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## **A Kiss Here and a Kiss There: Conflict and Non-confrontation in a Multi-stakeholder Environmental Partnership in Belgium**

### **INTRODUCTION**

While the long term effects of the 1992 United Nations "Earth Summit" have yet to be seen, one notable short term product has been the increased promotion of multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships as an alternative tool for environmental decision-making (CEC 1993, French 1995, Gamman 1994, Lafferty & Meadowcroft 1996, PCSD 1996, Pellow 1996). These collaborative efforts, which bring together stakeholders from the business, governmental, and non-governmental sectors for the purpose of achieving consensus-based solutions to specific environmental problems, have helped to institutionalize consensus-building practices and participatory dialogue into the environmental policy process (Glasbergen 1996a).

Given the diverse interests represented by the various participants and the history of contentious relations between the sectors (Buttel 1992, Gould et al. 1996), one might assume, as I did going into my research of these types of partnerships, that they would be characterized by a high degree of contestation and opposition. Instead, I found antagonistic debate and overt conflict among the participants to be the exception rather than the norm. I was even left with the impression that conflict was being purposefully avoided at times. This paper asks: Why is this the case? And what do these partnerships portend for the future of environmental decision making?

A number of different analytical perspectives exist for explaining this pattern of behavior in multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships. To date, the predominant approach comes from the field of environmental politics and treats the partnership process as an encounter between competing political or economic interests. Here, decision-making is seen to be the result of zero-sum bargaining efforts among policy actors rationally pursuing their respective preferences, desires, or goals (Schwarz & Thompson 1990). While it may certainly be true that some actors choose to avoid conflicting relations with other partners as a means of achieving any of a number of personal or organizational objectives, I contend that such a "politics of interest" perspective, though important, is insufficient to fully explain what goes on in these complex social processes (see Poncelet 1997). It suffers from a tendency to reduce the participants to one-dimensional actors mechanically acting out the Western model of rationality and a proclivity to decontextualize the assumed goal maximizing behavior from its social and cultural settings

(Majone 1985).

Interjecting a more anthropological perspective, I propose that we view multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships less as battlegrounds between conflicting interests and more as sites of opportunities, within specific contexts of unequal power relations, for the production of social and cultural forms. I suggest that these initiatives produce "partners" who tend to adopt certain ways of understanding, talking, and acting within the partnership setting. Moreover, the "privileging" of specific discourses and practices has the effect of promoting certain types of environmental actions over others. With respect to the topic at hand, I argue that these types of partnerships encourage non-confrontational practices which have the effect of restricting or evading debate and conflict among the stakeholders.

To address these issues, I will start by describing the multi-stakeholder environmental partnership upon which my argument is based and then move on to an exploration of the practice of non-confrontation commonly encountered. Next, I will propose socioculturally-based explanations for why debate and conflict tend to get diffused in these types of partnerships and then explore why this practice of non-confrontation remains dominant. Finally, I will conclude with some comments regarding the possibilities of these new instruments in the environmental policy arena.

## **A WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP IN BELGIUM**

In 1994-1995, I conducted research in Belgium with a provincial level multi-stakeholder environmental partnership. Situated in the Walloon Region south of Brussels, its aim was to improve the water quality of the province's major river. Unlike the type of multi-stakeholder activity which arises in response to a specific environmental crisis or event (e.g., the siting of a new manufacturing or waste disposal facility), this partnership--which I will refer to as the "Toupin River Contract" (or TRC) partnership--originated out of the momentum created by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. It was spawned when a federation of environmental groups in Wallonia, in anticipation of the "Earth Summit," asked some of its member organizations in the Toupin River basin to initiate a grass roots environmental project for the region. The result of this request was the decision by a group of 25 NGOs to create and enact what is known as a "river contract"--a publicly recognized though non-legally binding series of propositions for environmental action that the participants of the river contract partnership cooperatively create, voluntarily agree to, and subsequently implement. The partnership was coordinated by a center for cultural affairs in the province and was open to any individual or group who wished to participate. As such, it differed somewhat from more reactionary or crisis-based partnerships which tend to be more limited in focus and restricted in membership.

The TRC partnership was comprised of approximately 60 participants. These included representatives of communal and provincial level public authorities, environmental NGOs, and agricultural and business alliances. Of these actors, those from the governmental and NGO sectors were the most active. In this paper, the principal players from the NGO sector consist of representatives from two types of environmental organizations: national or regional level conservation organizations (which draw their strength from large memberships and scientific expertise on ecological matters), and local level environmental pressure groups (whose influence stems from their knowledge of local environmental conditions and their ability to sway local public opinion). The main governmental actors include representatives from the agency

responsible for the management of the province's waterways (which I call the Provincial Road Service, or PRS) and from the agency in charge of waste water treatment in the province (which I refer to as the Water Treatment Agency, or WTA).

Structurally, the TRC partnership was organized into three main committees (see Figure 1 below). The most important of these was a multi-sectorial, plenary-level body responsible for instituting and signing off on the river contract itself. This committee, which I refer to as the 'River Committee', was itself supported by two sub-committees. One--comprised largely of engineers and technicians responsible for managing and maintaining the river, served as a technical forum (the 'Technical Committee'), while the other--made up mostly of representatives of local, and regional level environmental groups--acted as a public forum (the 'NGO Committee'). The River Committee convened approximately twice a year, while the sub-committees met every two months or so.

Functionally, the partnership endeavored to operate according to the process of "concertation." Translated from French, this term refers to a method which is consensus-based, multi-disciplinary in approach, and inclusive of the greatest number and variety of participants possible. Citizen participation was strongly encouraged, and special attention was given to informing and sensitizing the public regarding the environmental issues at hand. Facilitation for the process was provided by the project coordinators.

