Can NGOs, Non-Profits, and Activists Co-operate?

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**An Exploration of the Feasibility of a Forum for
Communication, Co-operation, and Collaboration among
Community Non-Government Organizations, Non-Profit Groups, and Activists**

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INTRODUCTION

The working title of this project was "Non-Government Organization, Non-Profit Group, and Activist Co-op Feasibility Research Project." The research objective was to explore whether community non-government organizations (NGOs), non-profit groups (NPGs), and solo activists might benefit through the establishment of a forum, such as a co-operative, through which they could better communicate, co-operate, and collaborate with each other. The research supports the general idea but also that it isn't as simple as that and that there are barriers, limits, and challenges. As well, forums other than a co-operative, perhaps a variety of forums or even other approaches, may be preferable.

The notion that community NGOs and NPGs ought to organize is not new, of course. Indeed, there are several formal associations of like-minded NGOs and NPGs here in Greater Victoria. And experiences that I shared, a dozen years ago, with other volunteers in a lone NGO and with other community groups and activists clearly demonstrated the promise of collaboration. Yet, most, if not all, of us continued to usually work independently of each other.

Now, with the situation virtually unchanged, the Centre for Co-operative and Community-Based Economy (CCCBE) at the University of Victoria (UVic) has provided an opportunity to explore this issue. To this end, representatives of some local NGOs and NPGs and some activists kindly agreed to participate in two focus group sessions to discuss the subject. Their views, observations, insights, and stories are the primary information source for this study. While there were only six participants, plus me, the group draws from decades of real-world, activist work in environmentalism, human rights, alternative media, and social justice generally, at the local and global levels and in-between.

In Part 1 of this report, after defining the terms 'NGO', 'NPG', and 'co-operative' for the purposes of this project, I describe some of the needs and situations that compel NGOs, NPGs, and activists to consider communicating and working with each other. I also present a brief discussion of the current socio-political context for local co-operation and collectivism.

In Part 2, I describe the project design and its implementation, including how – and the implications of how – the composition of the focus group resulted, in part, from a self-selection and filtering process.

In Part 3, I present and discuss the participants' input – their considerations of the benefits, opportunities, barriers, and limits of communicating, co-operating, and collaborating through some organized means, some merits and downsides of co-operating at all, and some experienced-based suggestions as to how to address or work around some of these negative aspects.

Finally, in Part 4, I reflect on the findings and discussions presented in Part 3 and offer a suggestion as to 'where to go from here'.

PART 1: CONSIDERING CO-OPERATION

NGOs, NPGs, and Co-operatives

Already, I have introduced terms the meanings of which I should clarify before referring to them further. There is debate as to the differences between NGOs and NPGs (and non-profit organizations (NPOs)) and as to their individual definitions.[1],[2] I'm not concerned with that debate, here, because I refer to them collectively and, regardless, I recognize that there is, at best, a fuzzy distinction between the two terms. So, for the purposes of this project, an NPG (or NPO) is a not-for-profit organization that conducts activities, typically, to benefit some element of society. An NGO is a type of NPG, one that addresses a social and/or political issue or situation, often politically, but is explicitly not associated with any government. PETA, Amnesty International, and Greenpeace are NGOs. Aids Vancouver Island, Friends of Animals, and Transition Victoria are NPGs that I don't consider, here at least, to be NGOs. NGOs can be understood to be a more political subset of NPGs. NGOs and NPGs can be charities and they typically, though not necessarily, rely heavily on volunteers. In this report, I shall refer to NGOs and NPGs as their being both fuzzily distinct and the same.

While there is no appreciable debate over the meaning of the term "co-operative", there are many types of co-operatives. For this project, I mean the type that was legally established in BC, in 2007, through the Cooperative Association Act, as "Community Service Cooperative." As such, it's purpose must be "charitable . . . or otherwise to provide health, social, educational or other community services."[3] What I mean, in particular, is a co-operative having NGOs, NPGs, and solo activists as its members.

Inspirations for Co-operation and Collectivism

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was one of the five or six active members (all volunteers) of the Victoria Branch of the United Nations Association in Canada (UNA-Canada), an NGO. I am still a Director of the Branch. Our mandate then, as now, was to raise awareness of the work of the UN and of the global issues that affect us all.[4] One of the ways that we did this was by organizing public panel discussions and

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[1] "non-governmental organization," Answers.com, accessed December 23, 2011, http://www.answers.com/topic/non-governmental-organization.

[2] "non-profit," Answers.com, accessed December 23, 2011, http://www.answers.com/topic/nonprofit.

[3] "Division 3 – Community Service Cooperatives," Cooperative Association Act, accessed December 23, 2011, http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_99028_01#section1.

[4] "A Better World Starts HERE," UNA-Canada, accessed December 23, 2011, http://www.unac.org/en/index.asp.

ceremonies to mark some of the various designated UN 'days' that we thought would have some resonance in our community, such as "International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination" (March 21). Usually, we would collaborate with an NGO/NPG that has an affinity with the particular UN 'day'. Having almost no resources between us, we would be lucky to generate an attendance of a dozen people from the general public. However, in 1998, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10, 1948), we were determined to do better than that. We collaborated with 29 other NGOs, NPGs, and other groups to organize as major a public awareness event as we could. At the event, each group presented, for 2-3 minutes, how one of the Declaration's 30 Articles was particularly important to that group and to the community. All 30 Articles were so represented. Until that event, many of the groups weren't aware of some of the other's existence and some had never before been 'political'. All brought their supporters to the event, resulting in an overflow crowd numbering upwards of 200 people. The event was electric, interesting, and fun. While we didn't all subsequently regroup for some other initiative, our group did continue to bring together organizations and other groups of people who wouldn't otherwise meet (e.g., a peace-building event in which children, dementia folk, First Nations, peace activists, a choir, and others, all participated.) We don't know whether those events had lasting effects on those who were there, but we felt that they did and at least they were memorable and got the numbers and media out.

