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ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN THE PERIPHERY

Small firms in rural districts and their approaches to environmental issues

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Abstract

This paper is based on a business development project in the rural districts of North Sweden. The project, the Green Guide, aimed to assist small firms with environmental management and it reached more than a hundred local firms, of which eight are targeted in the paper. In trying to understand how and why the firms approached environmental issues, the mainstream economic scheme of interpretation was sidelined by an alternative and more open view. Through this lens, participating firms were actors in a local context with its unique characteristics. Environmental issues were considered important by the small firm managers and no manager encountered in the project claimed or hinted that working with environmental impact reduction was unnecessary. But, there was a pressure to deal with environmental issues on large firms' terms. In some cases, this resulted in a low enthusiasm and the issues were subsequently left to an outsider. The title of the paper, "Environmental management in the periphery", aims both at the rural location of the project and at the way mainstream corporate environmental management was approached.

Key words: Environmental management, small firms, rural districts.

Small firms and environmental issues

Corporate environmental management are engulfed by the developments and interests of transnational corporations (TNCs). It is as if their auras are magnets for academic scholars: their global reach, their technological amazements, their management systems, their economic power and so on. I have also fallen for this (Sandström, 2001; 2002), but there is another reality, or another part of the TNC reality, depending on how you view it. In Sweden, more than 96 percent of our firms are small and they employ more than two thirds of our work force. With an increasing mechanization of large industries, the number of small firms is most likely to increase. For some scholars, small firms are just like big ones, though. It is just that they have not become large yet, but they want to grow. As demonstrated by a body of writings, however, small firms and small firm managers often differ from TNCs and TNC managers (c.f. Johannisson & Lindmark, 1995; Bridge et al, 1998). Perhaps this is especially the case in rural districts where there is a poor infrastructure, few well-educated persons for local firms to hire, large distances to large markets and spearhead R&D centers. Still, what unites their realities is that many small firms supply large ones with products and services.

One aspect of these relationships, which does not escape the small and rural firm, is the increasing corporate focus on the environment. Some small firms argue that first, there was the quality wave (ISO 9000) and now there is time for an environmental fad (ISO 14000). Just sit back and wait until the storm is over. Other firms take heed of the competitive opportunity inherent in environmental issues. There is a chance to take a leap ahead of competition if we start right away. Let us be proactive and implement an environmental management system and eco-label our products. Other firms claim that this is a matter for urban city slickers. In our district, they argue, we have always worked with environmental issues. We live close to nature and we have always made sure that our environment stays healthy. Naturally, there are

more perspectives and imperatives than these (c.f. Shrivastava & Hart, 1995), but the sticking point is that there is a difference in context and approach between the small rural firm and the stereotyped counterpart, the TNC. They are not the same and there is most likely a difference in their approaches to environmental management too (c.f. Tilley, 1999).

The overarching question pondered in this article is: *How (and why) are small firms in rural districts approaching environmental issues?* The empirical base is a project, the Green Guide, initiated and managed by two rural municipalities, Malå and Sorsele, in the north of Sweden. It ran between March 1998 and July 2000 and aimed at assisting local businesses in their environmental management work. Similar projects had been carried out before in Sweden (c.f. Termén, 1995; Ammenberg et al, 1999), but the referenced writings focused on practical implications. This article, besides covering a different project, is rather interested in linkages between the practical, the theoretical and the philosophical. The interest lays in understanding the ways these firms approached environmental issues.

Methodology

My engagement in the Green Guide was ambiguous. I was from the outset both an instructor and an evaluator, and the two project managers were personal friends of mine. The benefit was the access gained through these relationships, leaning towards what Van Maanen et al (1982) refer to as *the insider view*. The downside is that closeness might make the overall picture fuzzy. Another risk is the potential criticism for claiming to scientifically evaluate, to some extent, one's own work. The latter is combated through letting the reader in on the facts just mentioned, which is an ethical obligation as we tell our stories (Parker, 1995), as well as through a brief discussion on research methodology. Overarching, the methodology was diverse, but subordinate to a case study approach. The project per se was, hence, treated as a case study in which the predominant methods were interviews and observations. There were, though, other encounters, for instance, telephone calls, short questionnaires, informal and formal meetings, and so on.

