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Environmental Conservation NGOs and the Concept of Sustainable Development

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A Research into the Value Systems of Greenpeace International, WWF International and IUCN International

ABSTRACT. On the background of the widely known and controversially discussed concept of sustainable development and the ever increasing influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on social, environmental and economic issues, this article focuses on how NGOs, specialised in environmental protection and conservation issues, reacted to the holistic societal concept of sustainable development which aims at finding solutions not only to environmental, but also to social and economic issues. For this purpose, the article investigates whether and to what extent the sustainability concept has been adopted by three worldwide leading environmental conservation NGOs: Greenpeace International, WWF International and IUCN International. The research, conducted in early 2006, reveals that the three organisations integrated the sustainability concept to different degrees depending on the organisations' dominant value set. The more an organisation is bound to the idea of environmental protection, the less it is inclined to adopt strategies stemming from the sustainability concept whose implicit value system contradicts a strong bio- or eco-centric position. This finding adds evidence to the assumption that the holistic sustainability concept is most likely to be reduced and adapted when addressed by a specialised societal actor such as an NGO. Such insight into the influence of value systems on the actual actions of pressure groups might also be valuable in the light of the ever increasing number of

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strategic partnerships between NGOs and the private sector. To be familiar with each others' action-leading key assumptions can significantly contribute to establishing a sound basis for a fruitful and rewarding collaboration.

Environmental conservation NGOs and the concept of sustainability

Western societies are traditionally made up of three overlapping sectors: government, the private sector and civil society. However, the continuing globalisation of markets and societies as well as the increasing role of multinational corporations and the new electronic communication technologies have caused a substantial reduction in the powers of the nation state to shape development and engage in environmental and social issues (Albrow, 1998; Altvater, 1997; Ronit and Schneider, 2000). Due to this new redistribution of power, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) gained momentum and started to play an increasingly decisive role in the political and social arenas. Consequently, NGOs are nowadays involved in many decision-making processes in prominent fields such as human rights, poverty alleviation or environmental protection (Altvater et al., 1997; Brunnengräber et al., 2005; Deler, 1998; Fowler, 2000; Heins, 2002). The impact of this steadily increasing involvement on the third player, the private sector, is significant. Along with the role of the dominant socio-political force on the planet, business has to face a whole range of new

responsibilities towards society and the environment. These responsibilities are at the centre of most NGO–business interactions, with the NGOs representing the interests of society and/or nature, thereby standing in for their core values and beliefs. It can therefore be argued that the value set of an NGO – as well as respective changes in it – is of vital importance for any business as it outlines potential topics and issues that might be taken up by the NGO.

However, the political and structural changes of the last 20 years did not only bring about a shift in the international power structure, but also led to the rise of several new concepts, aiming at finding solutions to problems linked to the ongoing globalisation process. Without doubt, *the concept of sustainable development*, introduced in 1987 in the context of the so-called Brundtland report "Our common future", is one of the most widely discussed and generally acknowledged concepts. As such it has, for example, been integrated into the UN Millennium Declaration as Goal No 7 named "Ensure Environmental Sustainability", covering three specific sub-targets (www.un.org/milleniumsgoals, retrieved July 29, 2006) and was again prominently addressed in the frame of the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development in 2002 (www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/POI_PD.htm, retrieved July 29, 2006).

These two driving elements in question, i.e. environmental NGOs and the concept of sustainable development, did not only appear in the same period of time, but were (and still are) often related to each other. Accordingly, the international civil society community has promptly reacted to the new concept, especially in the wake of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A significant number of organisations, in the first place those primarily involved in environmental-related issues, started to adopt the idea (Brühl, 2005; Wahl, 1997). This development seized not only the bigger, internationally active NGOs, but also smaller, local initiatives which often became involved in the sustainability discussion through the respective local Agenda 21.

As sensible as this alliance first appears, it is not immediately evident when looking at the immanent conceptual and structural frictions. On the one hand, these frictions are due to *fundamental conceptual differences between the ideas of sustainable development and environmental protection*. On the other hand, they result from the *structural difficulty* for pressure groups dedicated to the specific goal of environmental conservation to deal with a holistic societal concept, aiming at integrating economic, social and environmental concerns in view of a more just, respectively, more balanced world order.

With respect to the *conceptual differences* between the ideas of sustainable development and environmental protection, the following basic considerations have been made. In the case of the sustainability concept, this article starts from the very first and most frequently quoted definition, stemming from the report "Our Common Future", published by the so-called Brundtland Commission in 1987. In this document, sustainable development is defined as "[…] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

This definition was later concretised and operationalised by the German Helmholtz-Association group working on sustainability issues,[1] thereby identifying three specific elements that were found constitutive for the understanding of the normative concept of sustainable development. First, it is *the postulate of the intra- and inter-generational justice*, representing the core criteria of sustainable development. These two dimensions are coequal and belong together, resulting in the fact that whatever is requested for future generations may also be claimed by present generations. The second constitutive element is *the global orientation*, originating from the fact that the Brundtland commission was charged with presenting a worldwide change programme to formulate goals for the world community. The commission itself described its mission as to underline the importance of establishing the concept as *a global ethics*. The third element, *the anthropocentric approach*, is a core characteristic in so far as the Brundtland definition focuses on the importance of an intact environment *with respect to mankind*. To stably satisfy human needs is considered to be the primary goal of sustainable development. This position is strongly supported by principles 1–3 of the Rio declaration from 1992, impeding any justification on a non-anthropocentric basis (Grunwald et al., 2001; Kopfmüller et al., 2001).[2]

The second approach to be under consideration is that of environmental conservation and protection.

It is a concern that led to the first steps at the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning, environmental protection manifested itself in the foundation of several national parks,[3] followed by the first international conferences[4] and the foundation of international environmental organisations such as IUCN, WWF and Greenpeace from the 1940s onward.[5] All these efforts were carried by the ideal to conserve what was left of nature and wilderness. The most important concern was to preserve the species and to stem towards zero growth and consumption renouncement. The concept is oriented towards the conservation of the *status quo*; it aims at protecting nature for the sake of its intrinsic value and not in order to meet mankinds needs (Bätzing, 2003).

