

# *Top-Level Design in the Practice of Global Sustainable Development: the Role, Opportunities, and Challenges of NGOs*

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**Abstract:** Sustainable development is a blueprint for human beings to achieve a better life and longer survival. However, in the context of world industrialization, it has gradually become a global governance problem that plagues the development of all states. The 17 sustainable development goals(SDGs) put forward by the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit have not only aroused the widespread concern of various national actors, but also greatly promoted non-state actors to play a role in related fields. This article focuses on the practice of global sustainable development and analyzes the specific role of NGOs in the top-level design, thus summarizes the opportunities and challenges of NGOs in participating in sustainable development practice at present and proposes reflections and suggestions to promote relevant actors to better participate in global sustainable development practice.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Promote Ideas, Build Consensus**

Compared with state actors, the limit in the field of NGOs' activity is smaller and less sensitive, so it is easier to realize high-level communication between relevant countries, international organizations (IOs), and enterprises by holding high-level summits, thus, NGOs can set up cooperation principles, promote relevant activities which relate to sustainable development. For example, the Global Energy Interconnection Development and Cooperation Organization (GEIDCO) has publicized the concept of "promoting clean development and building a harmonious world" to heads of states through meetings and forums such as "Global Energy Interconnection & China-Africa Energy and Power Conference" and "Forum on African Energy Interconnection Development".

### **1.2 Establish Platforms, Integrate the Main Body**

NGOs can give full play to their advantages in mobilizing resources, signing cooperation agreements, and establishing cooperation platforms with governments, transnational corporations

and other actors, which enables governments, enterprises and other IOs to promote the implementation of sustainable development projects. For example, as one of the world's largest international nature conservation organizations, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) provides pragmatic and non-confrontational solutions to the sovereign states, the World Bank through cooperation agreements, resulting in the successful implementation of environmental protection projects in communities.

### **1.3 Provide Intellectual Support, Solve Technical Problems**

NGOs have made great strides in organizational structure and talent reserve. During the process, the role of the elite group of NGOs has become increasingly visible, who provide indispensable intellectual support for the practice of global sustainable development, including offering key technological breakthroughs, project research reports. For example, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has published several research reports, such as *Survey Report on Illegal Trade, Market, and Consumption of Asian Big Cats Skins in TIBET* and *Promotion of Renewable Energy Use in The Building Sector in Chinese Cities* providing more systematic and comprehensive data and intellectual support for the protection of the world's biodiversity.

## **2. Opportunities and Challenges**

### **2.1 Opportunities in Action**

#### **2.1.1 The Improvement in Official Recognition**

In general, the official attitude of governments towards NGOs includes the following situations. First, prevention and restriction. As the power of NGOs grows, the government will introduce restrictive policies to take the initiative. Second, they ignore the role of NGOs or incorporate them into the official departments. At the beginning, NGOs with low influence will not receive too much attention from the government. When NGOs develop to a certain scale, the government tends to recruit NGOs in terms of management, supervision, or safety. Third, the government and NGOs may maintain an independent relationship, and cooperate with each other, which is a relatively ideal state between the two actors. At present, as some NGOs become more systematic and normalized, especially with their outstanding contributions in relevant fields, governments are generally showing a trend of increasing recognition and support for NGOs, which is conducive to the sustainable development practice.

#### **2.1.2 The Increase of NGOs' Networking and Inclusiveness**

In the traditional sense, the actions of NGOs in different countries and fields are relatively parallel, and their cooperation are often limited by intangible or tangible barriers such as geographical conditions, institutional structure, and cultural traditions. However, in the tide of globalization and multilateralism, the cost of transnational cooperation is gradually decreasing, and networking and inclusiveness of NGOs are increasing. NGOs from various countries committed to sustainable development practice have, to a large extent, improved the professionalism of sustainable development practice and their coordination in dealing with global issues by constantly expanding cooperation circles and increasing their participation.

#### **2.1.3 The Enhancement in Capacity of Setting International Agenda**

International organizations and conferences are platforms and channels through which the

concept of sustainable development can spread. They are also focal points for building consensus and dispelling misgivings. As mentioned above, with the increasing influence and contribution of NGOs in global sustainable development issues, the ability of NGOs to set the international agenda is also increasing, which is an important vehicle for responding to official domestic initiatives and meeting the needs of the international community. At the same time, as an important subject to provide top-level design and participate in the implementation of sustainable development projects, NGOs can better realize the more positive interaction between different states and between governments and NGOs by holding international forums, and then, spreading the concept of sustainable development.

## **2.2 Challenges in Action**

### **2.2.1 Cultural Differences Lead to Misunderstandings**

As NGOs become more capable of transnational action in the field of sustainable development, the number of sustainable development project and investment carried out by NGOs in collaboration with host governments or enterprises is increasing. NGOs provide intellectual support and beneficial experience for host countries' sustainable development policies and practices. However, in the process of transnational practice, some NGOs often ignore the differences in culture or basic national conditions of different states, thus they directly transfer the experience of their home countries to the practice site of the host country without any adaption, which leads to doubts and even opposition from local residents, and ultimately hinders the smooth implementation of the project. Therefore, in the process of carrying out sustainable actions, NGOs should try to convey their true intentions by more appropriate means and minimize or avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

### **2.2.2 Financing Difficulties Remain to Be Resolved**

Whether promoting ideas or participating in sustainable development projects, NGOs depend to a large extent on adequate financial support. The main financing channels for NGOs include government support and social funding, which involve small financing volume and weak stability. Therefore, financing difficulties restrict NGOs from taking relevant activities, and reduces the efficiency and effectiveness of NGOs' participation in sustainable development practice. In this case, the governments should provide more diversified financing supports by giving play to the role of government policy and the market, and finally build efficient guarantee mechanism for the NGOs' financing.

### **2.2.3 Follow-Up Supporting Measures Need to Be Improved**

With the support of NGOs, sustainable development projects in various regions are increasingly being implemented. However, in this process, the follow-up problems of each project gradually emerged, such as the sustainable management of biological nature reserves and resettlement of clean hydropower stations, resulting in unsustainable problems in sustainable development projects. Therefore, in the process of sustainable development project, governments, enterprises and other IOs as well as NGOs should improve the predictability of relevant projects, improve the evaluation system and supporting measures for projects, so that projects can truly achieve the goal of sustainable development.

### 3. Conclusion

At present, with the severe sustainable development issues such as the climate crisis, the reduction of biodiversity, and the shortage of supply and demand are becoming increasingly prominent and overlapping, it is urgent for both state and non-state actors to take relevant actions to alleviate the challenges of global sustainable development. Compared with the traditional mode of international cooperation and governance, where state actors play the core role, the action and cooperation of NGOs are forming a new paradigm to promote the practice of global sustainable development. They can effectively play the roles of “promoting ideas and building consensus” “establishing platforms and integrating the main body” “providing intellectual support and solving technical problems”. In the future, NGOs should also grasp the opportunities of “the improvement in official recognition” “the increasement of NGO’s networking and inclusiveness” “the enhancement in capacity of setting international agenda”, to cooperate with relevant subject to solve the dilemmas of “misunderstandings led by cultural differences” “financing difficulties” and “lack of follow-up supporting measures”, and eventually to better promote the global practice of sustainable development.

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