Without being an active member of the Green Guide project group, I was engaged as an informal reviewer of the project applications authored by the project group in 1995/1996. The project did not take off before March 1998, though, at which time I was engaged as a lecturer at two occasions. At these seminars, I met some of the project's so called local resource persons. They were singled out by project management as having a particular interest in environmental management and as persons that may be used as a resource by other firms participating in the project. At the time of the seminars, I also participated in a start-up meeting where the project managers presented the project. I handed out simple evaluation forms to the managers, which were summarized and analyzed before being sent to the project managers. After this, I did not actively participate in the project's development. The predominant contact during 1999 was telephone conversations with the two project managers. As the project progressed, however, I also received every firm's environmental audit/investigation carried out within the project. The project managers continuously sent them to me. At the end of the project, I went on a tour of the region, interviewing eight managers from participating firms. The interviews were taped, except for one respondent who did not feel comfortable, and all the interviews were transcribed. After the tour, I also joined the final meeting where a large group of firms and municipal representatives commented on the project. I concluded with an evaluation report, which was sent to Sorsele municipality in July 2000.

The interviews and the other encounters were analyzed based on two focuses and three questions. The premier two questions targeted environmental issues in practice: What did they do in their environmental work and how did they do it? The third question, and second focus, concentrated on the imperatives, or driving forces, in the environmental work: Why did they (or did not) do it? These are the focus of the final discussion at the end of the paper. First, however, the project is accounted for. It should also be mentioned that the article partly intertwines theoretical references and empirical encounters.

A rural context

More than 800 km north of Stockholm, the ambitious tourist finds the municipalities of Malå and Sorsele. Statistically, they are next to invisible, as the inhabitant per square kilometer figure tends to require a decimal. The largest and most population dense places in these municipalities have no more than a couple of thousands inhabitants. With the current urbanization trend, the population situation is not improving either. Therefore, in both Malå and Sorsele, the supply of trained labor is scarce, the customer-base for local dealers is diminishing, large firms enter and take over small firms' areas, and the municipalities' base for taxes is reduced. Earlier, the region was kept alive by a, to some extent, diverse infrastructure. Trains used to visit the area by the inland railway line, but it was shut down due to low economic vitality. Nowadays the majority of transports are handled by cars, busses and trucks. From an environmental perspective, this is a dilemma since these transportation means are major environmental villains.

The need for transportation in this region is, besides strong, not viable in strict economic terms. Every year there are complaints about the poor standard of the road network system and the debate is intense on where the government's money should be put to work. One sign of people's dependency on roads becomes visible when traveling with public transports (bus and then taxi) from Umeå to Malå. The total travel-time is about four hours and it is less than 200 km. There is seldom any alternative to the car and the bus, which is due to the distances between different utilities. The distances, however, is also a particular reason why people feel at home here. During the summertime they enjoy the silence, the fishing and the cloudberry. During the wintertime they travel smoothly over the snow-covered landscape on the scooter. The environment in this region is also a concern for Sweden as such, as the region is characterized by a richness of resources: the endless forests, the fresh water, the acres of farmland and the constant presence of wildlife. The government sometimes wants to preserve it, firms usually want to exploit it, members of the local community both cherish and explore it, Non-Governmental Organizations aim at protecting the natural reserves, and so on. The stakeholders are many and the issues are often complex.

The project

Between 1995 and 1996 the environmental offices at Malå and Sorsele municipalities started discussing how local firms could deal with what seemed to be a general growing environmental trend. The firms should not, they thought, be surprised once the environmental talk was translated into concrete actions affecting the conditions for running a business in the region. Large firms in the south were already asking their small suppliers in the north for environmental investigations and reports. The government had also earlier demanded that all Swedish municipalities (289 in total) should develop a local Agenda 21-program and that it should include how the local firms were to be involved in the change processes. These developments became incitements to take action towards, or together with, the business community. Also, it was no disadvantage that environmental management in small firms was of keen interest to two environmental inspectors, one in Malå (Staffan Åsén) and one in Sorsele (Erik Sundkvist).