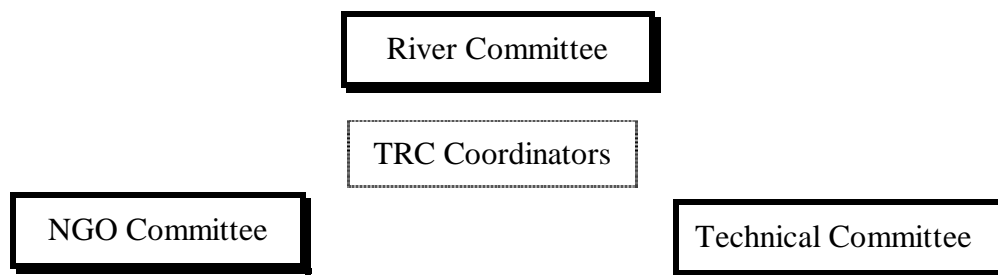


Figure 1. The structural organization of the TRC partnership.

## **PRACTICES OF CONFLICT AND NON-CONFRONTATION IN THE TRC PARTNERSHIP**

Various types of activities in the partnership served to bring the diverse participants together. Primary among these were the meetings which united the various committee members.

While these gatherings served to keep participants abreast of the status of the project and to engage them in environmental problem-solving, they also provided the opportunity for partners to really get to know and "dialogue" with one another. It was at these meetings that the participants had the chance to share their opinions and attempt to convince others with regard to their views on specific environmental and policy concerns.

Conflict--as defined as a state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas, or interests--was present in these meetings. It remained, however, for the most part "latent." By this I mean that while many of the participants held opposing views, they tended not

to express them during the meetings. Even when these opposing views were made "manifest"--i.e., when the involved parties displayed some sort of "destructive" behavior in attempting to undermine each other's positions (see Glasbergen 1996b:2)--this was either done in a somewhat mechanical fashion which seldom resulted in moments of emotional tension or aggression, or efforts were made to minimize any friction.

In exploring situations of open conflict, I distinguish between that which takes place in 'homogeneous' versus 'heterogeneous' settings. In homogeneous settings, contentious comments are made by participants in situations which did not include the company of their adversaries. This is in distinction to heterogeneous settings, where both opposing parties are present and participate in adversarial discourses and behaviors. A couple of examples from the TRC partnership will help illustrate some of the practices of conflict and non-confrontation encountered.

### **Homogeneous Conflict in an NGO Committee Meeting**

Two examples of a homogeneous-style conflict comes from an NGO Committee meeting which took place in the spring of 1995. This meeting, which was preparing for an upcoming River Committee meeting, was spent reviewing a specific TRC report evaluating the state of the Toupin River. Drawing on data collected by TRC volunteers, the report established some of the specific "trouble spots" plaguing the river. During the discussion, Charles (one of the project coordinators) took a moment to describe the Walloon Region's system of environmental enforcement. He noted that although the Walloon government is ultimately responsible for going after people causing damage to rivers, it has no real means for doing this. Consequently, many violations of existing environmental laws go unprosecuted. In an emotional response to this state of affairs, Pauline--an active member of a communal level environmental organization--complained of recent commercial development along one of the Toupin River tributaries that she encountered during her own fieldwork for the "trouble spots" survey. She fitfully described the damage to the river and river bed that she had witnessed as both "catastrophic" and "horrible" and demanded that other people be made aware of the situation. She admitted in frustration, however, that she did not know how to bring about these ends.

Michel, another of the project coordinators and the TRC's lead facilitator, entered the discussion here suggesting that the NGO Committee attempt to develop a strategy to get public authorities to do more. Pauline protested again, lamenting the difficulties in getting communal governments involved. Michel responded that the most important thing is to "establish a dialogue." Karl, a representative from a large and prestigious national level environmental NGO, added his agreement, though he noted the burden that attending great numbers of meetings poses for environmental activists. Michel went on to suggest choosing a few examples of successful "concertations" currently taking place in other venues in order to highlight some of the benefits of the process for members of the River Committee. After some discussion of possible case examples, Pauline re-entered the conversation in a much more subdued tone recommending that it may not be wise for NGOs to complain about issues and problems for which they do not have sufficient expertise.

Later in this same meeting, Charles explained the primary intent of the "trouble spots" report. He described it as an attempt to get all of the partners to agree on the state of the river, which would then pave the way for collectively agreed upon, concrete projects. Yvette--a member of another local level, communally-based environmental organization--intervened here, arguing instead that they use this report to pressure public authorities to do something about the

problems. She suggested showing them the report and saying: OK, here are the problems; what are we going to do about them? She even proposed that the results of the "trouble spots" report be published in the press as a means of further impelling the communal governments and the Water Treatment Agency. Michel stepped in again here and recommended that this action should not stop at "provocation" alone. He suggested that the press article should also announce that a follow-up story would be done in a year's time to see what progress had been made. Walter, a representative of a farmers union, ended the discussion by warning even more forcefully that "concertation" is the key to the TRC partnership and should always remain its goal.

Of importance, neither the discourse of crisis utilized by Pauline nor the antagonistic practice proposed by Yvette were expressed at the ensuing River Committee meeting.

### **Heterogeneous Conflict in a Technical Committee Meeting**

An example of a heterogenous-style conflict comes from a spring, 1995, Technical Committee meeting organized around the review of the provincial government's revision of a regulation covering the management of non-navigable rivers. In this case, the TRC partnership had been asked by the provincial government to review the proposed directive. It was decided by the coordinators of the TRC to submit the proposed regulation to the NGO Committee for review and then to pass these comments on to the Technical Committee, which included some of the authors of the regulation from the Provincial Road Service (PRS). These comments were presented and defended by the single NGO representative in the Technical Committee (Karl) with support from the TRC coordinators.

The comments submitted by the NGO Committee covered a wide range of recommendations. At the general, philosophical level, for instance, they called for better inclusion of stakeholders and greater use of concertation in the decision making process. At the explanatory level, they requested more clear wording and definitions of terms. At the technical level, they made ecologically-based suggestions for better preserving the river beds and improving flood controls.

