetings, interviews with representatives of its member organisations, analysis of 'grey' literature, and observation of key meetings.

Relation to the Programme

Of the Programme's three strands, this research will contribute most to Strand A: Organisations and Non-Governmental Public Action. In particular it can contribute useful empirical knowledge (4.1.4) on how an organisation defines its objectives and 'manages its accountability to a complex range of stakeholders.' The autonomy of FOEI member groups and the emphasis on internal democracy within the network also make it an interesting case with respect to the question: 'How do participatory policy processes affect the activities, effectiveness, goals and values of non-governmental actors?' FOEI has been much concerned with internal democracy as a

consequence of complaints by some Southern groups about being marginalised and we will seek to assess the effects of these reforms on the process of FOEI.

In terms of practical policy context; FOEI is situated in the domain of non-governmental resistance to neo-liberal strategies of rolling back the state. However, it represents an interesting case of how resistance politics have to be negotiated even within NGOs. The degree of emphasis on corporate accountability has been a source of divisions between some Southern and Northern branches. For Northern groups pressure for corporate social responsibility promises measurable impact, but for some Southern groups, insofar as CSR involves any form of co-operation with TNCs, it is a betrayal. Much has been written about the plurality of forms of resistance politics within the 'no global/global justice' movements, but despite its partial institutionalization, FOEI also struggles over diversity in ways that call its core identity into question.

Relevance of this research to user groups

FOEI itself and its autonomous member groups in 71 countries will be principal users of the research. We will also hold a one day workshop at the end of the project for UK user groups, bringing together the academic consultants and staff members of FOE, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; FOE Scotland, Greenpeace, WWF, BOND and DfID.

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