As mentioned above, *structural differences* are, apart from the *conceptual differences*, the second challenge for environmental NGOs when confronted with the holistic nature of the sustainability concept. By nature, NGOs are societal pressure groups dedicated to promote specific causes and often backed by a like-minded support community. As such they are a vivid expression of and example for what is called in sociology ''functional differentiation''. This fundamental sociological concept goes back to early sociological theories, as e.g. outlined by Durkheim (Durkheim, 1996), and describes the ongoing specialisation and distribution of duties among the members of a social group, community, society, etc. The modernity of a social body/entity is seen as directly related to its degree of specialisation, i.e. its ''functional differentiation''.

In this understanding, the development of society is seen as an evolutionary process, in analogy to biological processes. By means of functional specialisation of the particular parts, called ''division of labour'', the whole system grows more complex and efficient. Simultaneously, the particular parts are principally no longer meant to fulfil other than their specific tasks.

Applying this idea to environmental NGOs as specialised societal actors, it implies that, as a basic principle, any work outside the original ecological dimension represents ''new territory'' and requires the NGO to, sooner or later, position itself with respect to the new topic by adapting its original orientation accordingly.

This challenging situation caused by the holistic nature of the sustainability concept which, almost by definition, overcharges specialised social actors is at the heart of this research. How environmental conservation NGOs reacted to the comprehensive concept will be investigated and what possibilities specialised actors have when confronted with a generally acknowledged concept that exceeds their original ''terms of reference'' will be considered.

In the present case, the situation is additionally reinforced by the fact that environmental protection and sustainable development differ substantially in their conceptions as outlined above. Therefore, a (partial) integration of the latter does inevitably imply a constitutive change in orientation. Such changes in orientation are generally reflected and expressed in the respective strategy and mission documents, as research in the frame of organisational theory has shown (Gagliardi, 1986; Pant and Lachman, 1998).

With respect to the question as to how and under what circumstances changes in orientation take place within organisations, references are made to the discussion on the organising character of norms and values. This theoretical conception is linked to Parsonian functionalism, in first place to his theory of social action and the social system.[6] Making explicit reference to Durkheim, Parsons stated that values serve to maintain the patterned integrity of the system. Entering the social system through socialisation and learning, the values of the cultural system guide the respective actor in his decisions. They influence what is considered a goal and what means are selected to achieve it. In that sense, according to Parsons, there is a normative orientation to social action. Any change in action must therefore go back to or involve a change in the underlying normative orientation (Boudon, 2001; Parsons, 1967).

Considering more current publications on organisational change, it appears that ''value'' does not represent a predominant analytical category. This is especially the case for the discussion on the influence of values on organisational change. It was only by the mid-1990s that certain researchers started to recognise the links between institutional theory and organisational change (Amis et al., 2002). In contrast to this, the role of values in determining how organisations are structured and operated has been widely discussed by institutional theorists. Correspondingly, authors such as DiMaggio and Powell (1991) or Brint and Karabel (1991) indicated that

neo-institutionalism is more focused on the structuring and functioning of institutional forms than their alteration (Amis et al., 2002). Although the respective theoretical developments tend to concentrate on the persistence of structures and systems rather than their transformation, certain considerations are nevertheless very valuable when analysing change processes – the more as the concept of neo-institutionalism indeed takes into account the role of values (Preisendörfer, 2005). It starts from the idea that organisations operate in an environment consisting of other organisations/institutions, commonly called the institutional environment, in which every institution is influenced by the broader environment. The main goal for all institutions consists in surviving. In order to do so, they have not only to perform economically, but also need to establish legitimacy within the world of institutions (Hasse and Krücken, 1999). It has therefore been stated by institutional theorists that organisations have higher chances of survival when demonstrating conformity to the values of the institutional environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This correlation goes back to the fact that societal institutions, as much as the general public, tend to assess an organisation in function of alignment of the organisation's structural and procedural characteristics with prevailing institutional values. According to neo-institutionalism, conformity to the externally prescribed values can only be advantageous for the institution in question: it gives the organisation enhanced legitimacy and status, improves its level of predictability and stability, reduces the likelihood of being scrutinized by external bodies and finally opens up the chance of getting access to scarce resources (Amis et al., 2002).

Drawing on the insights of neo-institutionalism, it can be stated that not only the values of individuals and groups (Beck, 1981; Gagliardi, 1986), but also those inherent in an institutional environment significantly shape strategy choice and implementation of the parties concerned. Societal actors are therefore constantly challenged to position themselves with respect to the new value-sets introduced or promoted by other actors in the institutional environment.

Following this train of thoughts, Pant and Lachman focused their research on the way values affect strategy choice and implementation by focusing on the social control they exert. They distinguish between core and peripheral values, defining core values as values that are high consensus and exert high control, whereas peripheral values are low consensus values and exert low control. One of their findings is that organisations will be more prepared to adopt strategies whose implicit value systems fit their own values, than those that are distinct from them. Consequently, differing peripheral values have a greater chance to enter an existing value set than differing core values (Pant and Lachman, 1998).

Relating these theoretical considerations back to the research question of the present article, it shall be examined how specialised societal actors – in the present case environmental NGOs – reacted to the new sustainability concept, a holistic concept brought up by the institutional environment and focusing no longer primarily on conservation issues, but trying to find ways how to reconcile human needs with ecological restrictions and economic general conditions. Taking into account the differing degrees of social control exerted by values, the hypothesis is that NGOs integrate wide-ranging concepts introduced by the institutional environment such as the sustainability concept to differing degrees. The actual degree of integration is supposed to depend on whether the sustainability-related values conflict with existing core values of the respective NGO. The more such conflict occurs, the less the idea of sustainable development will be picked up and promoted, which in turn – according to neo-institutional theory – reduces the organisation's chances of survival as a result of this lack of conformity to the (predominant) values of the institutional environment.

Research setting

In order to exemplify the question as to what extent environmental protection NGOs integrated the sustainability concept, three major players will be studied: Greenpeace International, IUCN International and WWF International. Apart from the fact that they were all established well before the rise of the sustainability concept and therefore started with an organisational value set oriented towards environmental protection, they have been chosen because of their worldwide impact and radiation. This is especially true from a western European point of view where these organisations are generally

considered to rank among the most influential and trustworthy ones in the field of environmental conservation. Without doubt, there are substantial structural differences between the three organisations (e.g. IUCN International is a predominately science-based organisation while Greenpeace International and WWF International are more involved in direct operational activities), but these differences should carry no weight as the article analyses the general, underlying documents covering the respective mission and strategy decisions.