The dialogic process in this particular meeting followed a particular pattern. As each comment was read or presented, it was almost always quickly countered in some fashion by representatives of the PRS. Many of the responses involved the technicalities and legalities of modifying a law. Other rejoinders discounted the comments because they ignored the realities of PRS work. Over the course of the meeting, representatives from the PRS complained a number of times that members of the NGO Committee simply did not have the expertise to comment in a useful fashion on this type of regulation. These negative responses, it should be noted, were generally supported by the ranking Water Treatment Agency (WTA) representative taking part in this meeting.

The lone NGO representative and the TRC coordinators were forced to explain the intent, rationale, or meaning behind many of the NGO Committee comments--whether this meant explicating the damaging ecological effects of clearing roots structures from river banks or illustrating the potential benefits of improved information sharing by the PRS. Despite the hostile reception, this was done in a relatively polite, patient, and non-defensive manner.

### **Features of Non-Confrontation in the Partnership Setting**

The preceding examples of conflict help to illustrate several important features which commonly characterize the practice of non-confrontation in these types of environmental

partnerships. The first of these concerns the general practice of non-engagement--a practice which has the effect of keeping conflict from becoming open in the first place. Basically, this involves people withholding or keeping private those views or opinions which might lead to confrontation with others. This is most obviously associated with hidden or latent conflicts, but it is also commonplace in dialogic settings as well. Such is the case when participants refrain from entering into or continuing an existing debate. This is illustrated in the "trouble spots" report case where the contentious positions assumed in the NGO meeting are not replicated in the ensuing River Committee meeting.

A second feature involves the tendency for participants to attempt to reconcile disparate views by seeking common ground. In the "trouble spots" report example, confrontational comments made by NGO representatives were met by efforts on the part of project coordinators and other partners to steer away from discourses and practices which depart from the overarching goals of "dialogue" and "concertation." These reconciliatory attempts also had the effect of moderating provocative homogeneous-type comments so that they did not become dialogic in the more heterogeneous, multi-sectorial River Committee meeting.

A third feature involves the mien with which most of the participants participate in debate. In general, positions would be presented in a polite manner. People seldom raised their voices and rarely expressed strong emotions. This courteous demeanor was nicely expressed in the Technical Committee, river regulation example by the NGO representative who, when faced with a long series of critical retorts from his PRS and WTA counterparts, managed to calmly and in a respectful fashion address each one in turn.

A final characteristic feature of this practice of non-confrontation involves the tendency for participants to attempt to diffuse open conflict once it has arisen. This is evidenced in the NGO Committee case where two local NGO members proposed hostile use of the "trouble spots" report against the WTA and the communal governments. In both instances, the adversarial comments were immediately followed by attempts on the part of the project coordinators and some of the other partners (including other NGO representatives) to try to moderate the aggressive NGO positions by shifting the focus from pressure tactics to "dialogue" and "concertation."

## **TRUCE OR CONSEQUENCE: THE PRIVILEGING OF NON-CONFRONTATION IN MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS**

A number of compelling reasons may be forwarded to help explain why the practice of non-confrontation was dominant in this type of multi-stakeholder initiative rather than the overt conflict and opposition that holds sway other venues of cross-sectorial interaction (Pellow 1996, Schnaiberg & Gould 1994). A traditional politics of interest approach provides several important insights. It points, for instance, toward the commonly held goals of the participants and the cooperation among actors required to achieve them. If the primary aim of the TRC is to clean up the Toupin River, it is in the interests of all of the participants to work together, and not against one another, toward this end. A politics of interest approach also stresses some of the other political and economic interests (or disinterests) at stake. Confrontational practices by governmental representatives, for instance, might result in diminished respect and credibility in the eyes of the public. Likewise, contentious practices on the part of NGOs might jeopardize their place at the table--a place to which they have only recently been invited--and lessen the chance that they would be asked to participate in future initiatives.

Notwithstanding the obvious relevance of this politics of interest perspective, I suggest here that certain interrelated, socioculturally-based factors also need to be examined in order to more fully explain this practice of non-confrontation. Three factors will be discussed in detail: the first concerns the existence of particular models or shared understandings of what partnerships are supposed to be like; the second pertains to the adoption by the majority of participants in these partnerships of a specific way of conceptualizing and talking about environmental issues (what I call the discourse of "ecological modernization"); and the third involves the role of institution-building in these types of initiatives.

### **Cultural Models of Partnership**

Drawing on evidence from informal interviews with various TRC partners, participant-observation of the partnership meetings, and published documents, I suggest that there is a dominant, taken-for-granted model held by the vast majority of the participants for how multi-stakeholder partnerships are supposed to work. I further submit that this "cultural model" plays a major role in influencing their behaviors by framing their understandings of events and guiding their expectations (Quinn & Holland 1987). In its most basic form, this cultural model conceptualizes the partnership process--or "concertation"--as fundamentally non-conflictual in nature. Attached to this supposition is the commonly held belief that confrontation and opposition are ultimately detrimental to the concertation process.

Various elements make up the basic model of concertation as non-oppositional. First, it is seen as a process which both avoids and resolves conflict. This is illustrated in the comments of a representative from a small NGO:

Concertation, as a basis for work, is something very difficult to make happen. We have different levels here at the [TRC]. We have the scientists in the [Technical Committee]; we have the environmental movement, which is the [NGO Committee]. The scientists say: "We are the most competent. You don't know anything. It is up to us to make decisions." But the others say: "...it is we who should be participating because we live in the environment. And sometimes, when you make your technical decisions, we have to step in because you have forgotten to take this or that into account." It is at this level that a conflict exists, if you will. And concertation must permit the resolution of these conflicts--avoiding them as much as possible; and when they present themselves, finding a way of action or different modes of reasoning which permit the resolution of these conflicts, thereby arriving at a solution which takes into account all of the needs of the participants or other interested persons (PB5).