So, we learned that collaboration is a good idea. And that prompted us to consider other ways to co-operate. Operationally, for example, it didn't seem fair that NPGs and NGOs should pay the same utility rates as businesses. Also, our office could make good use of office equipment, computers, and furniture that other offices were replacing, if we only knew of their availability. Perhaps some groups could share reception services or office or storage space. In terms of addressing our mandates, we knew that there was a lot of mandate overlap and shared-concerns among the local NGOs, NPGs, and activists. And we all knew that there is strength in numbers, that our efforts to bring about social or political change would be greatly enhanced, if we would combine and focus them such as through joint lobbying or public awareness campaigns. Many groups had collaborated with other groups on an ad hoc basis and even regularly. What was and is still lacking, though, is a mechanism, system, or forum that facilitates collaboration, communication, and co-operation. We and others knew, considered, and sometimes discussed these things. But, for the most part, we never meaningfully pursued them. Later in this report, I present some reasons that the focus group identified as to why initiatives such as these fail to come about.

Nevertheless, there are some collectives in Greater Victoria of which NGOs, NPGs, other types of groups, including faith groups and governments, and individuals may be members. Examples include the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness[5] and the Community Social Planning Council[6]. Other collectives restrict

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[5] "The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness," accessed December 25, 2011, http://www.solvehomelessness.ca

[6] "Community Council Membership Form," accessed December 25, 2011, http://www.communitycouncil.ca/About/membership.html

their memberships to particular types of organizations. For example, the Victoria Labour Council membership consists only of national labour union locals (which are NPGs).[7] I am not aware of any collective in Greater Victoria of which the membership comprises, primarily, diverse NGOs and NPGs.

The Current Socio-Political Context for Local Co-operation and Collectivism

While this isn't the place to discuss, at length, the political context within which local NGOs, NPGs, and activists operate, it is important to point out that many of these groups and individuals are addressing what they perceive to be negative characteristics and symptoms of the hegemonic neoliberal, corporatist culture. Many of these characteristics and symptoms manifest as institutionalized and corporate practices that, because of their prevalence, are almost invisible. Examples include consumerism, sexism, homophobism, speciesism, racism, militarism, and many of the other 'isms that one can name. Of course, many of these 'isms preceded neoliberalism. I would argue, though, that they are important elements of its foundation. (They can also characterize other oppressive systems, such as autocratic tyranny.)

Many of the people who run the local businesses, local governments, and local media are themselves all but blind to these practices or they don't understand them to be a problem, in good part because they receive their doctrine through 'establishment' communications and systems. They have Chambers of Commerce, business networks, the Union of BC Municipalities, big-corporate media monopolies (e.g., TV), and more. Until recently, local NGOs, NPGs, and activists have had almost nothing like these things, notwithstanding some national and international NGO connections, newsletters, the internet, and alternative media.

At the national and international levels, there are NGOs that work, including with some local NGOs and activists, to disrupt, undermine, or displace the system itself. However, whereas neoliberalism is increasingly organized and globalized (virtually by definition), organized and global resistance to it has not kept pace – again, until recently. Globally, there has been an organic emergence of linked resistances – the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, other Arab country uprisings, the Occupy movement – that resonate across and between cultures and classes. Social media play a major role in organizing the movement, at least on the ground.[8] And progressive think-tanks are researching and promoting alternatives to the oppressive status quo.[9] All of these

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[7] "What is the Victoria Labour Council?" accessed December 25, 2011, http://victorialabour.ca/wp3/about

[8] "Protesters Look for Ways to Feed the Web," Jennifer Preston, New York Times, published November 24, 2011, accessed December 27, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/business/media/occupy-movement-focuses-on-staying-current-on-social-networks.html

[9] UVic Sociology Department Professor Bill Carroll is undertaking a comprehensive, 4-year research project on 'Alternative Policy Groups and Transnational Counter-Hegemonic Struggle'. A brief description of the project is found at "Social Movements

developments are gradually making any differential between the concepts 'local' and 'global' nonsensical.

I am not saying that all local NGOs, NPGs and activists are counterposed to neoliberalism or to other oppressive systems.[10] They (e.g., SPCA, MADD) may not be, at least not directly. But by communicating with other community groups and activists, they can learn how they *may* be. Or perhaps, through the mutual sharing of experiences, ideas, and information, they can recognize that another cultural malaise is responsible for the problems that they address. Or more basically, perhaps they can work with other groups simply to share resources.

Next, I describe the design and implementation of the research.

Research in the Department," accessed December 27, 2011, http://web.uvic.ca/soci/research/socmovresearch.php

[10] Indeed, in my definitions of the terms 'NGO' and 'NPG', I purposefully did not exclude groups that may work for neoliberal aims and against social-justice causes.

