

Civil Society Engagement in the G-8 Environment Ministers' Meeting (Banff, 2002)

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Good afternoon, Bonjour:

Today I would like to take look at the G-8 Environment Ministers' Meeting as an example of how civil society can become engaged in the G-8 process. This meeting, which took place in Banff April 12-14, was one of the many ministerial meetings leading up to this year's G-8 Summit in Kananaskis.

I will highlight where the Government's outreach and engagement program was successful and where it wasn't and how the lessons learned from this particular event could be applied to future ministerial meetings and perhaps Summits. My comments and conclusions are based on a series of follow-up assessments and debriefings with local authorities and residents, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders.

Aujourd'hui, je vous fait part de mes impressions sur la participation de la société civile dans la réunion des ministres de l'environnement du G-8 qui a eu lieu à Banff du 12 au 14 avril. Bien que ma présentation soit en anglais, il me ferait plaisir de répondre à vos questions en français

As many of you know, the Summit process comprises more than the actual gathering of G-8 leaders. Ministerial level meetings for ministers from the G-8 countries take place in the months leading up to the Summit. Although these meetings do no "feed into" the Summit, their content and exchanges help to shape the leaders' discussions.

Canada, as host of the 2002 Summit, was also host to its related ministerial meetings. While Foreign Affairs is responsible for arrangements related to the Summit, individual departments are left with the task of coordinating the ministerial meetings. Environment Canada was asked to organize the Environment Ministers' Meeting. While the logistics and content of the meeting were developed in Ottawa, Environment Canada's Prairie and Northern Region was asked to take over the "on the ground" outreach and engagement operations. The Region was also asked to "green" the meeting, something which I will elaborate on later.

The Environment Ministers' meeting focused on three themes: **Environment and Health, Environment and Development, and Effective National and International Environmental Governance** under the umbrella theme "On the Road to Johannesburg".

New way of doing business

Business as usual for a meeting of this sort would probably have been limited to hotel arrangements, catering and perhaps a roundtable session between key stakeholders and the Canadian Minister of the Environment, David Anderson.

However, recent protests at events of global consequence made it impossible for Environment Canada to limit itself simply to logistics. The RCMP, Canada's National Police Force, recommended the department engage local stakeholders in the G-8 process early on. This was part of a new approach developed in the wake of violent protests at the Summit of the Americas and the tragic events in Genoa.

The approach was to try to involve "activists" in the planning of international events in order to diffuse the need for protest, particularly violent protest; the G8 Environment meeting was the first test of this new approach.

The RCMP was eager to apply its new strategy in Banff. Since Environment Canada has a long history of involving civil society in its meetings, what the RCMP's was trying to do was not new to us. We gladly lent our expertise to this project.

Banff....a unique setting

A unique feature of this meeting was its location. All parties discovered quickly the differences involved in holding an international meeting in Banff — a unique, close-knit community within a national park — rather than in an anonymous hotel in a large city. The town of Banff, is often thought of as a picturesque, retreat-like setting for a meeting. While it is undeniable that Banff is a beautiful place, it is also one of Canada's most controversial national parks and it faces serious challenges when it comes to "sustainable development" — the need to balance preservation of the park against growing numbers of visitors and entrepreneurs. Parks Canada imposed a growth cap in the park when the Government realized that the current growth in the area was unsustainable. The result is a community that is torn between business owners who, for the most part, oppose the limit on growth, and an engaged environmental community who applauds the limit and pressures governments for more restrictions on human use of the park.

When it was first announced the G-8 Environment Ministers' Meeting was coming to Town, panic set in. At the time of the announcement, Environment Canada did not have a presence in Banff and the RCMP did not have all of the facts concerning the meeting in hand. In the absence of information – people invent their own; the rumour-mill went into overdrive.

With the images of prior international meetings in their head, the townsfolk worried that tens of thousands of protestors would invade the Town and ransack their businesses. Environmentalists were worried about the impact of such a large number of protesters on the already fragile montane environment. Town Council was concerned about financial compensation for vandalism should violence escalate. Over the long-term, the town was worried about the reputation of Banff as a tourist destination – especially since images of the meeting and the town would be broadcast into some of the town most lucrative tourism markets. Some local activists also wondered if they could play a role in the Ministers' discussions and how their issues could be brought to the table.

Obviously, we needed to react quickly and deliver an effective outreach strategy. The strategy can be summarized as having two different audiences with two different goals. The first audience was comprised of business owners and local residents concerned about their personal safety and the safety of their property. These are the people who were directly affected because of their proximity to the event. The second audience included the “activists” who wanted a place to voice their concerns to their Minister and to the international community.

The Department's strategy included many activities. The more successful ones were:

- The roundtable discussion Minister Anderson hosted involving representatives from G8 delegations, the Executive Director of UNEP and interest groups. The interest groups consisted of environmental, development and health non governmental organizations, business and industry, labour, aboriginal groups, local authorities, academia, faith communities and youth. The participants brought a wide range of issues and suggestions forward and all emphasized the importance of the inter-relationships central to sustainable development.

Canada, as 2002 G8 Chair, reported these discussions to ministers at the beginning of the ministerial meeting. Civil society groups were pleased to see that their concerns were being conveyed to the Canadian Environment Minister and his counterparts.

