

NGO Roundtable: Key Issues and Campaigns—Who is Leading the Charge on What Issues?

Chair: Jonathan Wootliff, Corporate Responsibility Consultant
Panel: Howard Shaw, Executive Director, Singapore Environment Council
Liam Salter, Co-ordinator, Asia-Pacific Climate and Energy Programme, WWF
Chong Chan Yau, Executive Director, Oxfam, Hong Kong
Dr. Liu Kai Ming, Executive Director, Migrant Workers, Community College

NGOs have historically been regarded with extreme caution by corporates, and in the view of the corporate world have commonly lacked credibility. However NGOs have in recent years increasingly been accepted by both the public and private sector as an important voice in the sustainability debate. Consequently, today corporates and governments worldwide are increasingly engaging with NGOs, often to avoid public distrust. The NGO roundtable provided the opportunity for an exchange of divergent views and lively debate on a number of key sustainability issues. The Chair, **Jonathan Wootliff**, with considerable experience of the third sector gained through many years of NGO work put forward the view that NGOs have earned a seat at the table, however he raised the question of whether there is sufficient gain for NGOs engaging corporates, and whether they would they be better off campaigning governments for tougher regulations.

Howard Shaw:

Howard Shaw of the Singapore Environment Council (SEC), illustrated how his NGO successfully works with the Singapore government rather than campaigning in the public arena. In Singapore's case, more is gained by identifying the key people in government and lobbying directly. SEC is a government-initiated NGO and has a board of directors with a diverse membership, including corporate representation. Given that environmentalism is seen as a mind set issue, SEC 's main aim is to educate, by focusing on young people, grass roots and industry, particularly SMEs. They assist companies in raising awareness of EHS issues.

Chong Chan Yau:

Chong Chan Yau of Oxfam-Hong Kong, questioned whether there was sufficient will to address some of the pertinent issues of today such as HIV/AIDs—highlighting the prevailing situation of wealthy pharmaceutical companies producing drugs that those in need are unable to access due to poverty. He also focused on workplace problems for workers in garment factories.

Kai Ming Lau:

Kai Ming Lau of the Migrant Workers Community College in China highlighted the situation in China, where there are very few NGOs focused on labour issues and CSR.

Liam Salter:

Liam Salter of WWF spoke on issues related to climate change, commencing with an overview of the severity of the problem, the fact that NGOs are becoming increasingly sophisticated and highlighting the role that NGOs have to play in campaigning on climate change issues. He drew on an example of the NGO sector successfully blocking power tariff increases in Asia. On engaging with companies, Mr. Salter expressed the view that there appears to be little opportunity for meaningful conversation with corporates.

Discussion:

On the subject of whether NGOs should engage the corporate sector there were divergent views from the floor and the panel, although there was some consensus on the view that successful engagement often depends on the individuals and the companies involved. The discussion inevitably touched on the



mismanagement of many NGOs and controversially whether the corporate sector should take the time to sit at the table with NGOs.