During 1996 the two municipalities turned to NUTEK, the European Union's Small Business Initiative and Västerbotten's County Administrative Board for financial support. The base for the application was a project proposal, "Environmental management in rural districts", mainly authored by Erik. He had earlier played a part in the municipality of Sorsele winning the second prize in His Majesty's environmental competition the same year. Erik later became one out of two project managers in the project. In the project description, this already encompassing environmental work in the municipalities, where schools, households, associations and villages were brought into the processes, was to be strengthened through a project targeted at the business community. The basic idea was to assist small firms with environmental management issues. There was an emphasis on small firms as small firms operating in rural districts had different prerequisites and therefore required different solutions

than large-scale corporations. Of course, there was almost nothing but small firms in this region, but environmental management had to be situated in their context. As formulated in the application, the main purpose of the project was to “provide solutions for environmental management in small firms localized in rural districts”. The actors behind the application thought this would enhance the competitiveness of the local firms, increase the concern for environmental issues, lead to a development of new and environmentally sounder products, and to a strengthen municipal Agenda 21-work.

In the early phases of the project, before money was guaranteed from the financiers, the group of actors influencing the project hesitated around the project name, “Environmental management in rural districts”. It associated particularly to the established environmental management systems and it was suggested that the project was better off avoiding such linkages. The reality for small firms was more related to a less bureaucratized environmental work, they argued, and firms representing such a reality should not feel excluded by the title of the project. They were after all the basic target in the project. Another downside of the title was the emphasis on rural districts and although it was a fact that the project and its participants were situated in a rural area, through making this explicit in the title of the project, the participants were firmly placed in the boondocks. Instead, “the Green Guide” (Miljövisaren) was proposed and approved. The project started with initial information meetings in March and April 1998, and was officially closed in July 2000. Among the participating firms, 59 percent employed 10 persons or less. 22 percent employed more than 20 persons and the largest firm had around 50 employees.

During the early information meetings with the firms, the importance of an environmental work was obvious: “the environmental work is not something we can neglect” and “the idea of working environmentally correct affects us all”. Others were closer to the own firm’s operations: “curious about the customers’ demand for environmental work”, “the firm is interested in implementing ISO 14001”, “environmental management system is already in progress”, and “it’s important to the firm’s survival”. But, there were also less enthusiastic comments about why they participated, for instance: “the boss sent me”. Others indicated frustration concerning the lack of links between environmental issues and their own firm: “I couldn’t decide whether this was interesting for a reindeer-business” and “I missed the concrete information of how to produce the documents”. Questions from the conversations that I picked up during my attendance at one of the Malå-meetings were also fairly hefty: “how do the trainings look like, I mean, concrete that is”, “are they directed to the specific firm and its environmental audit”, “could we calculate our own time [participating firms had to co-finance their participation and this question was about whether they could monetize spent time in the project]”, “how much time will this take”, and “what are the costs”. Also, “information about the environment is difficult to listen to for 50 minutes”, “there are no examples of firms that have carried out similar projects and what the consequences have been for them”, and “it was a bit slow”.

Some of the firms encountered were more eager than others and the eager ones got a jumpstart as the project managers immediately assisted them in their work. They helped them conduct simple environmental audits and with short, from a couple of hours to full days, trainings of the personnel. As the project continued, more and more firms boarded the train and the majority was assisted with initial environmental audits.

Examples from participating firms

In late June 2000 I traveled the region to meet up with participating firms and also to participate myself in the final gathering at Sandsjögården (also one of the tourist firms in the project). The selection of which firms to visit was made by the project managers and their premier aim was diversity. The first stop was with a firm recycling tires, *Malå Gummiverkstad AB*. I learned that MGV based its operations on reusing and recycling rubber and plastic, which made the firm a good example of industrial ecology in practice (c.f. Tibbs, 1992; Shrivastava, 1995). Rest-products from one line of industry became raw material for another line. This also provided MGV with a natural link to the project’s topic. The firm was

responsible for an additional five firms within the same area and you could consider them as a mini-group. At the time, MGV's operations demanded approximately twenty man-years, but it was an expanding group. Already in 2001 the firm expected to employ an additional 25-30 persons in a new subsidiary. For this region, that is a lot.