Second, it is perceived to be a distinctly non-adversarial process which goes beyond the "good guys" versus "bad guys" and "winners" versus "losers" dichotomies. This is evidenced by the following description of the concertation offered by the deputy mayor of one of the participating communes:

Concertation signifies the passage from a democracy where the majority wins over the minority to that which I would call an active participatory democracy where there are no longer winners and losers. ... Here everyone wins because everyone participates. We succeed in doing collective work. Perhaps it is just a dream. Anyway, it seems to me that our society allows people to protest and take strong stands, so we must find a way to go beyond this bestial stage, this perpetual confrontation, this struggle to crush our opponents, by new and more simplified methods (OJ6).

It is also expressed by one of the project coordinators:

Concertation is...putting all of the people concerned by a particular problem around a table so that each can hear the arguments and concerns of the others and integrate these into his or her own demands. ... It is not a weak process...where people have to give up some of their arguments or some of their interests. Nor is it a strong process where one's adversaries must be dominated in order to bring them to one's own opinions, as is often the case in negotiations. It involves integrating the arguments of others in order to modify one's own (DC7).

The coordinators of the TRC made explicit efforts to encourage and maintain this model of concertation as non-contentious. They published a short document defining the concertation process and distributed this to all of the TRC's partners. The document described concertation as:

a process of collective reflection which operates in a systematic fashion and which is clearly structured and planned. It requires of its participants a spirit of reconciliation and a cooperative attitude which facilitates dialogue and cooperation.

### *Supporting Analogies and Metaphors*

In their descriptions and definitions of partnerships and the process of concertation, participants also cited certain analogies or metaphors which, in their capacity to affect cognitive modeling (Lakoff 1984), also support the dominant model of partnerships as non-confrontational. In the TRC partnership, one important way by which many of the participants understood the concertation process was in terms of a "round table" dynamic--a process involving a diverse group of people representing all of the involved interests and competencies who take the time to get to know and really understand one another. It involves listening to other's arguments, positions, concerns, and objectives as much as it does trying to win acceptance for one's own. This is evidenced by the following comment made by a local NGO member:

[Concertation] is a round table, large or small, to which must be brought the people who are concerned with the problems around them, from any point of view--whether this be social, economic, cultural, environmental protection, etc.--and where a consensus on the best solution must be found which takes into account all of the factors. Because it serves no purpose to have a disequilibrium between different aspects (WR6).

This is also supported by the following comment by a deputy from the provincial government:

The advantage [of concertation] is in clarifying the problems and identifying the parameters so that everyone is applying the same parameters. ... People get to meet one another and to know each other's problems. They realize that they must get along (PB4).

Another important attribute of this "round table" dynamic concerns the type of power relations which many of the participants found to be inherent in it. The most commonly expressed view saw the concertation process as having an egalitarian quality to it, one in which the participants were depicted as relative equals. This stems from the feeling that in this



particular setting, all partners have potentially the same power of decision. As described by one of the TRC coordinators:

In my opinion, concertation is precisely there to reduce the differences and inequalities [between participants] so that a real estate developer can listen to the desires of an individual or so that an NGO can hear the economic necessities of a business or a commune or whatever. So, I believe that concertation brings together people with different power, but it is there to put people at the same level, in theory (DC10).

A member of a union of agriculturists put it this way:

You know...in a couple, the man is not more important than the woman, and the woman is not more important than the man. When a soccer team wins, he who scored the goal always says, even if he played well, he scored the goal because of a good pass from his teammate, and he always thanks the [goal] keeper for making the last save. Concertation is not a story about a pharmacist who takes out his scales to see who is small and who is large. That's not concertation. Concertation is everyone equal around the table. Otherwise, there is no concertation. It is respect. You can not have concertation without recognizing the others, without understanding, recognition, and acceptance of others (VD27).

Many of the participants appear to view the concertation process to act as some sort of levelling mechanism. It invokes the creation of a new cultural "space" where everyone has the same power.

A few partners went on to distinguish the equality which exists between participants within the setting of a concertation from the power imbalances which exist outside of it. They did so by making a clear distinction between the people involved--seen to be inherently unequal--and the positions that they represent--seen to be inherently equal. The representative from the union of agriculturists stated:

Is everyone equal in concertation? Concertation is not a story about people. It is a story of objectives or ideas. When I do concertation, I don't judge the person who is in front of me. I consider his ideas and his objectives, but not the person (VD20).

This was echoed by a representative of the WTA:

I ask myself...how concertation is a relation of power. I believe that it is a relation of opinions and that the prevailing authorities are responsible for taking into account what is possible among these opinions (CP9).

The priority given to ideas over people in the concertation process serves to focus attention away from the inherent structural power imbalances involved. This serves to decontextualize the process of debate in concertation, reducing it to competition between ideas but not between people.

A second prevalent metaphor utilized in talking about concertation in the TRC partnership which also helps to explain the non-confrontational character of the partnership process concerns the frequent reference to concertation as a "game". More specifically, the success of the concertation process was seen by many TRC participants as dependent upon people "playing the game."

More than anything, this idea of "playing the game" demands a level of "good will" on the

part of the participants. As expressed by a member of a local environmental group:

I believe [concertation] is good because it is based on the good will of all of the parties.

If one of the parties stops playing the game and starts doing things in secret, I believe that it is over at that point. It will never work again. Given that it doesn't have any legal or obligatory basis, it really rests upon people's good will (MF5).

Also incorporated in this notion of "good will" is the idea that people should be motivated to participate, willing to abide by the decisions taken in the process, and dedicated to play until the end. You can not just quit if you do not like the results. To "play the game," people must be "honest"--they should play "fairly," by the "rules," "honorably," and without "ulterior motives" or "cheating." The concertation process is seen as being compromised by participants who fail to "put their cards down on the table."

This "good will" also means that people must be willing to inform others and become informed, to discuss the problems at issue, to take responsibility for what they can do in the process (whether this involves volunteering labor or making funding available), and to participate for the general good rather than for personal benefit. "Playing the game," moreover, does not mean ignoring one's own interest. A number of the participants stressed that a successful concertation depends exactly on the motivation of participants to express and defend their interests. "Playing the game" does mean, however, that these personal interests remain subservient to the good of the group.

