

## PROJECT SUMMMARY-

### ***CSO Engagement with Ecological Economics***

Ecological economics (EE) and, in general, sustainability sciences make important contributions to the analyses of sustainability policies in Europe and worldwide. EE develops physical indicators and indices, provides economic valuation of environmental services and negative externalities, applies tools of multi-criteria evaluation to resource use, and promotes environmental policy instruments such as eco-taxes and marketable permits. To provide policy makers with high quality, relevant research, increased collaboration between ecological economists and civil society organisations (CSOs) is needed. Many CSOs already have a large stock of environmental knowledge but need increased capacity in EE to give an analytical foundation to activism and policy making. The social and disciplinary divide between CSO and academic research poses significant challenges. At the same time, there are real-world demands from CSOs for knowledge of EE: for instance, to assess the liability of companies in oil extraction conflicts, to evaluate plans for palm oil plantations for bio-fuel exports, or to establish alternative energy plans at the regional level. This project addresses CSO capacity weakness in EE through a number of coordinated activities. The focus is not on theory but on case study learning. Joint working groups will identify and report on key issues for research in water management, mining, energy, forestry and agriculture, based on CSO needs and interests. Previous cooperative research activities will be reviewed and assessed in terms of their effectiveness in meeting CSO needs, and documented and disseminated. In addition, options for future research cooperation will be explored in order to apply EE methods, tools and indicators to CSO work. Findings will be presented and enhanced at symposia embedded in the 2008 EE world conference in Nairobi (with UNEP) and the 2009 conference of the European Society for EE. A website will disseminate the project's work and continue the capacity building process.

This project arose out of a combination of concerns. There are growing demands from members of civil society organisations (or CSOs, organisations defined in this project as not for profit, not representative of commercial interests, non-governmental organisations pursuing the common purpose of sustainable development in the public interest) for access to expertise and practical methods for applying ecological economics as a "science of sustainability" to their work, and at the same time there is concern from within the European and international research communities that the principles and tools of ecological economics remain rather inaccessible to the general public.

There is a need for two-way communication on these important issues between academics and CSOs, and while ecological economics has made significant inroads into including extended peer communities into its analyses, its goal of translating research findings into direct action for solving problems has met only limited success. Ecological economists have begun to recognise that activism can be a

great source of knowledge, and engagement of CSOs in choosing cases to study and in the analytic process, ensures research relevance and contributes to finding solutions to complex problems. Increased collaboration between ecological economists and civil society is therefore regarded by an expanding number of academics as utterly essential if theory and practice are to be merged to produce “action research” of the highest quality.

CSOs themselves often hold identifiable needs for research activities. In fact, a primary motivation for this proposal has been the calls from CSOs for capacity building and training to investigate issues that require the expert advice of ecological economists.

As a field explicitly concerned with the interplay between economic, environmental and social issues, ecological economics is increasingly drawing the attention of members of both scientific and civil society communities. One concept from ecological economics that has been successfully mainstreamed into civil society discourse is that of the “ecological footprint” (Rees and Wackernagel, 1994). CSOs worldwide have begun using this index, and the Ecological Debt day calendar, which calculates the day each year when humans exceed the earth’s so-called annual capacity for regeneration. The ecological footprint is of course itself subject to scientific scrutiny, but there is no doubt about its glittering success as an instrument for communicating concern about the environment to the public.

Another intersection that has emerged between the foci of CSOs and sustainability science is in the definition of fair trade. The UK supermarket giant Tesco says it is considering the use of life-cycle analysis as a means of calculating the ecological footprint of its operations in response to consumer demand. Some important issues are raised in this context regarding whether and how the use of these concepts will be communicated to the public, and if so, whether consumer groups and the public at large will be able to understand what is meant, and how they will be able to respond to the information provided.

There is then a clear need for building the capacity of environmental CSOs to understand ecological economics, and to find practical ways of applying its concepts, methods, tools and indicators to their work. For instance, in order to take part in discussions on the decoupling between economic growth and environmental damage, it is necessary to become familiar with debates on Environmental Kuznets Curves without being discouraged by econometrics. Knowledge is also needed of the methods for counting “natural capital” depreciation (e.g. as used in the World Bank “genuine savings” accounts).

Deeper engagement of CSOs in ecological economics will help to express academic ideas in language accessible to grassroots advocacy groups, reducing jargon and honing in on which ideas are most relevant to the public and policy makers. Capacity building for increased CSO cooperation with ecological economists is therefore necessary if Europe is to achieve its goal of moving from current modes of involving citizenry as consumers of research findings, to richer forms of engagement in sustainable development research and research based policies, regionally as well as internationally.

This project builds upon the large stock of practical knowledge held by CSOs on environmental-economic issues, and aims to translate and generalise it into principles and tools, which, from the other extreme, academic research has tried to develop in forms which are often somewhat hermetic. In broad terms then, this project seeks to:

- Improve CSO access to knowledge of the theoretical frameworks of ecological economics and practical applications for CSO agendas
- Improve CSO capacity to participate in research through methodological capacity-building activities to enable the translation of their knowledge, concerns and agendas into research questions and subsequently into successful research proposals
- Increase awareness amongst ecological economists of CSO practical knowledge and of the most pressing research questions of CSOs and types of research use by CSOs to promote their agendas
- Increase ecological economists or sustainability scientists ability to communicate key messages vis-à-vis CSO interests and concerns in understandable terms without over simplification.
- Promote effective two-way communication channels to enable the public to engage with ecological economics, and ecological economics to engage with the public

Specifically, this project expects to achieve its impacts through:

- deepening interest in the science and applications of ecological economics amongst CSOs and the general public
- increasing the uptake of environmental indicators (some of which are currently integrated into Eurostat such as Material Flow Analysis, and others which may be integrated in the future, such as HANPP) and tools (such as EROI) that can become valuable analytical instruments for CSOs examining environmental issues related to energy (bio fuels), water (dams), mining and agricultural management, and trade, among other issues
- increasing the capability of environmental CSOs to understand and contribute to the development of schemes of payment for environmental services, by contributing their own critiques and suggestions for further research on institutions and property rights
- deepening Northern CSOs and research organizations' understanding and research capabilities for addressing Southern environmental issues and environmental pressures/conflicts facing the South on issues such as climate change, trade, bio-piracy, and conservation of biodiversity.
- increasing the capability of environmental CSOs to act as intermediaries between governments/corporate actors and other civil society organizations or community organizations facing conflicts over use of resources and sinks. This will come from a deepened understanding of the dynamics of ecological conflicts and the conflict resolution/decision-making mechanisms offered by ecological economics
- improving CSO understanding of industrial ecology and life-cycle analysis, thus enabling enhanced research capabilities regarding consumption issues and their environmental impacts. Such research can also be valuable to

corporate actors seeking to make their activities more sustainable and less environmentally damaging or to reduce the “ecological footprint” of their activities.

- contributing to civil society understanding of key ecological economics concepts such as complexity, uncertainty, and resilience. This work can be especially valuable in policy formulation and when implementing the precautionary principle in a post-normal scientific approach
- preparing the ground for cooperative research on “greening” national income accounting through improved understanding of research related to indicators measuring social/environmental welfare
- increasing civil society understanding of the institutions and policy instruments available (such as eco-taxes and markets for environmental permits) for influencing public behaviour, thereby stimulating involvement in research on the effectiveness of such mechanisms and possible alternatives