Due to its line of industry, it was argued that there was a huge potential in creating an environmental profile and despite the firm's fairly small size it had implemented an environmental management system (ISO 14001). The certificate was received in September 1999. The firm's relation to the Green Guide had mainly been maintained through Peder Linder, who was responsible for the organization's quality and environmental work. He was also the son of the founder/manager and it was Peder whom I met up with in his office. I had met him on an earlier occasion when he participated in my seminars. Through the project, MGV had received assistance in training their personnel and with implementing the environmental management system. The project managers regarded the firm as one of the most active firms. According to Peder, however, they had rushed past the project, but it was still rewarding, especially regarding the way of thinking surfaced in the project. Many of his prejudices about the environmental stuff had been shattered, in a positive way. Peder enthusiastically explained that you could actually make money while working for the environment. There was a win-win situation and the dichotomized relationship between economic growth and ecological mending was dropped. It indeed paid to be green (c.f. Ahuja & Hart, 1996). The competitive imperative, to grow and make money, was thereby merged with an ethical imperative, to save the environment (c.f. Shrivastava & Hart, 1995).

The firm had also acted quickly in their environmental work. Peder started his work in May 1999 and was dedicated to the task. Staffan entered the picture and in the beginning it was mainly about "help to self-help" through education and training. Peder argued that the project was a good investment for the firm as they strived to implement environmental management systems in the other firms in the group as well. He also claimed that their pro-activeness was good for the region as such, as their products were environmentally sound and as they created new work opportunities. Peder also stated, however, that the level of the project was quite low and suitable for firms that had not come as far as they had in the environmental work. He would also like to see more network-based work and together with some other participants he had received some information about the "Hackefors-model" (Ammenberg et al., 1999). This model was based on the idea that small firms should work with environmental management systems in groups in order to save costs and create networks. Hackefors is a Swedish village outside Linköping and the place where a structured model of this was tested. At the time, a similar project was carried out in Umeå with similar responses.

Leaving the rubber firm, the next stop was at one of the local carpenters, *Bebos Trä AB* (Bebos Wood Ltd.). Bebos worked with furnishings and I met the managing director, Anders Lundgren, in their conference room. Anders did not fit in the administrative milieu. He seemed to be a man of practice and, indicating that the environmental work to some extent was administrative, he pointed out that Stellan Wänstedt mainly conducted the environmental work at the firm. Stellan was a resource-person in the Green Guide (I met him at my seminars). He was also a manager of a firm participating in the project and a member of Bebos' board.

Bebos had customers throughout Europe, from wholesalers and hotels to small private buyers. Anders said that the majority of customers never made any demands in the environmental area. Larger construction firms, however, such as Skanska, NCC and Peab were making environmental inquiries. The firm had made an environmental audit and identified a problem with chemical substances used in the surface treatment of the wood. They had tried water-based substances, but it did not go very well. Instead they invested in a catalytic cleaning of the pollution they caused due to the surface treatment, but as Anders claimed: "To clean costs a million and nobody is ready to pay the additional costs". This reality was one reason for participating in the Green Guide. Environmental investments meant expenses and they were not clearly related to an increase in income. For them, it did not pay to be green. The competitive imperative was low at Bebos. Another reason was that Bebos was a member of an

organization coordinating several carpenters in the region. They had started making demands as well on their members and, preferably, all members should be EMS-certified. Anders was also a bit worried about the impact of the new Swedish environmental legislation, Miljöbalken. He stated that “with the right prosecutor, you can bring down a lot of companies” (as a parenthesis, Erik had arranged two evening trainings on Miljöbalken where eleven tourist-firms participated during 1999).