Associated with this "game" metaphor is the idea that concertation is something that people do voluntarily. Participants are not, as many people noted, "coerced" to participate. Nor are decisions made by concertation imposed. Some participants, especially those from the NGO sector, made a clear distinction between the decision making process in concertation and that of "authoritarian" decision making--where the powerful are allowed to force their opinions upon others. Others took this one step farther by directly contrasting the concertation process to the regulatory process. In concertation, decisions are made by agreement, not by law or legal obligation. This is by necessity more of a sociological or political response to a problem than an administrative one. Regulations, on the other hand, were described as "tools of repression" which only tell us "what we can't do". This is as opposed to concertation, which "tells us what we can do" (BT22).

What is in some ways striking about this discourse of "playing the game" is the fact that it differs markedly from the war-based metaphors of "fighting," "struggling," and "battling" that are more commonly used, especially in the popular press, to describe environmental discussions between the governmental, business, and NGO sectors. Though these more combative words were utilized from time to time by some of the participants in the TRC, they appeared less often than the game metaphor. As to the wider implications of this difference, I can only speculate. Suffice it to say that concertation appears to be a process which is more fun and perhaps less dangerous than the traditional regulatory-based decision making process.

### **Competing Discourses and the Privileging of Ecological Modernization**

A second major socioculturally-based factor concerns the utilization by participants in the TRC partnership of a particular discourse--that of "ecological modernization." It is my contention that this discourse--which subsumes a perspective of, and way of talking about, environmental issues--is privileged over other discourses also represented. Moreover, the discourse of ecological modernization is comprised of certain characteristics which have the

effect of promoting environmental actions which lend toward non-confrontation. In the paragraphs below, I will describe the discourse of ecological modernization and the role that it plays in the partnerships. I will then do the same for two other important discourses at play: one stemming from the environmental movement which Hajer (1995) calls the "survival discourse"; and another which Harvey (1996) refers to as the "standard view of environmental management."

The discourse of ecological modernization is by no means a minority or marginalized discourse in society. According to Hajer (1995:30), it has become "the most credible way of 'talking Green' in the spheres of environmental policy-making" since the late 1980s. At the root of ecological modernization is the accepted recognition that current environmental problems are fundamentally a product of our capitalistic system of production and consumption. This acknowledgement, however, is not accompanied by the concurrent belief that the system therefore must be replaced. On the contrary, ecological modernization views existing political, economic and social institutions as the most appropriate structures for addressing issues of environmental protection (Hajer 1995:25). Capitalism can be maintained if it is moderated.

Three additional characteristics of ecological modernization are important to our discussion here. The first pertains to the premise that solutions to current environmental dilemmas can be remedied only through collective action. As summarized by Hajer (1995:26), "there would be no fundamental obstructions to an environmental sound organization of society if only every individual, firm or country would participate." Cooperation among the many players is deemed necessary in order to gain support for "proactive" environmental initiatives (Harvey 1996:379). The second feature concerns the dominance of economic thinking in this perspective. For the first time, environmental degradation is made calculable by approaching ecological problems from a position of scientific rationality and framing them in monetary terms. This provides a common basis by which costs and benefits of pollution can be taken into account (Hajer 1995:25-26). The catch phrase here is "pollution prevention pays" (Hajer 1995). The final attribute regards the portrayal of environmental protection as a positive-sum, rather than a zero-sum, game. In other words, ecological modernization rejects the assumed fundamental opposition between economy and ecology and points toward a possible reconciliation between economic growth and environmental problems (Mol 1996). The key word in this formulation is "sustainability" (Harvey 1996).

Though dominant, ecological modernization was not the only discourse adopted or utilized in the TRC partnership. A second general way of conceptualizing and talking about the environment and environmental issues, and one most common to representatives from the environmental community, has been called by Hajer (1995) the "survival discourse." This discourse has its roots in the environmental movement of the early 1970s and is founded upon several major ideas (Hajer 1995:78-89). Highlighting the interrelated trends of accelerating industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, diminishing natural resources, and a deteriorating environment, this discourse is concerned with revealing the seriousness of our current environmental predicament and demanding that the problems be addressed. This crisis-oriented perspective also links existing ecological dilemmas to a broader social critique: one which criticized Western materialism; the Western notion of progress; the dominant mode of production (i.e., the existing capitalistic relations); large-scale thinking; the lack of morality in industrialized and urbanized societies; expert-based, technocratic approaches; and the threat of alienation posed by these institutions. This discourse places far more emphasis on pointing out the problems which exist than on proposing solutions to them.

A third discourse at play, what Harvey (1996) has termed the "standard view of

environmental management," was employed most frequently not by environmentalists but by public authorities and members of the business community. According to Harvey (1996:373-376), this perspective promotes an "after the event" approach to environmental problems in which problems are addressed only after they have become distinctive and un-ignorable. Certain assumptions underlie this discourse as well. The basic "after the event" strategy stems from the belief that environmental concerns should not stand in the way of progress (i.e., economic growth). The presumption here is that a zero-sum trade-off exists between economic growth and environmental quality. Furthermore, the discourse assumes that environmental problems are not irreversible, that any "after the event" environmental difficulties can be effectively cleaned up if necessary, and that scientific knowledge exists to cope with any difficulties that may arise. Environmental issues are also regarded as "incidents" resulting from "errors" or "mistakes" which should be dealt with on an ad hoc basis, and preference is given to "end-of-pipe"--i.e., curative--measures rather than proactive, preventative ones.

The state is seen as having an intervening or regulatory role to play here, but only for dealing with cases of so-called "market failure"--e.g., in order to prevent excessive pollution, plundering of common resources, and exposure of workers and consumers to toxic hazards and environmental degradation. Two important limitations to state intervention are seen to exist. First, regulations should not be created without the support of clear scientific evidence; and secondly, tradeoffs must be determined via cost-benefit analyses.