The Focus Group – A Plan for Diversity

A brief description of the research is that it consisted of some NGO and NPG representatives and some activists who participated together in two focus group sessions to consider the feasibility of establishing some kind of forum, possibly a co-operative, through which they and others in the local NGO/NPG/activist community may communicate, collaborate, and otherwise co-operate. Thus, the research was entirely qualitative. While this is exactly what transpired, a look at how the participant solicitation process unfolded reveals some politics that has implications for the possibility and limits of co-operation within that community.

Throughout the design, organization, and implementation of this project, I had an influence on the nature of the project's outcome. I made a conscious effort to allow the project to proceed fairly organically, though within a simple focus group research framework. Recognizing that the prospective participants are ideologically, socially, and/or politically motivated actors in the community, I wanted this project to be meaningful and possibly useful to them. Whether and how they could co-operate with each other during this project signaled whether and how they could do so in the 'real world'. So, I allowed their input during the participant solicitation phase to influence the composition of the group that eventually emerged. Thus, the group's discussions and views were directly influenced by the prospective participants' input during the solicitation process.

When I first considered the nature of a forum for NGO co-operation, I imagined that its members would be of all stripes, that they wouldn't necessarily be like-minded. The forum itself would enable the members to discover where they could and could not agree, thus delineating opportunities for and barriers to co-operation. I imagined that it might be possible to have, for example, pro-choice and pro-life activists sit at the same table, to agree to set their differences aside, so that they could work together and with others on projects and programs the aims of which they *could* agree upon. Perhaps they could lobby for reduced utility cost rates or work to establish an independent TV program that would fairly present all sides of issues. I expressed this notion in my application to the CCCBE to conduct this project. The CCCBE accepted my application and helped me take it through the university's Human Research Ethics Approval process.

In the Human Research Ethics Approval application, I explained, among other things, how I would deal with possible abusive behavior that I said could arise if a focus group participant were to become overly aggressive during a heated verbal exchange. I stated that I would deal with that problem in three ways. First, I would strongly emphasize to the participants, both before and during the focus group sessions, in writing and verbally, that the group's composition was purposefully diverse, that the sessions were not the forum to debate their differences but to find opportunities for agreement despite their differences, and that mutual respect was paramount. Second, I ensured that the participants understood that they could withdraw from the project at any time, without explanation or consequence. Third, should unacceptable behavior occur, I would be prepared to remove or arrange for the removal of participants, as required, and I would be able to arrange for counseling, as may be appropriate. The

Ethics Board was satisfied with my explanation and approved my research. I was then able to seek participants for the focus group.

My task then was to find twelve participants to meet for two one-and-a-half hour sessions.

Prospective Participants – Self-Defining and Filtering

After I developed a list of prospective participants, some of whom I knew personally, some by reputation, and others not at all, I contacted them. I explained the project and emphasized the diversity aspect of the group. At this point, it became obvious that some groups or individuals would not participate if certain others did. In fact, I learned early on that, if pro-life activists were going to be in the focus group, the group would be very small. Another prospective participant expressed that she would participate only if the other group members were social justice advocates. Thus, some people would engage with only those with whom they considered to be ideologically aligned. I don't know whether pro-life activists would have participated with pro-choice activists.

In response to this, I decided to not invite pro-life advocates to participate and I ensured that all of the participants were social justice advocates. I did this for several pragmatic reasons. First, several people, all social justice advocates/activists, had already agreed to participate in the project. Second, I hadn't yet contacted any pro-life advocates. Third, I was and am much better connected with and knowledgeable of the social justice community than with other sorts of NGOs, NPGs, and activists, so it would be easier for me to find social justice-oriented participants. Fourth, I was becoming aware of the difficulty I was going to have in scheduling a focus group session that would be convenient for twelve busy people; I needed to minimize the difficulties as much as possible.

Another influence on the group's composition was the aforementioned set of precautions against possible abusive behavior during the focus group sessions. Just prior to the first session, one of the participants told me that she had considered not participating because of the possible danger. She decided to participate, nevertheless. It may be that other prospective participants decided not to participate because of their concern of possible danger. So, the knowledge that there could be a potential for abusive behavior during a group session may have had a filtering effect on the group composition. I have no idea whether or how this might have influenced the group discussion. Besides, under the circumstances, this problem was unavoidable.

My attitude in all of this was and is that 'it is what it is'. Yes, I was disappointed – for a split-second – that the group was limiting itself even before it formed. But it wasn't 'my' group. It was the group's group. I didn't want to be the one to make 'membership' criteria decisions for the group. I thought that it was important for the group to consider how it would develop its own membership criteria, (again) as if it were doing so in the 'real world'. My job was to present possibilities, encourage brainstorming, and facilitate discussion. My job was explicitly not to give direction, shape, or content to an outcome. I know, of course, that this is impossible, given that I initiated the project, designed its process, and generated the prospective participant group from which the final group emerged. I even became an active participant (more on that, later).

Scheduling the meetings was probably the greatest single influence on the group's composition, in terms of the number of participants who would participate. Scheduling was difficult. All of the prospective participants are constantly busy, their individual schedules change frequently, and they get tired. This issue is discussed in Part 3 of this report. The times and dates of the focus group sessions that were eventually scheduled were the least worst available. While the site of the meetings – the CCCBE facility at the UVic campus – was convenient for most of the prospective participants, it wasn't universally so. Few of these people were directly affiliated with the university and the building was known to be difficult to find. In fact, one prospective participant didn't get to the meeting because she simply couldn't find it. In the end, of the fourteen activists and NGO/NPG representatives who were interested in participating in the focus groups, only eight made appointments to attend, and only six attended the first session. Only two participants attended the second session.