Stellan and Staffan had carried out some activities at Bebos within the Green Guide. Anders argued that they had a lack of time and money to indulge in these matters themselves. He continuously weighed environmental activities against the money they had to spend. They did not receive anything in the other end, he argued. But, before ending our conversation he mentioned that they had actually done some things in the area. He talked about how they through a number of simple measures regarding waste handling had saved some money. They had bought a waste disposer and waste going to deposit was continuously reduced. At the time, they chopped rest-products into chips and sold them, whereas earlier, they sent away, on the average, two containers of waste (10 cubic meters/container) each week. At the time, they sent one each month. The project had also led to a better understanding among the employees and they had, for instance, started car-pooling much more. Basically though, Anders said that they would like the initial environmental audit that Stellan and Staffan conducted to settle down before taking another step. When asked about his overall impression about the project, Anders felt that foremost two things made it useful. First, Bebos needed help as neither he nor anybody else at the firm mastered environmental issues. Secondly, they needed a catalyst in order to get started. The project filled those gaps.

Moving on, the next firm was *Samhall in Malå* and Samhall was a bit special. Their purpose was not comparable to traditional firms as they were owned by the Swedish Government and served to provide meaningful work for work-disabled persons. Samhall in Malå was at the time predominantly manufacturing coffins, but it also produced some of the accessories, such as grave clothes and wooden crosses. Their market stretched from the county of Dalarna and up north, but they also sold to Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, as well as to Finland and Norway. The market for coffins was relatively large (and stable) and in Sweden, approximately 94000 coffins were “consumed” each year. Samhall in Malå delivered about 7000 of those and they had 50 employees of which all were work-disabled in some sense. I met with the foreman, Lars-Gunnar Boklund, at his office in the middle of the factory. Lars-Gunnar first came in contact with the project through a personal visit from Staffan in 1999 and during the visit it came to the fore that Samhall had already in 1995 initiated a quality process, following ISO 9002, and in 1996 an environmental process, following ISO 14001. Due to a diverse set of re-organizations, the environmental work was delayed and at the time of Staffan’s visit, Samhall in Malå had just had their environmental work audited and there were several remarks. Lars-Gunnar felt that the environmental work was difficult, as it was hard to receive support from both employees and management. The customers did not make any demands in the environmental area either, but at the time, information about the environmental work reached both the employees and management, and the environment had also become a recurrent paragraph at the workplace meetings.

In their environmental work, Samhall had tried to make itself less dependent on different solvents. Earlier they used twelve tons of solvents, but they had managed to replace a large amount with water-based solvents. At the time they were down to three tons, but they still had some dangerous agents in some products. Besides the surface treatment, Lars-Gunnar singled out transports as their largest environmental influence and they had one road carrier working intimately with the firm. Generally, all transports were done by truck and it often came back empty after delivering the coffins. They had therefore made some inquiries in the area of logistics, trying to reduce packaging. When giving me the tour of the facilities, Lars-Gunnar also presented one of their products, an environmentally profiled coffin. The coffin had no metallic fittings, was glued with wooden plugs and the lid was locked with a leather strap. The coffin constituted one out of seven or eight (Lars-Gunnar hesitated) basic products in Samhall’s assortment and it had during the last couple of years been increasing in sales. At the time it represented more than 10% of the total sales. When asked about the general impression

of the project, Lars-Gunnar first mentioned that he felt a little bit as an outsider as they were engaged fairly late. He missed the opportunities when he could match experiences with other firms and he also stated that: "It's not so easy for a regular person", referring to the complexity of the issues. Staffan was mentioned a couple times, especially when it came to linking the environmental management standard to the firm's operations.

Heading down to Malå village I was guided to a small hardware retailer mainly selling products for those aiming to paint their house, work in the garden (summer and winter), fix their boats or go fishing. It was really an all-in-house store, despite its small size. It was one of those stores that could only survive in a small village. The store's name was *Malå Järn & Färg AB* (Malå Hardware & Paint Ltd.) and I visited it during the most hectic time of the year. People were buying a lot of paint for their summer cabins, as the weather allowed for such activities. I met the manager on the run in their lunchroom and he told me that their biggest customer was the municipality, but the households were of course a major group too. Environmental issues were basically up to the customer to decide about, which made the customer the mark of goodness (c.f. Fineman, 1996). The store tried to supply some eco-labeled alternatives in case they would be demanded, but other than that, they did not find time for environmental issues. The store was, however, a member of the Hardware Industry Association and it had started to consider environmental issues, which had resulted in some pressure on the dealers. Järn & Färg was, though, a bit disappointed by the way the association worked with the issues. The approach taken in the Green Guide appealed more to them: "It's much easier with Staffan. He can help you direct at the spot". As mentioned by the manager, they were themselves too busy to do the environmental work.

