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Making the Local-Global Connection: The Role of Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Diffusing Environmental Ideas

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Abstract

Just as scientists study the mechanisms by which toxic chemicals spread throughout the environment and alter biological processes and atmospheric conditions, this paper examines how pollution prevention ideas diffuse into manufacturing decisions and public policy. Just as pollution knows no boundaries, this paper examines how ideas spread across nations and into multinational corporations and international environmental commissions. The argument of this paper is, environmental organizations catalyze the diffusion of transformative environmental ideas by developing politically potent ideas, implementing strategic diffusion campaigns, and capturing the attention of key decision-makers.

The specific research question this paper addresses is, how did the idea of totally chlorine free paper diffuse into manufacturing decisions and into discussions of international environmental commissions? Many analysts of change in environmental and public policy emphasize the role of experts as both the developers and diffusers of policy ideas (for example, see Haas, 1992a and 1992b; Hall, 1989; and Kingdon, 1984). Their explanations of policy change mirror the centralized model of technology diffusion, where a central organization develops and diffuses a new product to adopters (Rogers, 1995).

The hypothesis of this paper is that environmental ideas emerge from the periphery, for example from environmental activists, and diffuse through their political actions into the center -- either government or multinational corporations. For the ideas to be adopted internationally, they must capture the attention of key actors (lead adopters) in corporations or international environmental commissions: environmental activists alone cannot move an idea into good currency. The lead adopters, in turn, become agents of

diffusion as they persuade others of the benefits of the new idea. This research extends Schon's (1971) notion of peripheral technology and policy diffusion to the field of environmental policy.

The methodological approach to this analysis is two-fold. First, a historical study will explain how concerns over the discharge of chlorinated compounds, in particular dioxins, from the paper industry emerged in North America and Western Europe. Second, qualitative, open-ended interviews will be completed with staff of multinational paper corporations and environmental organizations in North America and Western Europe and with members of three international environmental commissions -- the International Joint Commission, Helsinki Commission, and Paris Commission. The goals of these interviews are to develop a map of actors (who developed, diffused, and adopted the idea), explain how they diffused the idea, and examine why adopters embraced the idea. As Weiss (1994) observes, "interviews are necessary [when integrating multiple perspectives], standardized question won't work, because every respondent will have different observations to contribute" (p. 9).

The conference presentation will focus on how the idea of totally chlorine free paper diffused, who was critical to its diffusion, and why some institutions adopted it and others did not.