In view of the low turnout, I decided, at the beginning of the first session, that I would participate in the sessions in the dual role as an NGO representative (of the Victoria Branch of UNA-Canada) and as the focus group session facilitator. I had already intended to contribute in both capacities, but only lightly so as an NGO representative, preferring to allow the group to develop it's own synergy relatively independently of me. However, with only six group members, I felt that my input as a participant would help to generate synergy and to provide more content for discussion.

I had planned all along for the sessions to be informal and conversational. The small group size worked well with that approach. The sessions are better described as meetings. Nevertheless, the first session discussions were guided by questions that I had prepared and the second session discussions were explicitly informed by the discussions of the first session.

The limited attendance was disappointing, of course, and raises the question of interest. Why would activists and NGO/NPG representatives donate their time to participate in some one else's research about the possibilities of co-operating among each other? Clearly, not many would. And why not? The group had some insights concerning these questions.

Before introducing those who did participate, here are some logistic details of the sessions. Both sessions took place in University House 2, the premises of the CCCBE, at the UVic campus. The meeting room doubles as a kitchen and comfortably seats 14 people around a long table. The first session was held on Friday, November 4, 2011, from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. The second session was held on Thursday, December 1, 2011, from 4:35 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. The meetings were audio-recorded and some light refreshments were provided.

The Participants

Despite the filtering that occurred during the participation solicitation phase of the project and despite the small group size, the resultant group was diverse within the social justice spectrum and that extended into the realm of environmentalism and concern with the global ecology. I should point out that none of the participants were among those who said that they would not meet with pro-life advocates or that they would meet with only social-justice advocates.

All of the participants were given the option to waive their right to anonymity, confidentiality, or both. All but one of the participants waived their right to both. In this report, I refer to the person who did not waive those rights as 'Pat' and I shall refer to the organization that s/he represents as 'Agency'. Anything that I present has having been said by Pat is a paraphrase. Here, then, are the participants:

Chris Cook (session 1)
- Editor – "Pacific Free Press," http://www.pacificfreepress.com
- Host – "Gorilla Radio," CFUV 101.0 FM, http://cfuv.uvic.ca

Jill Leslie (session 1)
- Coordinator – Amnesty in Victoria, http://www.amnestyinvictoria.ca

Jackie MacDonald (session 1)
- Transition Victoria, http://transitionvictoria.ning.com

Jean McRae (session 1)
- Executive Director – Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA), http://www.icavictoria.org

Pat (sessions 1 and 2)
- Agency

Mark Reed (sessions 1 and 2)
- Community Fellow Researcher (2011-12) – Centre for Co-operative and Community-Based Economy (CCCBE), University of Victoria (UVic), http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cccbe
- Director – Victoria Branch, United Nations Association in Canada (UNA-Canada), unac.victoria@gmail.com

Joan Russow, PhD (sessions 1 and 2)
- Global Compliance Research Project
- Editor – "Peace, Earth, & Justice News," http://www.pej.org/html/index.php

Some of the participants already knew each other. Most, though not all, were already familiar with each other's work or that of the organizations that they represented in this project.

PART 3: WHAT THE GROUP SAID

The findings presented here were distilled from the discussions of the focus group participants during both sessions. I have not added any material that originated from outside the group. Where I do add commentary, it is my own and is explanatory only. I sometimes identify (in brackets) the individual participants who provided comments or ideas.

Benefits of Co-operation

Much of the group's consideration of the benefits of co-operation among community NGOs, NPGs, and activists was not specific to any particular means of co-operation, but inferred a sort of generic, unidentified, informal communication and co-operation means. The group did discuss co-operatives and other means of co-operation; I will present that discussion later. But here, I present the advantages that the group considered could result through communication and co-operation generally. It is important to note that the advantages and benefits accrue not only to those who are communicating and co-operating. Potentially everyone and everything who/that is a concern of those groups and activists can benefit.

The group implicitly considered communication to be a form of co-operation and that communication and co-operation can lead to collaboration. The most elemental co-operative act would arguably be to express a willingness to communicate and that willingness was implicitly taken as a given.

Mutual Awareness

The foremost benefit of communication among the NGO, NPG, and activist community is simply and importantly the awareness of each others' interests, concerns, perspectives, mandates, areas of knowledge and expertise, programs, and projects. This awareness enables these community actors to consider whether and how they can further co-operate. The group identified many ways that they could co-operate. They also identified challenges, limitations, and barriers to co-operation; I will present those later.

Better Knowledge through Information Sharing

Perhaps the most useful form of co-operation that the group identified is the sharing of information. Many examples were provided of instances in which group members' organizations or they themselves personally sought information from other organizations in order to better understand or address a situation or undertake an activity. That it makes sense to share information recognizes that many organizations share many concerns and interests. It also demonstrates the interrelatedness of the issues themselves. For example, group members pointed out that not only does climate change affect the whole globe, it also impacts immigration (Jean), health, poverty, and water availability (Joan). Pat recommended the book Tropic of Chaos, by Christian Parenti, which is about the intersection of poverty, warfare, and climate.[11]

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[11] Christian Parenti, Topic of Chaos: Climate Wars and the New Geography of Violence, New York: Nation Books, 2011.