Finally, a powerful array of sub-discourses are embedded within this "standard view" discourse. These include environmental economics, environmental engineering, environmental law, and planning and policy analysis. The view that economic growth is fundamental to human development or that humans have the right to modify (or dominate) their environments as they choose, however, is never challenged. Drawing financial and logistical support from corporations and the state, environmental action proceeds instead by the key question: how can the environment best be managed for capital accumulation, economic efficiency, and growth?

Returning to the TRC partnership, I found the discourse of "ecological modernization"--more so that the "survival" or "standard view" discourses--to permeate the texts, discussions, and individual understandings of current environmental problems and problem-solving. I will now explore some evidence of the prominence of this dominant discourse by relating partnership practices to the three characteristics of ecological modernization described above (i.e., collective action, economic rationality, and positive sum game between economy and ecology).

The privileging of collective action is evident in the many comments made by participants on the essential role of multi-stakeholder partnerships in the resolution of contemporary, complex, environmental problems. This sub-discourse--which I refer to it as the "discourse of concertation"--emphasizes the need for concertation, dialogue, and cooperation in the environmental arena. When asked to talk about some of the disadvantages of the concertation process, for instance, a deputy mayor from a participating commune replied:

Disadvantages? None. None. Without a good concertation, nothing is possible. It's not possible to do good work. ... With concertation, we can accomplish many projects and improve many situations (EM5).

As concertation is seen as being particularly appropriate for dealing with complicated problems involving many people, it is also viewed as necessitated by the complexity of and diverse interests involved in environmental problem-solving.

Solutions arrived at via concertation are generally considered to be more "appropriate" or

"optimal" than those arrived at via more traditional regulatory or legislating processes. According to this ideal, concertation lends toward a better analysis of problems, better ideas which receive less resistance down the road, and solutions which are more agreeable to all. The following comments illustrate. According to an NGO representative:

If we arrive at a solution which is accepted by the majority, it will be a more permanent solution than one which was imposed, better accepted by the people involved, and more long-lasting because it is based on consensus (PB7).

A communal deputy mayor added:

For environmental issues, it is better to move forward slowly but with a lot of people than to work all alone. I believe that we have to change the mentality with which one approaches environmental issues, and I believe that it is concertation which permits this (CMVDG9).

This discourse also subsumes the commonly held belief that just by engaging in concertation--i.e., just by getting people to work together--things can be worked out. The underlying problem that concertation is seen to help overcome is the omnipresent lack of communication, information, and knowledge which exists among actors in the environmental domain. This belief is embedded in the following description of the concertation process made by an NGO representative:

For me, before anything else, concertation should allow each partner to be understood by the others. But we are not yet, in my view, at this point. It is extremely difficult to get each partner to understand what his neighbor wants. For me, this is the first step. From this point on, if we have understood what our neighbor wants, it is possible to discuss a problem and to come up with a solution which is more or less agreeable to everyone. For me, this is concertation (CP5).

It is interesting here that it is this lack of understanding and information, and not the political and economic interests at stake themselves, which is understood as the underlying problem preventing better solutions to environmental problems.

A second key characteristic of ecological modernization--the economic rationality underlying this discourse--appears in the fundamental link drawn by many of the participants between economic and environmental interests. This is exemplified by the following comment uttered by a prominent NGO member:

The protection and research for a better environment is in agreement with the pursuit of economic activities--economic activities done with better attention to the environment. (JS6)

Finally, the discourse of ecological modernization is evident in the centrally held belief that the pursuit of sustainable development is the key to addressing today's pressing environmental concerns. As expressed by a representative from an industrial federation in Wallonia:

The environmental policy action to which a government must lead comes under the framework of sustainable development--the necessary conciliation of ecological interests (environmental protection, the parsimonious use of natural resources) but with a constraint, which is economic development, which is the sole producer of economic but also social wealth and well-being. ... There is no ecological paradise in an economic desert...and there is no economic paradise in an ecological desert (AL3).

### **Institutional Constraints and the Need for Self-Preservation**

A third and final factor which further helps to explain the prominence of practices of non-confrontation in the TRC is tied to forces of institutionalization. My basic point here is that the bureaucratic nature of this partnership has the effect of drawing attention toward its institutional needs and away from the more contentious topics subsumed in the environmental issues being addressed.

Structurally, the TRC partnership may be characterized as a formal institution. It was initiated by a convention administered by the Walloon Regional government and signed by all of the intending participants. Rules for structuring and operating river contracts were further established by a 1993 letter from the Walloon Minister of the Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture. These documents laid out the project objectives, the roles of the project coordinators, the general framework and methodology, the domains of activity to be covered by the convention, the basic structure of the River Committee, and the financial commitments necessary.

It should come as no surprise, then, that large amounts of time and effort were devoted to the functioning of the TRC partnership itself. In the committee meetings, for instance, the partnership devoted great amounts of energy to logistical and procedural matters which were not directly tied to the stated environmental goal of improving water quality in the Toupin River basin. This included time spent on reminding participants of what had transpired in the past (e.g., in the reviewing and accepting of meeting minutes), previewing future activities, and keeping the various committees and sub-committees up to speed with regard to each other's activities.

Outside of the committee meetings themselves, an enormous amount of time was spent by project coordinators and partners alike in attempts to insure the continued existence of the partnership. This included substantial efforts made to assure the enduring cooperation of the existing partners. Many of the communal governments participating in the TRC partnership, for example, did so rather reluctantly. Their attendance was often poor, their written responses to early drafts of the actual River Contract rather sporadic, and many were negligent in organizing their own local working groups. Consequently, the TRC coordinators were forced to make repeated visits to these communes in order to keep the momentum going.

Maintaining the institution also necessitated a great amount of energy dedicated to fundraising. The TRC partnership was constantly under the gun to secure enough funding to keep running for another year, and the coordinators often expressed frustration at the inherent inefficiency of trying to run such a complex project with insufficient or tardy financial support.

These institutional practices are by no means unique to the TRC partnership. In fact, they are predicted by the Weber-Michels theory of institutionalization. According to Dalton (1994:100), this theory contends that once organizational structures get established for such voluntary-based initiatives as the TRC, they have a tendency to become highly centralized and institutionalized. It also asserts that these processes of centralization and bureaucratization may serve to isolate such bottom-up initiatives from their key supporters and lead to the substitution of organizational maintenance goals for the projects' original environmental objectives.