To investigate to what extent the sustainability concept has been integrated by these environmental NGOs, values that are reflected in their mission and strategy will be analysed. To do this, the respective documents will be examined against the background of five key questions covering the main aspects of the concept of sustainable development. Three questions result from the constitutive elements of the sustainability understanding as outlined in the last chapter (global orientation, inter- and intra-generational justice and anthropocentric approach). Additionally, it will be checked whether the sustainability idea is addressed in mission, strategy and other relevant documents and whether all three dimensions of sustainable development are taken into account and promoted.[7]

This leads to the following five key questions:

1. Is the sustainability concept mentioned in mission and strategy documents?
2. Are all three dimensions of sustainable development promoted?
3. Is the global orientation expressed?
4. Are the aspects of inter- and intra-generational justice supported?
5. Is the anthropocentric approach constitutive?

As far as the actual method is concerned, the research, carried out in early 2006,[8] consisted of an in-depth text analysis of the relevant documents available on the internet sites of the three organisations, including the respective annual reports dating from 2001 to 2005.[9] Covering the research topic by analysing the publicly available documents goes back to the decision to approach the actual research topic "from the outside". To start with, it seemed advisable to first analyse the NGOs' official self-representation with respect to the "new" concept.[10] In addition to the in-depth text analysis, a semantic analysis was indicated in the case of one NGO in order to substantiate the respective results.

Environmental organisations between environmental protection and sustainable development

As outlined above, the three environmental protection NGOs will be analysed against the background of the five key questions, starting with Greenpeace International, followed by WWF International and IUCN International. However, given the organic structure of the text material on the respective internet sites, the key questions will not be dealt with along the above mentioned order. However, the keywords to each question will be set in italics in order to structure the following sub-chapters.

Greenpeace International[11]

On Greenpeace's website a clearly defined *statement* regarding the organisation's aim and *mission* is given:

> Greenpeace is an independent, campaigning organisation that uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems, and forces solutions for a green and peaceful future. Greenpeace's goal is to ensure the ability of the Earth to nurture life in all its diversity (www.greenpeace.org/international/about/our-mission, retrieved February 2, 2006).

With respect to the organisation's self-definition/-legitimation, Greenpeace considers it to be its duty to take the role of the planet's advocate:

> Greenpeace exists because this fragile Earth deserves a voice. It needs solutions. It needs change. It needs action (www.greenpeace.org/international/about, retrieved February 2, 2006).

As far as the officially available mission and strategy documents are concerned, any allusion to the concept of sustainability is absent. The focus and starting point for Greenpeace are the protection of the environment:

> Today, Greenpeace is an international organisation that prioritises global environmental campaigns (www.greenpeace.org/international/about/history, retrieved February 2, 2006).

This unambiguous orientation has, of course, an effect on one of the core characteristics of the sustainability concept, the *integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development*. Although Greenpeace does not confine its endeavours to exclusively dealing with environmental issues and is aware of the linkage between environmental, societal and economic issues, the primacy is clearly on the ecological side. Judging from the activities described on the internet, Greenpeace generally becomes active in case of ecological threats, mostly triggered by human caused environmental degradation or pollution. Once this environmental-related entry point is given, the organisation is well prepared to invest in societal (and to a lesser extent economic) issues.

This procedure points out that it does not seem to be Greenpeace's actual intention to promote the different dimensions of sustainability equally. Comparing the social and the economic dimensions in Greenpeace's relevant document papers, societal issues, especially health-related ones,[12] are much more fostered than economic ones. This is also reflected by the fact that it seems to almost exclusively be the social dimension which is mentioned together with the core (environmental) concern:

> This global social movement has been described as the 'emerging second superpower' and is made up of millions of people dedicated to environmental protection, human rights and social development (www.greenpeace.org/international/about/reports, retrieved February 2, 2006).

However, regarding the *anthropocentric approach* inherent to the sustainability concept, the fact that Greenpeace invests in societal rather than economic issues, does not automatically imply that the organisation would agree with the anthropocentric approach. On the contrary, the material available on the internet even suggests that Greenpeace would rather dissociate from this position. Generally speaking, the organisation seems to be rather suspicious if not at times desperate about mankind in general and its willingness to care for an intact and solid environment. This attitude is also reflected by the repeatedly recalled origin of the name of Greenpeace's well-known flagship, the ''Rainbow Warrior''. According to the organisation's website, the name refers to an ancient North American Cree Indian legend, foretelling a time when humanity's greed will make the Earth sick, and a mythical band of warriors will descend from a rainbow to save it (www.greenpeace.org/international/about/ships/the-rainbow-warrior, retrieved May 4, 2006). The parallel to the earth's current state and to Greenpeace's self-conception is evident.

Although the fact that economic issues play a minor role and that, overall, the sustainability concept is rather absent in the organisation's relevant documents, Greenpeace has a specific section called ''Encourage sustainable trade'' on its website. To a large extent, this section focuses on exposing the drawback of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and therefore prevailingly talks about unsustainable trade. Still, the interested reader can find one short definition of what Greenpeace understands by sustainable development in the very opening text of this section:

> We support global environmental standards. Trade must not take priority. Governments must work to achieve sustainable development. This means integrating three things: environmental, social and economic priorities (www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/trade-and-the-environment, retrieved May 8, 2006).

However, this definition is to a large extent normative, rather vague and does not give any hint as to how to achieve the integration of three, at least at first glance, contradicting priorities. In a way, it points straight forward at the difficulties inherent in the concept itself when it comes to its actual implementation.

In addition to this, the above cited ''economic priorities'' are not mentioned any further after this introducing definition. On the contrary, Greenpeace confines itself to stressing the importance of a fairer trade system in terms of its consequences for two aspects primarily: the environment and human health – a conceptual pair that occurs as often as 13 times throughout the whole section.

Finally, the material available on the internet (including the annual reports 2001–2005) does not allow precise determination of the year Greenpeace started to become involved in the theme of sustainable trade.

Taking these aspects into consideration, it can be presumed that the theme of sustainable trade

represents a rather new activity field, reflecting the organisation's recognition of the tremendous impact business has on the ecological condition of the earth. However, the findings also suggest that currently the economic dimension does not belong to the very heartland of Greenpeace. In this sense, it is maybe not by accident that the only definition or – rather – explanation of the sustainability concept appears in a context outlining the duties of the government rather than of those of all actors involved including the civil society sector itself.