Sometimes, world events arise to which groups feel compelled to respond even if just to express an opinion, but the groups realize that they first need better information. Joan described how the Victoria Peace Coalition is sometimes asked for its input on international developments, such as a particular war. The Coalition would sometimes, in turn, call upon another group, one that is closer to the event through its ethnicity-centered member base, for example, for its input on the conflict in its ancestral country. This would result in a more informed response, one that might even be opposite to one that would have been made with only the information initially available.

Communication with other closer-to-the-ground groups can correct assumptions, as well. It's not true that we all want the same things, contrary to the inference of the Golden Rule (Mark). Pat related a story in which s/he complimented some people on their beautiful, picturesque rural home only to be surprised to learn that they were very unhappy with having to live in such an awful place. Similarly, some issues are very complex and have multiple stakeholders. Sometimes, the NGOs can get it wrong or get it too simplistically. So, "it's good," as Joan put it, "when an issue comes up to be able to . . . have people with different backgrounds coming together, you can have a better idea of the complexity of it." She also told the group how NGO activists outside of the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun were calling for less stringent remedial measures than what scientists and Bolivia were calling for. She said, "If NGOs are participating at the international level, they have to really pay attention to what the developing countries want."

Pat informed the group of author Peter Russell's metaphor that the world's population is essentially a global brain, to the extent that everyone on it communicates with each other.[12] Similarly, community members are a community brain, to the extent that they communicate with each other. Pat added that the use of Twitter is akin to synapses firing off in the human brain.

Self/Group Reflection

Information sharing among NGOs, NPGs and activists is beneficial even when there is no particular or immediate application for its use. It would be good, the group thought, if a forum were available simply to share ideas and values, present and debate points of view, express one's struggles, experiences, and feelings, or declare one's objectives. The forum would be a sort of sounding board for ideas (Joan). Sharing them with each other would help individuals to clarify and challenge their own values (Joan) and it would bring awareness of how one's own or one's group's positions fit with those of others. This type of sharing could facilitate movement or change and could lead to some synthesis (Pat). As well, it could engender new initiatives.

But even without outcomes such as those, there is benefit. Jean expressed how nice it was simply to communicate and to learn about each other without having to work towards some objective or commit to a formal alliance. In a moment of self-reflection, she said, "I have to say that just being here, I'm thinking, 'This is kind of nice. I'm hearing about what other people are thinking. I don't spend a lot of time [doing this kind of thing].'"

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[12] Peter Russell, The Global Brain: The Awakening Earth for a New Century, 3rd edition, Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2007.

Greater Effectiveness

NGOs, NPGs, and activists can be more effective when they co-operate and collaborate with each other. For example, as the Occupied Movement has demonstrated, there is no single cohesive view opposing the hegemonic system of oppression imposed by the "1%". Instead, the Movement is itself at once an organic global forum for and expression of the co-operation and collaboration of a multitude of diverse, geographically disparate individuals and groups with almost as many points of view. It can be seen as an example of a global equivalent to a local forum for co-operation that is being explored here (Joan, Mark).

Pat pointed out that some people will accept information, particularly unpopular information, from one source but not from another. When multiple voices deliver the same message, the credibility of each of those voices is bolstered, solidarity among the speakers develops, and the message has more force and effect.

Greater Capacity to Address Complex Issues

Issues are increasingly understood to be increasingly interrelated and complex. Organizations and activists working independently generally have less capacity to address issues than when they work together. Collaborations facilitate multi-disciplinary attention and analysis and can produce many interrelated and complex answers (Jean). Funders recognize this, too. They increasingly insist that the projects they fund be undertaken by consortiums and alliances. This is especially the case when project outcomes are intended to guide industry/government actions (Pat, Joan). Sometimes, this insistence results in unlikely alliances, such as First Nations groups and industry; I present the group's thoughts on this, later.

Collaborations have the additional benefit of building individuals' and groups' expertise and skills in recognizing how broad-based knowledge can address particular topics. This ability to understand the interrelatedness of issues and disciplines is itself becoming a valuable, specialized skill (Joan).

Operational and Organizational Improvements

Aside from the benefits that communication and co-operation can bring to how well groups and individual activists can fulfill their mandates, there can be operational and financial benefits, as well. Many NGOs and NPGs struggle to pay just their rent, if they can even afford space, and many lone activists have few or no resources at all. The sharing of resources, such as space, office equipment, reception, and databases, even possibly through time-share, could help to redirect time and money normally spent on operational needs to programs and projects (Mark).

Space, particularly meeting space, is a common and consistent scarcity (Jackie). Some NGOs, such as the ICA, rent space from churches. The ICA has, in turn, been able to rent out, very cheaply, some of its space to certain small groups. But various constraints make that increasingly difficult to do (Jean). Transition Victoria has managed to hold some meetings in a boardroom provided by the Victoria Foundation (Jackie) and Amnesty Victoria, with the help of an Amnesty group on the university campus, has been meeting in university classrooms (Jill). These examples illustrate both the need for and practice of co-operation. Broader and deeper co-operation,

especially with the better funded NGOs and NPGs, would increase the overall capacity to fulfill mandates.