The point that I am trying to make in this section is this: the institutional nature of this type of partnership means that by definition, it will have the tendency to place great emphasis on the objective of organizational maintenance. In other words, the desire to perpetuate the institution will play a substantial role relative to their purely environmental goals. Taking a clue from the

privileging of the discourse of concertation discussed above, if we acknowledge the importance that the participants place on partnerships and concertation in the environmental problem-solving process, working to keep the partnership alive increasingly becomes a means to that end. What is important here is that actions, such as conflictual behavior, which might serve to harm the organizational health of the partnership may get suppressed so that the institution itself may be preserved.

## DISCUSSION

What needs to be further discussed at this juncture is how the above-described socioculturally-based factors--i.e., dominant cultural models, privileged discourses, and forces of institutionalization--specifically affect practices of conflict and non-confrontation. Before we revisit the particular case examples of contestation in detail, it is worthwhile to note that the three main sociocultural factors mesh well with the practices of non-confrontation. Four such practices were described above: 1) disengagement from the discussion and withholding one's views, 2) reconciliation of disparate views by seeking common ground, 3) polite behavior, and 4) the diffusion of any conflict that arises. With regard to the first two sociocultural factors, if participants believe that they are not supposed to be engaging in conflict in the partnership process, and if they perceive such conflict to have the potential of undermining the very collaborative institutions which they find so imperative to resolving environmental problems, I submit that this will influence efforts on the part of the participants to refrain from or to at least minimize potentially conflictual practices. The discourse of ecological modernization is especially powerful here because it provides a common conceptual system for the reconciliation of disparate views concerning ecology and economy.

Regarding the role of institution-building, the point I want to make is that possibilities for debate and conflict in these partnerships are also being restrained by the omnipresent task of keeping the partnerships alive. While the diverse partners may differ on many issues of environmental concern, these disagreements often get swamped by the institutional upkeep requirements of the organizations. Time spent on the operation and maintenance of the partnership is also time not spent treading on contentious environmental issues. It should also be noted that while efforts made to support the partnership institutions may not directly resolve environmental problems, these efforts do provide opportunities for consensus-based decisions to be made. And consensus, even if it only concerns issues of housekeeping, is what partnerships are all about.

### **Case Example: Conflict in the NGO Committee over the "Trouble Spots" Report**

The case example of the NGO Committee debate over what to do with the "trouble spots" report illustrates a number of important characteristics of the practice of non-confrontation: namely the reconciliation of disparate views by seeking common ground, and the proclivity to diffuse conflict once it arises. I suggest that we view the conflict as a debate between two positions: one utilizing ideas, words, and strategies from the above-described "survival discourse"; and the other doing the same from the discourse of "ecological modernization." I further submit that the latter of these two discourses is privileged in this setting, as is evidenced, in part, by the great value placed on the "concertation" process as the most appropriate method for proceeding. As the discourse of ecological modernization sanctions collaborative action over competition (unlike the "survival discourse"), conflict tends to get reduced in these types of

situations.

In this example, members of local environmental groups illustrate the "survival discourse" when they complain that the very reality of the river basin's substantial environmental problems is not being taken seriously by governmental actors. They go on, in a rather adversarial manner, to propose that the evidence uncovered by the "trouble spots" report be used to pressure local and provincial governments into taking action. These rather contentious behaviors, however, are tempered by the comments of other participants--in this case, by a project coordinator, by another environmentalist, and by a representative of an agricultural federation. By preaching the virtues--and indeed the necessity--of "dialogue," "cooperation," and "concertation" in the environmental problem solving process, these partners invoke the privileged sub-discourse of ecological modernization which I have termed the discourse of concertation. The dominance that this discourse holds in the TRC setting is evidenced by its ability to quiet the hard-line positions taken by the environmentalists. The conflict is further diffused by the ability of the discourse of concertation to unite the participants under the banner of a common objective desired by all.

### **Case Example: Conflict in the Technical Committee over a River Regulation**

The Technical Committee meeting example also concerns a situation involving the interaction between competing discourses. On one side of the conflict are members of the NGO Committee, represented by a single NGO member (Karl) and some of the TRC coordinators, who presented comments to a proposed revision of a regulation covering non-navigable rivers. On the other side are members of the Provincial Road Service (PRS), who were proposing the regulatory changes, and the Water Treatment Agency (WTA). The comments to the revised regulation were made largely through the use of the language of ecological modernization. This was evident primarily in the numerous calls for more citizen participation in the environmental decision-making process. The responses made to these NGO comments, on the other hand, exemplify the language and ideas subsumed under the "standard view of environmental management" discourse. This was most evident by the PRS and WTA arguments that members of environmental organizations did not have the technical, political, or legal expertise to be commenting on such regulations.

During the course of this meeting, the participants from the PRS and the WTA were frequently uncompromising, and I would even say hostile, in their review of the NGO Committee comments. They often dismissed the NGO suggestions without much thought or discussion. That Karl, the NGO member, did not respond to the antagonistic retorts in kind is due, I believe, to his privileging of concertation (as was demonstrated by his comments in the first case example) and his concurrent belief that this process should remain non-oppositional.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the preceding sections, I have described a practice common to the type of partnership studied which involves a minimization of conflict. To the extent that this translates to a retreat from rigorous debate, this poses serious questions for these institutions. In this conclusion, I ask: What do these multi-stakeholder partnerships mean for the future of environmental decision-making? And, more specifically, what value do they add to the current regulatory regime?