The assumption that Greenpeace does not explicitly concentrate on adopting the sustainability concept and integrating the three dimensions is confirmed when looking at the actual activity plans in the section "What we do". There the official eight core activity fields are outlined:

1. Stop climate change
2. Save our oceans
3. Protect ancient forests
4. Say no to genetic engineering
5. Eliminate toxic chemicals
6. End nuclear threat
7. Abolish nuclear weapons
8. Encourage sustainable trade[13]

The first three themes reflect the classical areas of environmental protection. In these fields, Greenpeace strives to protect and conserve vital common goods by means of direct actions. The following four fields of activity are dedicated to dispose of man-made substances and inventions that are, at least potentially, threatening the balance of the earth's ecosystem. However, as already mentioned above, the sustainability concept is also explicitly referred to in the form of the last theme "Encourage sustainable trade".

Given this rather scarce occurrence of the sustainability idea, a semantic analysis of the whole section "What we do" was conducted in order to verify (or falsify) the findings presented so far. The analysis focused on distribution and use of the term "(un-)sustainable", respectively, "sustainability" throughout the section.

The expression "sustainable development" is used most often (13×) and in various contexts. It is followed by 11× "sustainable forestry/logging/forest/ use of forests" and 11× "sustainable manner/path-way/way/approach". The rather neutral word "(un-)sustainable" is used 9×, followed by 7× "sustainability", 7× "sustainable farming/agriculture" and 5× "sustainable trade/means of income/ economic form". The remaining uses of the word "(un-)sustainable" occur only once and show no distinct pattern.

This uneven distribution is also reflected by the fact that the terms "sustainable" and "sustainability" are not evenly used in the different fields of activity, respectively, on the different internet sub-pages. Most often, sustainability is mentioned in the context of conservation of forests (21×), followed by the activity fields concerning seas (16×) and climate change (16×). The theme of sustainable trade notes 12 hits and the one on genetic engineering comes up to 11 hits. Far behind are the activity fields regarding nuclear weapons (2×), toxic chemicals (1×) and nuclear treat in general (no mention at all).

These findings suggest that in Greenpeace's perception, sustainable development is still primarily linked to forestry issues, fostering the already historic link between these two fields. More generally, the unequal use of the keywords in the different sections indicates that sustainable development is primarily seen as related to the preservation of common goods such as seas or forests. Issues regarding genetic engineering and fair trade are also repeatedly contextualised with the idea of sustainability, in the latter case even explicitly. However, the three action fields of nuclear weapon/threat and toxic chemicals are only marginally pulled together with sustainable development. This is rather striking as the human impact in these fields cannot be claimed to be less substantial.

In addition, the use of sustainability-related terms seems to strongly depend on the author's semantic preference. Whilst in one short text in the context of sustainable forestry (approx. 750 words), the keywords can be found as much as 5×, at least half of the sub-chapters in the main section "Protect ancient forests" do not contain any sustainability-related expressions at all. This suggests that even within the context of forestry, being a traditional field for sustainability concerns, the concept is not equally promoted.

Of course, one can only speculate about the reasons for such a handling of the sustainability

concept. On the one hand, it seems that, with the exception of the specific section "Encourage sustainable trade", Greenpeace considers sustainable development as primarily relevant in the context of conservation of common goods. On the other hand, it looks as though the organisation does not see the necessity to define a corporate position concerning the sustainability concept, leaving it up to the respective person in charge as whether or not to work with it.

However, notwithstanding all these differences regarding the actual promotion of the sustainability concept, there are two aspects shared by both the concept and Greenpeace's core values: the global orientation and the orientation towards the future (inter-generational justice).

The *global orientation* is confirmed when looking at the section outlining Greenpeace's numerous activities. In this section called "What we do" it becomes evident that the organisation is engaged in various activities in many different regions on all five continents. Additionally, the decision to act globally is also reflected in the definition of Greenpeace's mission and strategy, as already cited at the beginning of this chapter:

> Greenpeace is an independent, campaigning organisation that uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose *global* environmental problems [...] (www.greenpeace.org/international/about/our-mission, retrieved February 2, 2006, italics by the author).

The situation is similar with respect to the orientation towards the future, respectively, the so-called *inter-generational justice*. While Greenpeace does not query the importance of the intra-generational justice, it is, at least in the documents publicly available, more inclined towards the inter-generational justice. Although rather sceptical about mankind in general, Greenpeace does not challenge that all efforts take place in view of future generations. The organisation is clearly determined to act for the sake of the generations to come:

> We exist to expose environmental criminals and to challenge government and corporations when they fail to live up to their mandates to safeguard our environment and our future (www.greenpeace.org/international/about, retrieved May 4, 2006) *and* There is a lot to be done when protecting the planet

for future generations [...] (www.greenpeace.org/international/about/volunteers, retrieved February 2, 2006).

WWF International[14]

Looking at WWF's *mission statement*, the organisation's driving principle is clearly oriented towards the conservation of biodiversity in all its aspects. It intends to

> [...] stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:
>
> - conserving the world's biological diversity
> - ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
> - promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

(www.panda.org/about_wwf/who_we_are/index.cfm, retrieved February 12, 2006)

Although the idea of sustainability is implied, it is related to the rather conventional and traditional context of the use of renewable resources. At first glance it might therefore look as though the concept does not play a major role in WWF's overall efforts. However, other documents, especially those in the section "History", show that WWF indeed opened up its "horizon of concern".

As outlined in the section "History", WWF evolved in the eighties from a small organisation that focused on species and habitat conservation into an international organisation involved in a much broader set of conservation issues. In the course of this development – in first place along with the publication of a joint World Conservation strategy together with IUCN and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) – the need to integrate development with conservation has become "perhaps the most important" new conservation issue (www.panda.org/about_wwf/who_we_are/history/eighties/index.cfm, retrieved February 12, 2006). Subsequently, the concept of sustainable development started to play an increasingly important role because it represented a holistic approach which, in turn, was considered to be vital for the integration of

development and conservation. In terms of the operational implementation, WWF started with initiatives promoting the sustainable use of natural resources. As a continuation of this development, WWF revised its mission and strategy in the early nineties, defining the promotion of the sustainable use of resources as one of the three interdependent categories structuring WWF's work in general.