Barriers, Limits, and Downsides to Co-operation

There are some compelling reasons why some NGOs, NPGs and activists would choose not to co-operate, at least formally or openly, with each other or with particular groups or individuals. And the simple lack of time and money makes new co-operation initiatives difficult, despite willingness to undertake them.

Incompatible Allies

For a variety of reasons, some NGOs and NPGs will not associate with certain others or with certain activists. In some instances, these others are considered to be too extreme, whether politically or operationally. One such person whom the group discussed is independent environmental activist Ingmar Lee. Chris said that Ingmar, a friend of his, had just been sentenced, a few weeks previous, for illegal activities related to his opposition to the logging of old-growth trees on Vancouver Island. Organizations with 'non-profit' status need to be careful that they don't risk that status by associating with hard-core activists such as Ingmar. For the same reason, hard-core activists don't apply for 'non-profit' status. It has too many constraints (Chris).

This is not the type of situation wherein ideologies are opposed, though they couldn't be said to align. Rather, they vary in their means to achieve generally agreed-upon ends. Ingmar is very critical of organizations like the Sierra Club because, as Chris said, "they're spending all their time assuaging donors and not getting down to brass tacks, not getting active, and that time is of the essence and so he climbs up a flagpole and hangs a banner . . . and that was one of the charges." NGOs and NPGs that negotiate with government and industry prefer not to be linked with such behavior, even if they may appreciate the efforts. And they, nevertheless, achieve significant results through negotiation (Pat).

The group considered how NGOs and NPGs could support people like Ingmar without risk to their ability to address issues as they see fit. I present these considerations, later.

Registered charities have more constraints than non-charities have on their lobbying efforts and other campaigns. They also have to be cognizant that any activities they undertake and associations they develop don't alienate their donors. This is especially true of large charities because their donors tend to be more conservative. For the same reason, the ICA must be careful as to whom it lets use the space that it rents from a church, as earlier mentioned. There could even be liability issues, if insurance is involved. If a space is being used for activities that weren't anticipated and an insurance claim arises, the insurance could be denied (Jean).

Even if an organization has no formal constraints on it activities, it still needs to consider that its activities and associations are reasonably harmonious with the intentions and vision of the people who built and support the organization (Jean, Jackie).

Lack of Resources

Two barriers to working together in new ways are the lack of resources, particularly time and money. The general feeling was that people who do this type of work are already overwhelmed and have little energy, time, or money to bring to yet another organization. Everybody laughed in agreement when Pat said that we probably all have this feeling that we're always behind and always being drawn into new initiatives. A downside of working with a lot of people, Pat said, is that it's difficult to focus in on what's of most importance, in terms of one's own goals. Jill added, referring to the Left Coast Events, a periodic email listing of community events of interest to activists and other socio-politically-minded people, "I see dozens of things on it which work that are absolutely essential that I go to them, but I never actually make any of them because there just isn't the time." The group concurred.

Money is equally scarce. The NGO, NPG, and activist community is very reliant upon volunteers and donations. Jean related that, several years ago, she was among a group of social service providers who decided to start a co-operative. She said,

> And we started a bank account. My organization put $225 in it. It's the only money that's in there. Things shifted I terms of the configuration of organizations and nobody had time to do it. It was just like, everybody was too maxed out to have time to concentrate on something that wasn't really urgent.

Membership Criteria

When I raised the question of what sort of membership criteria could be considered for some kind of association of NGOs, NPGs, and activists, Chris suggested that membership be based upon individuals' acceptance of

> motherhood principles that are broad enough that individuals, even if they are representing organizations, they can comfortably put their names on it, because these are issues that are of common decency, that everybody can safely say that, "Well, yeah, I believe that it's wrong to murder women and children with laser-guided bombs arbitrarily." Now, who will rightly say that that's wrong?

> I pointed out that the people who do that would not sign on.

Chris explained that the approach that he just suggested would allow people to sign on who might not if they felt that it would be inappropriate for them to do so as representatives of some organization. Jean said that organizations can and do join other organizations that are more activist-oriented than their own organization is. If the issue alignment is strong and well known enough, the linkage is almost expected. Her own organization, the ICA, does that.

Jean continued, saying that it's the needs of the individuals that compel them to form and join organizations with others who have similar needs but who may have different points of view and interests, though they share concerns for the same general issues.

She said that the ICA also belongs "to networks where we get to go and be reasonable." It's a strategy that ensures that they are seen to be not too radical, in order not to risk, e.g., government cuts to services that are important to the ICA.

Tactics & Compromises

In addition to participating as individuals in an association of like-minded people who happen to represent some NGOs and NPGs, there are other tactics that the NGO, NPG, and activist community members can use to co-operate among themselves.

A problem that often arises is the conflation of a person's views and statements with those of an organization that the person belongs to or represents. A good example is David Suzuki's relationship with the David Suzuki Foundation. When he speaks, people think that he's speaking for the Foundation. And that isn't necessarily so (Pat). Joan had the same difficulty when she was the Leader of the Green Party of Canada. It was a relief to her, afterward, that she could say things that she couldn't say while in that position. Others in the group experienced the same difficulty, especially when it came to signing petitions and writing opinion pieces. They had to be careful to distance themselves from the organizations that they were known to be associated with or represent. And that is essentially how the problem is addressed. As Jean put it, "You have to be very careful. But that doesn't mean there's not things that we wouldn't sign." She also added that it's a good idea for an organization to identify the limits of what it can comment on with any credibility.