When considering the advantages of these types of initiatives, three benefits are apparent. First, these collaborative institutions constitute a forum for increased public participation and



input into the environmental arena. They provide opportunities, where little has existed before, for individual citizens and citizen groups to interact with and attempt to influence some of the dominant players in the political and economic arenas. Gaining access to the meeting rooms where environmental decisions are being made is indeed the fulfillment of one of the environmental movement's long-time demands. This public participation is further enabled by the ability of these partnerships to provide a common discursive basis for interaction. This is accomplished in the TRC partnership via the privileging of the discourse of ecological modernization--a discourse which has found favor in all three of the governmental, NGO, and business sectors. Although not all organizations buy completely into this discourse, it does allow participating actors to operate from a common set of assumptions.

Secondly, in addition to the impact that this may have for improved decision-making, increased participation also means that the so-called stakeholders are having the opportunity to actually meet and dialogue with one another. Though seemingly trivial, this is an unmistakable step forward toward overcoming the lack of face to face communication between the different sectors of society which has plagued meaningful levels of concerted action in the past. We should not downplay the possibilities for change engendered by the act of bringing people together who had formerly been kept, or kept themselves, apart.

Lastly, although confrontation-suppressing discourses and practices may restrict the range of stakeholders involved or narrow the agenda items on the table for discussion, multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships like the TRC do pave the way for the production of what Hajer (1995:283-284) calls "limited consensuses." Even limited consensuses--such as the TRC agreements to create communal level water advisory groups and to improve information disclosure regarding large public works projects--can have positive impacts in social and environmental arenas where public debate has produced little more than dissensus in the past.

Though these advantages of multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships are genuine, they are not without drawbacks. Three potential deficits require continued attention. The first grows out of a dilemma that these types of multi-stakeholder partnerships pose for the environmental movement. Despite the benefits described above, the specific institutional and discursive settings constitutive of the type of partnership studied also encourage a certain rationality and demeanor which lessens the force of more purely moral (i.e., less utilitarian) arguments and diminishes the advantages of more adversarial posturing--strategies which environmentalists have developed and used successfully in other venues. Furthermore, as the mere participation of the environmental movement in these partnerships infuses them with a certain legitimacy in the environmental field, so rises the danger of political co-optation for these NGOs. Not only do these NGOs risk falling out of touch with their grass-roots foundations and support, they risk losing their primary source of social capital--their credibility--as well.

The second weakness relates to the possibility that the privileged practice of non-confrontation and discourse of ecological modernization may result in a relative silencing rather than promotion of environmental debate. The problem arises out of a distinct reluctance (if not outright avoidance) on the part of the participants to turn a critical eye toward some of the deeper, structural sources of our current environmental dilemmas. The discourse of ecological modernization, for example, plays a key role in undermining any serious, sustained challenge to the role played by the capitalist mode of production. Contradictions inherent in the system, such as the possibility of capitalism producing its own environmental barriers to production and the creation of wealth (O'Connor 1988), are not open for real discussion in these partnerships even though these issues are often given a clear voice outside of them.

The final potential deficit grows out of the first two and concerns the tendency for these types of partnerships to mask the power imbalances extant in the sphere of environmental policy production. Historically, there has been a dearth of public participation in all policy arenas in Belgium (Kitschelt & Hellemans 1990) just as there has been in the European Union (Baker 1996, McCormick 1995). Limited citizen representation at the decision-making table has been further hindered by an enormous gap which exists between the resources available to citizens-groups (like environmental NGOs) and those available to industry--a gap which has had a tremendous impact on each of their abilities to influence public officials (Butt-Philip 1995). When these characteristics are placed into the context of institutional structures which have historically privileged economic goals over environmental ones, it should come as little surprise that the dominant players in the current system of environmental decision-making in Belgium come almost exclusively from the governmental and business sectors.

Now while these power imbalances are of great concern to many critics of the current system (e.g., Hey & Brendle 1994), this criticism often disappears in environmental partnerships like the TRC. In fact, this issue seldom came up in the meetings themselves. This is due in part, I contend, to that component of the privileged model of partnership which assumes the participants to be equals (this was most clearly evidenced in the elicitation of the "round table" metaphor). It is also due to the fact that these stakeholder processes are producing "partners" who place more value on achieving consensus, sustaining the partnership, and just getting along than they do on condemning inequities in the system. In the end, the social inequalities which many critics argue lie at the source of our current environmental problems (see Pellow 1996) are being concealed by people's desires to be "good partners."

When it comes down to choosing whether or not to participate in such partnerships, the risks outweigh the benefits for certain stakeholders. This camp--made up, for instance, of radical environmental groups and more traditional industries unwilling to compromise on their environmental beliefs and priorities--is truly silenced as its actors typically choose not to (or are not invited to) participate in these initiatives. Those organizations who elect to participate and to conform to the privileged practice of non-confrontation do retain some voice, though they too are ultimately restricted in what they may say or do.

Given all of these constraints, we may conclude that these multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships have the potential, at least in the short term, to produce a valuable though ultimately limited range of environmental actions. It is in the long term, however, that they may prove to be most significant. The personal relationships and cross-sectorial communication engendered by such partnerships--perhaps even more so than any consensus based decisions produced--provide a necessary foundation for a future sustainable society.

#### **END NOTES:**

- (1) This notion of "privileging" is based upon Wertsch's (1991:124) idea that certain types of "mediational means" (e.g., social discourses) may be viewed as "more appropriate and efficacious than others in a particular social setting."
- (2) Two other multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships--a local level initiative directed toward preserving the biodiversity in a commune located in the Walloon Region of

- Belgium, and a European Union level initiative aimed at promoting sustainable development in Europe--were also studied as part of this research project. Data from these partnerships support the findings presented in this paper for the regional level partnership.
- (3) Pseudonyms are used for the partnership itself and for all participating organizations and individuals.
  - (4) Informal interviews conducted with the participants verified that hidden conflicts were indeed present. In these interviews, for instance, participants expressed strong opinions--whether on how best to solve current environmental problems or on the value of the partnership process itself--which were fundamentally at odds with those of other participants.
  - (5) It should be pointed out that efforts directed toward institutional maintenance are often greatest during the early phases of a partnership. Later, when the institution is more stable, more time and effort can be directed toward the objectives of environmental concern.

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