The adaptation of the sustainability concept into WWF's overall strategy is apparent within different sections all over the official website. The introducing section outlining the regions and places of WWF's conservation activities (section ''Where we work'') clearly underlines the necessity to integrate mankind's needs to the extent possible into conservation efforts. It thereby interconnects the topics of conservation, poverty alleviation and sustainable development:

> So the first thing we must do is look after ourselves. Humans. People. If we can't look after ourselves then we cannot even begin to think about looking after anything else.
> The second thing we must do is, in fact, look after everything else. To look after the rest of life that shares this planet with us.
> Yet it is not like these two things exist in isolation. Poverty, health, safe drinking water – these are the goals of the world's governments and the UN. They are inextricably, undeniably and irreversibly linked to the world around us, to the environment, to the plants and animals, right down the very air we breathe.
> So what do we do then?
> How do we go about ensuring that the world we live on can indeed be lived on. Within its means. Within its capacity to support us. All of us (www.panda. org/about_wwf/where_we_work/index.cfm, retrieved May 5, 2006).

This short text most clearly expresses WWF's understanding of the sustainability concept, thereby integrating its generally acknowledged characteristics. The section starts with consent to the *anthropocentric approach*: fully in line with the idea that any development claiming to be sustainable must assign a crucial role to mankind, the short text defines mankind's needs as the starting point to all action concerned with development. In reference to the *integrated promotion of the three dimensions of sustainability*, the section outlines the linkages between environmental conservation and other develop-

ment-related issues such as poverty alleviation or health and sanitation problems. Thereafter the text not only points at the time and space dimensions, alluding to the topics of *inter-generational justice* and *global orientation* (''How do we go about ensuring that the world we live on can indeed be lived on''.), but also refers to the discussion about the exploitation limits of common goods. To finish, the last sentence raises the topic of *intra-generational justice* (''All of us''.), covering another crucial element of the sustainability concept.

Strikingly, this short text shows an advanced and integrated understanding of the sustainability concept as defined in the second Chapter. In view of the fact that it is not positioned in the explicit section ''Sustainability'', but in the introducing section ''Where we work'', WWF's commitment to sustainable development comes a bit unexpectedly, thereby gaining as a side effect certain credibility. Compared to the positioning of the sustainability idea within the official mission statement, the section above displays a broader and more integrated understanding of the concept's content and potential. In other words, this short text can be read as a distinct commitment to act according to the sustainability principles – however, without naming it explicitly and without positioning this commitment in the respective (and expected) section.

Such procedure attracts attention insofar as WWF has in fact an explicit main section on the website called ''Sustainability''. Naturally, in its efforts to ''care about the welfare of our planet'' (www. panda.org/about_wwf/who_we_are/history/index. cfm, February 12, 2006), the organisation is not able to tackle all environmental problems simultaneously. Alike other organisations, WWF has defined a range of focus areas, outlined on its website under ''What we do'', namely:

1. Forests Programme
2. Freshwater Programme
3. Marine Programme
4. Species Programme
5. Climate Change Programme
6. Toxics Programme
7. Sustainability
   - Agriculture & Biodiversity
   - Macroeconomics

- Trade & Investment
- People & the Environment
- Treaties & Organisations
- European Policy
- One Planet Living

Consistent with WWF's traditional orientation towards conservation of nature, the first four themes concentrate on specific ecosystems and species. The following two themes – "Climate Change Programme" and "Toxics Programme" – reflect to an already higher degree the human impact on environment and its potentially devastating consequences. On top of this, WWF has an explicit section called "Sustainability", covering a wide range of sub-themes. Notwithstanding their widely differing themes, they primarily share the characteristic of representing interfaces of socially, environmentally and economically relevant issues.

Not surprisingly, the *integration of the three dimensions of sustainability* as one of its core characteristics is most advanced within the main section "Sustainability".[15] However, with respect to the *global orientation* as another sustainability characteristic, it seems that WWF is indeed involved in activities and projects all over the world, regardless of the respective theme or activity field (cf. section "What we do" and "Where we work").

Looking at the section "Sustainability", it strikes that in spite of its apparent diversity, the whole section does not provide any pursuing discussion or statement regarding WWF's overall understanding of the sustainability concept – apart from one rather basic definition in the sub-theme "Macroeconomics":

> The WWF Macroeconomics for Sustainable Development Programme Office seeks to promote the integration of environmental sustainability and social equity into economic development strategies at national and international levels (www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/policy/macro_economics/index.cfm, February 12, 2006).

This definition is literally the only one informing the interested reader about the focus of the whole section. Moreover, this definition is not only located but also limited to the section on "Macroeconomics", representing explicitly its specific goal and orientation. This is striking insofar as the widely discussed sustainability concept is all but self-explanatory and needs to be operationalised with respect to concrete activities. Moreover, one might expect a short introductory explanation of the sustainability idea at the opening site of the main section "Sustainability".

This certain lack of structure and conceptual clarity might suggest that at the present moment, the section "Sustainability" represents rather some kind of a puzzle or patchwork in progress. This seems to be true for the overall handling of the sustainability topic in general. Although the organisation invests significantly into the overall promotion of the concept, it abstains from clearly and more prominently communicating the respective efforts. An alternative explanation would ascribe this procedure to the fact that for some reasons, WWF does not intend to comprehensively communicate the ongoing paradigm shift for the time being.

This again would contradict the fact that the very idea of sustainability is frequently expressed throughout the documents available on WWF's website. Moreover, it is prominently represented by WWF management representatives, e.g. in different Annual Reports. One explicit statement clarifying that WWF is no longer a pure conservation organisation, is prominently outlined by Paul Steel, the Chief Operating Officer of WWF International. Significantly, he considers WWF's steps to move away from an exclusive conservation mentality towards a more integrated understanding of sustainable development to be a distinguishing feature:

> It's not just about putting fences around things and protecting them, but applying a whole raft of different skills, tools, and partnerships to ensure we're delivering long-term sustainable solutions. […] Many organisations operate with a 'let's just protect biodiversity' mentality, without necessarily providing solutions (WWF Annual Report, 2004, p. 3).