Similarly, organizations and activists must weigh the pros and cons of working with others on individual projects, especially if they are co-authoring reports. Working together suggests alliances that may not exist. Even if co-authors are allies, they are not identical. It can happen that co-authors don't even agree on some of the main conclusions. It's a compromise that one must decide whether or not to make (Pat).

Another approach to getting around the constraints of being a part of or associated with an organization that one needs to be careful to protect is to create a new group, one that can take more risks and doesn't have to worry about funding or charitable status limitations. The ICA did that. Jean said that, "a few year back, we knew we needed to do some straight-up advocacy work and so we just formed a parallel [group], gave it a new name, said 'this is who we are,' same characters at the table, it's not associated to that other organization which has charitable status and funding and other things."

Joan added that, "It's often the other way around. . . . [T]here was a more radical group who was trying to stop the nuclear ships coming in . . . [T]hey set up [an organization with] charitable status for peace education." Jean said that she did that same thing, as well.

Ingmar's name came up again. The group was considering how organizations can support independent, hard-core activists like Ingmar without risking losing support for their own projects or otherwise be hindered. Additionally, as Chris put it, "I think it's important that the radical and the median have some kind of discourse and coordination." Other examples of people who some in the group suggested could use

support for their courage and conviction include NASA scientist James Hanson[13] and former Senate Page Brigette DePape.[14] Chris suggested that an arms-length pool of funds, a small percentage of organizations' resources, be organized to support efforts that they "might not agree with entirely . . . [but] agree with the need for more than one message." Jackie suggested that responses could be more ad hoc, such as to create websites with petitions for individuals to sign in support of such activists and their actions. Organizations could thereby facilitate the support without actually endorsing those activists or their actions. Jean reiterated the need to be careful to respect the people who fed into the vision of the organizations, to recognize that there isn't consensus on controversial activism. But she agreed that, "there's certainly ways to give support in a back door kind of way, that is real support." This discussion reminded Joan of Voltaire's comment, "The best is the enemy of the good," to which Chris responded, "But, they're all necessary . . . the best [and] the good are necessary."

Challenges

There are other challenges for co-operation among diverse groups and people. Though identified earlier, the challenge of working with diverse members is framed differently here. Given a broad range of perspectives and opinions, how would a group reach decisions or agree on positions? Opting out or signing as individuals does not work if the aim is to speak or act as a single entity. The group needs to know when it can and cannot claim consensus. And it needs to be up-front about it. In group decision-making, there needs to be some mechanism for disagreement (Pat). Otherwise, the outcome is the lowest common denominator outcome; the strong outlier position is lost. The process should allow for difference of opinion and, should that carry through to the decision outcome, that fact should be made explicit. Such outcomes don't carry the same weight as unanimous decisions, but the positions that are expressed are stronger and more fairly represented (Joan).

A challenge to everyone involved in an association of NGOs, NPGs, and activists would be in how to deal with all of the new available information. Sharing the information is one thing. Absorbing it is another matter. There has recently emerged, however, a very useful kind of electronic communications-based, information provider service, known as 'data aggregation'. Data aggregators – usually individual people or small activist groups – gather information on given topics and then compile, filter, and organize it, usually chronologically, for the end user. This service produces much more pertinent results than that produced by a Google search, for example (Pat). The challenge of absorbing information is not thereby eliminated, but it is less daunting.

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[13] James Hansen was arrested in 2009 while protesting with others against mountaintop coal mining. "James Hansen," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, accessed January 2, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Hansen

[14] Brigette DePape was a Canadian Senate Page who disrupted the Throne Speech in 2011 by silently holding a sign in plain view that said, "Stop Harper." "Brigette DePape," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, accessed January 2, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigette_DePape

Providing information to the general members and/or supporters of each of the respective coalition partners is a similar challenge. Especially within single-issue organizations, members and supporters sometimes complain when they receive information about issues or event that they don't consider are directly related to the cause that they are supporting. They sometimes complain even when the directly-related-to-their-cause mail that they do receive exceeds the amount of mail that they were told they would receive. Funders, too, prefer that the organizations that they support stick to one issue. Some organizations, such as the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, have learned to send out information focused on very specific topics. This is all unfortunate because all of these issues and events are interrelated in important ways and they cannot be addressed in isolation. Limiting outgoing information ignores the larger issues as well as the larger community (Joan). Pat pointed out that those members and supporters may be saturated with information, too.

Forum Options

The group casually mentioned several alternatives to a formal NGO, NPG, activist co-operative. There was no discussion as to their relative merits, with respect to possible needs. Nor was there discussion as to making a move to organize a forum. So, the thoughts on them here are more description than comment.

I pointed out that relationships, whether at the individual activist or group level or of the whole could be formal or informal and short-term/ad-hoc or long term. I also suggested that it's conceivable for two (or more) very diverse groups, perhaps even enemies, to belong to a third organization. The UN is a good example of this third type of organization. Why couldn't a charity, for example, belong to some other organization? Jean didn't think that it would be problem. Jill said that it would be, if the third organization were a political party. Besides, she said, "there are affiliations that would not be well looked upon." Yet, that political party and the charity could be members of another organization (Mark).