Leaving Malå village, I drove towards Sandsjön and the farmers, Carina and Kjell Öjeryd, who managed *Öjeryds Lantbruk AB* (Öjeryds Farm Ltd.). The farm was located on a slope, 30 to 40 meters above the neighboring lake, Sandsjön. The environmental work at the farm started 1995/1996 when they joined a study circle about the environment together with a range of other farmers in the area. This resulted in 1998 in an economic association called the Sorsele Farmers. One reason behind this initiative was a poor price on beef, but the major reason was that "we are fewer farmers today and we need to cooperate". According to Carina and Kjell, their farm's largest environmental effect was the mineral fertilizers, even if they "used it minimally". They did not use any pesticides at their farm. The biggest purchasing post was concentrated feed and the price was the most important thing considered in the contacts with the suppliers. They also bought plastic, but they claimed that they could return the majority to be reused once they had used it. The largest customer was Norrmejerier, a large economic association buying farm products from farms throughout the north of Sweden, and they made environmental demands on their suppliers. Carina and Kjell appreciated this, as it was one way of receiving a reward for their environmental work. Basically though, they both argued that as farmers they live naturally closer to a sound environmental operation and they knew how to deal with the environment.

In their environmental work they had so far conducted a prescribed inspection on the farm's environmental influence (miljöhusensyn), which was the farmers' counterpart to the ISO-certification. The inspection was done together with Erik and they did not hold back on the satisfaction of Erik: "He's become a mentor in everything". A lot of things would have fallen between the chairs if it was not for him, they claimed. The inspection included a first step, an environmental audit, which would be used in the contacts with Norrmejerier and the Sorsele Farmers, as well as in the relations with schools and households. During the interview, Carina and Kjell also showed me a paper from Umeå University regarding a new course on environmental management developed under the Green Guide project. They aimed to follow this course and in the same breath argued for the necessity of a university going rural.

Leaving Malå all together, a couple of kilometers along the Ammarnäs-road from Sorsele, the floor-manufacturer *Baseco Golv AB* (Baseco Floor Ltd.) had its factory and headquarters. The firm had sixteen employees and their products were predominantly made out of pinewood. The interview with Baseco was conducted at their headquarters and I got the opportunity to meet with the administrative manager Monika Abrahamsson, who was also one of the part

owners and whose husband was the managing director of the firm. Baseco's customers were wholesalers, builders' suppliers, building contractors and households, although the ambition was to steer their products towards building contractors. It was also the demands from them that had sparked the interest in environmental issues during the last couple of years. Baseco exported more than half of their total sales.

Monika said, about the environmental work, that it was difficult to allocate resources, especially man-hours, for environmental issues. It was in this context that Erik entered the picture and started dealing with their environmental work piece for piece. He had conducted a personnel training that stretched over three meetings and he developed an action plan for the environmental work at Baseco. Until the time of this study, Baseco's environmental work had been about sorting waste, which earlier was a problem for the firm. They had also reviewed their transports when, as Monika stated: "We have to carry everything and that means carrying by truck". Raw material was usually bought on the way back, which meant that the truck seldom returned empty. Baseco also used oil in their processes and they treated the wood with lye, although it was "very diluted" according to Monika. The actual raw material was not a problem for Baseco and massive wood was seldom associated with any dangerous substances, but still, the raw material purchased was preferably eco-labeled. One of those labels was the Forest Stewardship Council's label and it was mainly the large forest industry that could handle such labels. Baseco also bought timber from their neighbor Sorsele Trä.