IUCN International[16]

In the general *mission statement* displayed on IUCN's internet site (Section "About us"), the concept of sustainable development is clearly mentioned:

> The Union's mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the

integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. (www.iucn.org/en/about/index.htm, retrieved February 8, 2006)

This first and prominent mention of the concept obviously concentrates on the ecological side. As in the case of WWF, the sustainability idea is linked to the rather traditional field of using natural resources sustainably.

In spite of this prioritisation, the mission statement covers two other important aspects characteristic of the sustainability concept, the aspects of global orientation and of intra-generational justice. In contrast to other organisations, IUCN, being a knowledge-based network organisation, does not aim to directly tackle environmental issues, but to empower and assist societies throughout the world to care for the environment they live in. Their very commitment to spread knowledge (and subsequently) responsibilities, thereby empowering other people and increasing their chances to shape their own future, suggests that IUCN does consider *intra-generational justice* to be a vital aspect. The *global orientation* of IUCN is underlined through its statement to assist ''societies throughout the world''.

However, IUCN does not limit itself to refer to the sustainability concept in a traditional way. On the contrary, on the background of the above mentioned bias towards the ecological side, IUCN explicitly underlines the linkage between environmental conservation and sustainable development:

> All [entities within the Union] are concerned to promote the conservation of biodiversity within the context of sustainable development. (www.iucn.org/programme/files/steppinginto.pdf, p. 9, retrieved February 8, 2006) *and* IUCN is first and foremost a union of members that are concerned with species loss and ecosystem integrity. However, IUCN recognises that the causes of environmental problems are largely political, economic and social (www.iucn.org/programme, retrieved February 8, 2006).

Looking at IUCN's strategic documents in general, it becomes clear that the organisation did indeed take notice of the sustainability concept. The idea of an interdependency of ecological, social and economic issues has been integrated into the organisation's strategy. At present, IUCN displays an *advanced and integrated understanding of sustainable development.* However, in spite of the general conformance with the concept, IUCN does not confine itself to adapting the suitable parts of it, but strives to find an own position with respect to the concept. In this respect, IUCN criticises what it perceives as a certain tendency within the sustainability discussion to primarily focus on the economic dimension. In contrast to this, the organisation promotes a more equitable balance between the three pillars of sustainable development, based on the recognition that every development requires a solid and intact ecological basis.

The basic recognition that ecological, social and economic problems are often interlinked, also affects IUCN's strategic planning. In the IUCN Programme 2005–2008, the organisation stresses the need to tackle not only the direct, but also the underlying causes of biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and destruction. These causes are recognised as: (1) human population dynamics, (2) consumption patterns, (3) market failure and policy distortions and (4) wealth, poverty and inequity.

The recognition and integration of the sustainability idea is also reflected in IUCN's current overall activity plans commonly referred to as the so-called Key Results Area (KRAs). The KRAs are defined every four year together with the overall strategy on the occasion of the recurring IUCN World Conservation Congress.[17] For the period 2005–2008, the following six KRAs have been identified:

1. KRA 1: Understanding Biodiversity
2. KRA 2: Social Equity
3. KRA 3: Conservation Incentives and Finance
4. KRA 4: International Agreements, Processes and Institutions for Conservation
5. KRA 5: Ecosystems and Sustainable Livelihoods
6. KRA 6: Programme Delivery

The first three KRAs show IUCN's intention to enlarge the knowledge about the three dimensions of sustainable development. By means of KRA 1, the organisation seeks to improve its (core-) ability to ''generate and disseminate knowledge about natural systems and the species that inhabit

them'' (www.iucn.org/programme/files/Programme English.pdf, retrieved May 8, 2006). KRA 2 aims at promoting a better understanding of the role of social equity in biodiversity conservation. Finally, KRA 3, covering the economic dimension, intends to promote ''shared knowledge of incentives and financing mechanisms for supporting effective biodiversity conservation'' (www.iucn.org/programme/files/ProgrammeEnglish.pdf, retrieved May 8, 2006).

In addition to this, KRA 4 and KRA 5 seek to use the knowledge from the preceding KRAs in an integrated manner to build the capacity and influence environmental governance at all levels: at regional and global level (KRA 4) as well as at local, national and transboundary level (KRA 5). Finally, KRA 6 is a tool to organise and improve IUCN's own workflow.

As mentioned in Figure 1, IUCN displays *the integration of the three dimensions* and its respective efforts towards this integration.

Undoubtedly, the organisation recognises the linkages between the three dimensions of sustainability and the need to address them together in order to contribute to IUCN's overall vision and mission. This *integrated understanding of sustainable development* is frequently expressed all over the organisation's homepage, e.g.

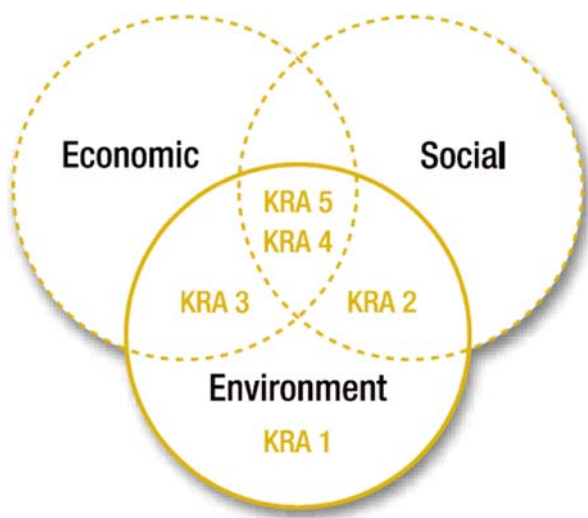> […] sustainable development cannot be achieved in isolation from ensuring economic wellbeing,

Figure 1. The IUCN Programme 2005–2008, p. 11.

environmental health or addressing social development goals. (The IUCN Programme 2005–2008, p. 9)

Looking at IUCN's actual programme as displayed on their website, the implementation work is divided into four sub-themes: ''Species'', ''Equity and Justice'', ''Ecosystems'' and ''Cross-cutting issues''. Strikingly, the topic of sustainable development does not appear in one of the rather openly formulated themes such as ''Equity and Justice'' or ''Cross-cutting issues'', but is reserved for a section called ''Sustainable Use Specialist Group'' (SUSG), established in the sub-theme ''Species''. This network aims at distinguishing uses of renewable natural resources that are ecologically and socially beneficial. The concept of SUSG clearly documents an integrative understanding of the sustainability concept:

> IUCN recognises that the economies, cultures, and well-being of all human societies depend on the use of biodiversity. Conservation must address the way we use biodiversity, rather than construct artificial distinctions between people and nature (www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/susg/faq.html, retrieved May 9, 2006).