- Another success was the Youth Forum: this Forum was sponsored by Environment Canada and delivered through a local environmental group. The

forum brought together 20 environmentally-engaged young people from the region to discuss the same topics that G-8 Environment Ministers would be discussing a few days later. The youth drafted a declaration, and one representative was chosen to present this declaration at the Minister's Roundtable Meeting. The Forum gave youth a new and positive relationship with the RCMP and the federal government and, more importantly, it gave young people a chance to be heard.

- Equally positive activities, although time-consuming, were the one-on-one discussions between a team of Environment Canada and RCMP staff and local environmental groups, businesses, town leaders and the average person in the street. These efforts resulted in "putting a human face" to the event which in turn assisted in alleviating many of their fears and or concerns. If any questions came up prior to or during the meeting, citizens knew who to call and knew who they were calling.
- Local decision makers found that Environment Canada/RCMP participation in the Town Council's G-8 planning committee was also an excellent way to involve local decision-makers in the meeting. The Mayor and his council were given timely information about the meeting's progress and were made to feel part of the planning process. Ensuring that the Town felt more like hosts of the meeting, than victims of it, was a very important element.
- Environment Canada worked with other departments and levels of government to ensure consistent messaging during the meeting and to share information as it became available.
- A good relationship was also built with the local media, which made coverage of the event more informed than it would otherwise have been. This relationship was not maintained in Kananaskis a few months later.

Greening the meeting

Another aspect of this meeting that I'd like to share with you concerns the efforts made by Environment Canada to make this the "greenest" G-8 Environment Ministers' Meeting ever held. As a demonstration of its commitment to sustainable development, Canada took measures to minimize the environmental impact of the meeting and to serve as a hallmark for future events.

Every aspect of the meeting was put through a "green" lens to make sure the best possible environmental choices were made. The first principle used was to reduce waste at the source. For example, delegates used shuttle buses to travel from the airport to the meeting. Environment Canada purchased greenhouse gas emission credits to offset the emissions generated by travel to and from the meeting and by the meeting itself. Wind power was also

purchased to offset electricity used during the meeting. Since most meetings are “powered” by coffee, we even made sure the coffee served was shade-grown and fair-trade. While some members of the environmental community might have considered this “tokenism”, others applauded the departments’ efforts.

As one environmentalist put it: “These meetings are going to happen whether or not we like it...they may as well be green”.

Environment Canada will share its greening experience with the Government of France in the hopes that next year’s ministerials and Summit will follow Canada’s environmental leadership. The French have already expressed interest in Canada’s approach and plan to follow suit next year.

In the end, the G-8 Environment Ministers’ Meeting was successful in the following ways: Ministers were able to discuss the three themes of the meeting in detail (directly) and managed to exchange views on climate change. Civil society engagement was high, though tempered by heightened post 911 security. The only protest was a peaceful and small one comprised of 22 protesters dressed as endangered spotted owls .

Lost Opportunities

Though the meeting did manage to engage citizens in a positive manner, opportunities were lost as a result of a short-time frame, coupled with financial constraints.

- In his paper on Building Democratic Partnerships, John Kirton proposes eleven steps to improve the G-8 Civil Society Link. One of these suggestions is that civil society be included on-site in a multistakeholder forum. The stakeholder roundtable only partially met Professor Kirton’s suggestion. While it was certainly a step in the right direction, civil society did not have the time to discuss the issues at hand in depth, nor were groups given an opportunity and venue to do so. A full two-day meeting, parallel to Environment Ministers’ meeting would have resulted in more effective participation.
- Indeed, the only direct interface that civil society had with Ministers was during the stakeholder roundtable. The fact that a large number of participants from varied backgrounds were asked to provide statements to the Minister in 2 hours limited the level of their engagement. While the themes discussed by ministers were broad and multidisciplinary in nature, more focused discussion topics with civil society participants would have been more effective. Although the civil society participants were Canadian, other Ministers would likely have benefited from the discussions and should have been encouraged to participate instead of sending representatives.

- Local outreach was by and large successful on the security front as residents were made to feel safe and secure about the event. However, in terms of reaching out to locals and involving them in the meeting's content, the outreach strategy was not as effective as it could have been. Ministerial meetings should make room for the community that is hosting their event. After all, given the security risks that the community *perceives* it is taking when one of these meetings comes to town, it's only fair to have local residents be part of the organization of the. They should be hosts, not victims.
- Environment Canada set up a web-site to keep people informed about the meeting and its related documents. However, it was launched late in the process and was not as up-to-date as it should have been. This frustrated local residents and activists who were eager to find out more about the meeting's themes. As Professor Hajnal suggests "a single permanent website with a continuous stream of new information is an important vehicle for engaging citizens". In this regard, the G-8 Summit was far ahead of the Environment Ministers' Meeting with its fairly sophisticated and useful site.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Banff's Environment Minister's Meeting represented a significant step forward for civil society engagement, it is but the first step. Civil groups want to be heard and want to be part of the process and there is value in having them there. It is important to ensure that outreach and engagement attempts not be seen as simple placation on the part of the federal government.

Citizen participation and contribution helps inform deliberations at the ministerial level and serves to diffuse the need for violent protest. Indeed, if future Summits follow the trend of smaller, retreat-style meetings with limited delegations, it will become even more important for civil-society to be involved at these ministerial-level meetings. Citizens should participate on-site during these meetings in their own multistakeholder forum. Furthermore, further thought should be given on how host communities can play a meaningful role in the organization and planning of these meetings. Finally, the Greening of the Environment Ministers' Meeting and the Kananaskis Summit was one of Canada's hallmark successes as host. This should be taken up as an integral component of future ministerials and Summits.

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