The group considered a few terms. An 'association' seems not to require the sharing of principles, whereas a 'coalition' does (Joan). A 'network' "doesn't sound as though everybody shares the same views on various issues," said Joan. And Pat commented that 'network' no longer manifests in the physical world, that it implies a virtual organization. A 'collective' was considered an open enough term to encompass such organizations as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Earth First! and the Wilderness Committee and closed enough to exclude organizations not explicitly concerned with the natural environment (Pat).

Having presented the discussions of the focus group participants, I'll now address what they can mean in terms of the possibilities of the local NGO, NPG, activist community organizing itself into a cohesive entity.

PART 4: WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

First of all, it seems obvious that there won't, any time soon, be a collective of local NGOs, NPGs, and activists so diverse that, through it, ideologically opposed individuals will share their thoughts in order to discover how they may more easily and effectively achieve their opposing aims. There is cautious consideration, though, for the possibility of an informal collective of local NGOs, NPGs, and activists who approximately share ideologies and aims but some of whom may employ means that most disagree with. This assumes, of course, that the latter group would be interested in belonging to such a collective. And except for the lack of resources, especially time and money, there is some interest in the possibility of local, like-minded activists and representatives of NGOs and NPGS to at least occasionally communicate and discuss how they might co-operate and collaborate with each other. But the lack of either time or money is sufficient to negate that possibility.

Also, the aforementioned 'cautious consideration' and degree of 'interest' are that of only a 7-member group of social justice advocates and environmentalists. We don't know what other social justice advocates or environmentalists might have said. Nor do we know what advocates and activists for other 'causes', such as individual freedom or Christian fundamentalism, would have said. Nevertheless, this group of seven (including me) would seem to entertain the possibility of participating in a collective of social-justice and environmentalism-oriented NGOs, NPGs, and activists, given the availability of time and money, even if we had to overcome some of the challenges and problems ourselves. We participated in this project. We are at least interested.

And looking at some recent developments in Greater Victoria and around the world, we are not alone. The Occupy Movement demonstrates the need for and the practice of co-operation among people with diverse concerns a preponderance of which are social justice-related. And the Movement is just one, hugely significant, real-life example of one type of forum for co-operation. A variety of forums can coexist and even co-operate together.

I am aware of two other attempts to bring local activists together during this past year. One was a call to the local, independent media community. Initial response was promising, there having been two meetings of about a dozen representatives of various types of media. However, there has not yet been a subsequent meeting, reflecting, likely, the familiar problem of the lack of resources (time and money, mostly) needed to organize it and develop initiatives. The other attempt to connect local activists is through SocialCoast, "a non-profit organization designed to create a central hub for the environmental and social justice movement in Victoria, B.C."[15] Being an online forum, not a lot of resources are required to be connected with it and through it. On January 3, 2012, six months after the project was initiated, it had 178 members. Hopefully, the members can bring resources that will enable the forum to facilitate substantial co-operation and collaboration.

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[15] "Our Story," Social Coast, accessed January 3, 2012,
http://socialcoast.org/index.php/our-story--who-we-are

In early December 2011, journalist/activist Nick Fillmore wrote an online call for "the creation of a large progressive cooperative movement in the country – a cooperative venture that would include hundreds of groups."[16] He wants to work with interested groups to make this happen.

These three initiatives, plus this present research project, not to mention the Occupy Movement, and the responses to them clearly illustrate that there is a broad-based need and impulse for co-operation at least among those who are concerned with social justice and environmental issues. At the same time, the fact that there is both a need and impulse that remain unfulfilled also reveals that there are significant and ongoing barriers, downsides, and challenges to co-operation.

It seems to me that, though the group that came together for this project didn't dwell much on the problem of the lack of time and money, that could be because that problem is so dominant and relatively insurmountable. The group was able to provide interesting and creative solutions to deal with the other sorts of challenges. In the NGO, NPG, and activist community, the lack of time and money is an ongoing absolute. However interesting a new project may seem to be and however well challenges to it may be worked out, if individuals are already overwhelmed with work associated with their primary interests and if working at another new project means to divert limited funds to it, then they are unlikely to engage with the new project.

Based upon the input provided by this project's participants, I suggest this: In addition to communicating via online forums, the local, diverse, social justice and environment advocacy community could meet at a convenient venue (not at UVic), say, once each month. Perhaps this could be organized by some SocialCoast members. At each meeting, a few participants could explain their work, ask for project partners on an ad hoc basis, solicit ideas or information, suggest joint initiatives, and more. There could be a resource-sharing session or space (that could be online, too) and there could be guest speakers. The venue and refreshments could be donated by those whom the organizers approve. (Some elements of this suggestion are similar to what the Camas Books & Infoshop Collective does, though within a narrower frame of reference.[17]) Some people will show up. They will be attracted by the opportunity to share ideas and have their positions challenged in a relaxed and enjoyable social setting and without the pressure of being expected to make commitments, though they could if they so wished.

When I first proposed this research project to the CCCBE, I imagined that a formal co-operative might emerge from it, though I wasn't particularly advocating it. It seems that the local NGOs, NPGs, and activists could indeed benefit from having some organized means to facilitate co-operation and collaboration, but a co-operative is too rigid and taxing a forum. A more organic, dynamic, and less demanding forum or set of forums seems preferable.

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[16] "A Different Point of View," accessed January 3, 2012, http://nickfillmore.blogspot.com/2011/12/focus-and-determination-required-call.html

[17] Camas Books & Infoshop, accessed January 3, 2012, camas.ca

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