Although this definition is fully in line with IUCN's overall understanding of sustainable development, it is still surprising that IUCN did not allocate a more prominent place to the topic of sustainable development – especially given that the concept is discussed in detail on the main introduction sites. Strikingly, there is a certain analogy between the position of the sustainability concept with respect to the actual activity fields and IUCN's official mission statement, as cited at the beginning of this chapter. Although the concept plays a prominent role in IUCN's overall strategic conception, it seems to be reduced to its traditional domain of sustainable use of natural resources at the level of its actual implementation.

Notwithstanding this fact, the citation above points at another important characteristic of sustainable development: *the anthropocentric approach*. It underlines the fundamental interdependency between nature and mankind. Consequently, human needs have to been taken account of when planning conservation activities.

Recognising the general link between environmental health and human well-being, IUCN strives

to integrate its efforts in the frame of larger, internationally binding agreements, seeking to address core elements of the UN Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. The contribution to international initiatives gives a clear example of IUCN's efforts to act globally – apart from the fact that IUCN as a knowledge-based network organisation is by definition represented all over the world. This short outline of their profile supports the assumption that *the global orientation*, as one of the core characteristics of sustainable development, is covered:

> The World Conservation Union supports and develops cutting-edge conservation science; implements this research in field projects around the world; and then links both research and results to local, national, regional and global policy by convening dialogues between governments, civil society and the private sector (www.iucn.org/en/about/index.htm, retrieved May 8, 2006).

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to examine how three major environmental conservation NGOs reacted to the rise of the sustainability concept. The respective reactions shed a light on the fundamental value system of the NGOs under discussion, any related changes and, consequently, their main sphere of concerns, respectively, of activity. Such insight into the key assumptions is again potentially valuable for any business interested in their stakeholders and their fundamental orientation.

Such research serves to exemplify the strategies that specified societal actors choose when confronted with a holistic concept that clearly exceeds their original sphere of activity, i.e. in this case their intrinsic concern for environmental issues. Given that the present research focused on the public self-presentation of the three NGOs with respect to the sustainability topic, it would be too early to come to a final conclusion,[18] however, preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the material available.

The analysis of the relevant documents adds further evidence to the hypothesis formulated at the end of the first chapter, namely that environmental protection NGOs do integrate the sustainability concept, but to differing degrees, depending on their respective original value set. A certain value shift from the idea of environmental conservation to the concept of sustainable development can be observed, but as expected, the extent of this conceptual shift differs quite significantly, as the short recapitulation of the five leading research questions[19] will show.

Comparing the three organisations with respect to the overall *integration of the sustainability idea into mission and strategy* it becomes clear that only Greenpeace abstains from mentioning it at all. IUCN and WWF include the concept in their mission and strategy, but limit the sustainability idea to the rather traditional topic of sustainable use of resources. In spite of the fact that both organisations clearly focus on their "heartland" environmental conservation, there is a clear recognition that environmental problems are closely linked to social, economic and political issues and can only be solved using an integrative approach. WWF even points out that this approach distinguishes their organisation from others who primarily work by means of prohibitions without offering solutions to human facts and needs. In terms of conceptual clarity, IUCN goes as far as to query what it perceives as a distinct predominance of the economic dimension. Subsequently, the organisation suggests opting for a more balanced handling of the three dimensions bearing in mind the fundamental importance of an intact environment for any (human) undertaking.

Regarding the *balanced promotion of the three dimensions of sustainability*, it is again Greenpeace displaying the strongest determination to concentrate on their traditional field of activity, the ecological dimension. In most cases, social issues become relevant if somehow linked to, or caused by, environmental degradation and pollution. Although Greenpeace has a specific field of activity called "Encourage Sustainable Trade", it is mainly focused on picturing the business practises of WTO. In contrast to this, WWF shows a more balanced handling of the three dimensions. While the specific field of activity called "Sustainability" is not yet fully convincing in terms of its conceptual clarity, it clearly shows the organisation's growing awareness of the many issues related to it. The latter is also expressed by the fact that WWF explicitly works on integrating development and conservation.

However, in terms of integrating the social, ecological and economic dimensions, IUCN is probably the most advanced NGO under discussion. The first three so-called Key Result Areas are clearly related to the respective dimensions and are later on integrated in the Key Result Area No 4.[20]

The *inter- and intra-generational justice* as one of the constitutive elements for sustainability is well and explicitly served by all three NGOs. WWF and IUCN even relate their efforts to international agreements such as the UN Millennium Development Goals or the Johannesburg Plan of Action.

The *global orientation* as another essential element is equally covered by the three NGOs, given the fact that all of them operate on all five continents.

However, things are less clear when it comes to the last constitutive element, the *anthropocentric approach*. Greenpeace quite clearly declines to shift the focus of its work to mankind's needs. The respective positions of IUCN and WWF are less defined and not explicitly expressed although it can be assumed that human needs play an already more important role. However, there will probably remain a certain fundamental incompatibility between caring for nature and focusing on human needs, especially if looking at a global scale.

To sum up, the research revealed that, on the one hand, certain aspects of the sustainability concept have been more easily integrated into the NGOs' mission and strategy than others and, on the other hand, that not all three actors are equally prepared to reshape their basic orientation in respect of the sustainability concept, thereby potentially reducing their chances of survival in the institutional environment according to the concepts of neo-institutionalism. Apart from these theoretical implications, the NGOs can also be expected to display different (re-)actions in the concrete interaction with other societal actors, especially with the private sector. It may therefore be of vital importance for both the NGOs and businesses to have a close look at the respective fundamental orientation before entering in any form of interaction for the sake of a better mutual understanding.

Linking these results back to the initially outlined theoretical discussion on the influence of values on strategy and mission, the following conclusion can be drawn. New concepts or role models consist of a range of single values, not all of which may be integrated into an already existing value set of an organisation or NGO, resulting in a partial integration. With respect to the sustainability concept, the two easily adopted values "global orientation" and "inter- and intra-generational justice" are likely to have caused no or only little friction with the existing value set, pointing at the fact that they were most likely measured only against the NGOs' peripheral values. However, in the case of the anthropocentric orientation, the situation is different. This value seems to have strongly conflicted with the NGOs' fundamental or core convictions, most likely thereby overextending their receptivity. The same counts for the balanced promotion of the three dimensions of sustainable development. As civil society actors primarily and foremost involved in environmental protection, an objectively balanced promotion of all three dimensions would to a certain degree conflict with the organisations' initial purpose.

This final observation links back to the initial question regarding how specialised actors can react to a societal concept that aims at finding integrated solutions to global problems and thereby exceeds the specialised actors' actual spheres of activity. The research adds evidence to the assumption that in the light of the sophisticated functional differentiation within modern societies, specialised actors or pressure groups are to be expected to make their choice and integrate those aspects into their own mission and strategy that best fit their general orientation and respective value set. In the case of NGOs involved in environmental protection and conservation, the topic of sustainable development is therefore most likely to be in the first place promoted in the context of "sustainable use of natural resources".

Notes

[1] With respect to the operationalisation of the sustainability concept, this article refers to the approach as outlined by the German Helmholtz-Association. This association is the largest scientific organisation in Germany. It is a union of 15 scientifically, technically, biologically and medically oriented research centres with altogether some 24,000 employees and an annual budget that exceeds two billion euros. The official mission of the Association is "to answer great and pressing questions of science, society, and economics".

[2] There is no consensus about the question whether sustainable development is necessarily founded in the

anthropocentric approach. Critics prefer to work with alternatives approaches such as the bio-centric, eco-centric or holistic approach. However, an intermediary position can be assigned to the so-called "enlightened" anthropocentric approach. This position implies a careful interaction with nature and is grounded in a sound self-interest of mankind. Self-interest is hereby understood as an attitude characterised by mankind's long-term interest to conserve nature's manifold functions. Such attitude automatically excludes an egoistic, exploitative attitude (Grunwald et al., 2001, p. 79). The position of the "enlightened" anthropocentric approach is the basis of the integrative concept of sustainable development used in the context of this research.

3   Yellowstone national park was the first one to be founded after the resolution taken by the American congress in 1872. The first national park in Europe was founded in Sweden in 1909.

4   The first international environmental-related conference on bird protection was held in Paris in 1911.

5   IUCN was founded in 1948, WWF in 1961 and Greenpeace in 1971.

6   This article does not intend to elaborate on the broadly discussed controversy between the systems theories of Parsons and Luhmann. With respect to this article, the Parsonian approach has been selected because it represents a promising analysis tool when dealing with value-based institutional changes, given that Parsons, along with, e.g. Habermas (1981) or Münch (1982/1988), attributes actions to actors and/or aggregates of actors performing via institutions.

7   In order to reliably analyse the even promotion of the ecological, social and economic dimensions of sustainability, it would be essential to thoroughly analyse the actual activity plans and the respective project documents of the three organisations in question. However, such procedure would exceed the frame of the present article, aiming at gaining an overall impression regarding the organisation's attitude towards the sustainability concept.

8   While the research has been conducted and written down in 2006, the publication appears in its on-line version only in 2009, due to reasons beyond the influence of the author. Given that internet-based content tends to change rapidly, the author would like to emphasise that the article describes the situation in 2006 and should therefore be perceived as an analysis of the documents available at that time.

9   In the case of one organisation, the Annual Reports had to be consulted in the hard-copy version.

10   In a second step it would be very interesting and promising to also investigate the actual daily handling of the sustainability concept by thoroughly analysing the organisations' activity plans and conducting interviews with key actors of all three organisations.

11   Analysed documents: All information has been taken from the official website of Greenpeace International: www.greenpeace.org/international. Greenpeace International, located in Amsterdam, Netherlands, represents the organisation's strategic office, coordinating the overall strategy and activity plans of the 27 national and regional offices. For the sake of simplicity, Greenpeace International will henceforward be referred to as "Greenpeace".

12   The focus on health-related societal issues does not really come by surprise as the actual health problems tackled by Greenpeace commonly stem from environmental degradation or pollution.

13   This order slightly differs from the original one on Greenpeace's website at the time when the data collection was conducted. At that time, the theme "Encourage sustainable trade" has been listed in between "End the nuclear threat" and "Abolish nuclear weapons". For the sake of a structured argumentation, the order has been adjusted as showed above.

In the meantime, Greenpeace has restructured the overall section "What we do", introducing a new main section called "Demand Peace and Disarmament" (uploaded on 10 April, 2006). This section now includes the former main section "Abolish nuclear threat".

14   Analysed documents: All information has been taken from the official website of WWF International: www.panda.org. WWF International, located in Gland, Switzerland, is the secretariat for WWF's global organisation, consisting of 25 affiliated national organisations and five associated organisations and operating in more than 100 countries. For the sake of simplicity, WWF International will henceforward be referred to as "WWF".

15   This evaluation has of course to be handled with care. At the current stage of the research, it is not foreseen to analyse the very project documents which would be an essential criteria for defining to what extent the organisation indeed implements the concept.

16   Analysed documents: All information has been taken from the official website of IUCN International: www.iucn.org. IUCN International, located in Gland, Switzerland, represents the organisation's strategic office, coordinating the overall strategy and activity plans of the Union. The Union itself brings together 82 states, 111 government agencies, more than 800 NGOs and some 10,000 scientists in a worldwide partnership. For the sake of simplicity, IUCN International will henceforward be referred to as "IUCN".

17   The last IUCN World Congress was held in Bangkok in October 2004.

[18] In order to deepen and verify the present results, further research would be essential, involving in a next step an in-depth analysis of the NGOs' actual activity plans. Such research would allow depicting the actual level of implementation with respect to the sustainability topic.

Another most interesting and complementary research question would consist in examining to what extent the NGOs under discussion implement the sustainability-related principles with respect to their own internal management processes. In contrast to the present research and the above mentioned research question regarding the NGOs actual activity plans, such an approach would shed light on the question to what extent the NGOs walk their talk regarding the way *how* things are actually done.

[19] See Chapter 2.

[20] Among other reasons, this clarity may also be linked to the fact that IUCN is much more a science- and policy-based organisation than WWF or Greenpeace.

Acknowledgments

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