The environmental work at Baseco was, according to Monika, mainly about enhancing the credibility in the contact with stakeholders through displaying a consciousness about the environmental influence their operations and products had. Baseco therefore continued their environmental work in the Green Guide and during 1998 Erik conducted an environmental audit. This was, in spring 1999, followed by a thorough review of all their purchases with accompanying recommendations, which was carried out by two students from Storuman. Erik's audit was used to obtain the Green Trade-certificate, an environmental organization for exporting firms issuing its own environmental certifications. In spring 2000 two students from Umeå University reviewed it again (Svedberg & Sjöström, 2000). The environment was also one section in Baseco's product-binder, which they had distributed to about 200 architects and entrepreneurs. The homepage also had a link to their environmental work, which "shows that we're working with the issues". Monika also mentioned their product-sheets, which declared the particular product's environmental profile.

On the question of what was next in Baseco's environmental work, Monika claimed that it was about keeping up to date with current developments and to make sure they followed the action plan established in the Green Guide. There was a hype around the environment at the time, she thought, just as with the quality system ISO 9000 some years back when "you had to have ISO 9000, otherwise you're out". The environment was seen as fad (c.f. Fineman, 2001) and this view made Baseco a bit skeptic about jumping right into ISO 14000. She expressed her satisfaction with the way Erik had approached them and asserted that they got the chance to participate in the project on their own terms. Within the project, Baseco had not had any exchange with any other firm, except for their neighbor, Sorsele Trä AB (Sorsele Wood Ltd.).

I met the managing director of *Sorsele Trä*, Roger Linder, twice in June 2000. Roger was a man with many irons in the fire, and a man with fire (figure of speak), which was evident from his engagement in the eco-labeling debate in the forest industry. His sawmill's environmental work was mainly focused on ISO 14001 and the debate on the forest industry's development of a certificate of origin. FSC had developed some directions, but Roger was very critical to them as he felt they excluded small sawmills: "Certification has become a pawn in the game to hinder competition... and all this was supposed to favor the environment". Sorsele Trä had therefore worked with an alternative, PEFC (Pan-European Forest Council), which they felt was more reasonable. At the time, customers had to deal with large forest owners if they were interested in FSC-labeled forest, but according to Roger, this made transports longer and the share of processed wood in the region lower. He emphasized that "timber should be processed as close to the stump as possible" and Sorsele Trä had an average length of their timber transports of 45 kilometers. This made him conclude that: "I

dare to stand up and say that we're the most environmentally friendly sawmill around here, but we don't have any certificate".

Roger continued by arguing that "the larger the turnover of a sawmill, the longer the transports". A large sawmill had considerably more miles by truck in order to get the timber to the sawmill and keeping in mind that transports was one of the single most destructive environmental villains, the effects on the environmental friendliness of the FSC-label should be questioned, Roger asserted. Sorsele Trä was a small sawmill and a member of an association for small sawmills in the north of Sweden, Sågab (SawLtd.). In total they were 25-30 sawmills in this association and Roger also added that the small sawmills in Sweden were combined larger than the large ones. Reality was, though, that small sawmills in rural districts were closing down or standing still. For them, these issues were about survival and Sågab was one forum to influence the direction of the developments.

About the Green Guide, Roger mentioned that they were very satisfied with the project. Roger mentioned that environmental issues were not so apparent at the time, but that they were issues for the future. The environmental work in the project had mainly been a contact with two students from Umeå University, which conducted a review of the environmental influence of the sawmill in their examination paper (Svedberg & Sjöström, 2000). The students were well prepared and made a good impression on Roger. He was also very satisfied with Erik, who supervised the students, when "he deals with the environmental issues in a way that you can actually talk to him" and helped the firm in recognizing practical consequences of working with the environment. The audit that the students conducted constituted the platform for the sawmill's ISO 14001 work and Roger estimated that they had between 12 and 18 months until they were certified. Roger also squeezed in a comment on the FSC when stating that "ISO 14001 is at least open for everybody, which is not the case of FSC". In the ISO 14001 work, Roger hoped for an additional Green Guide where they could, together with other firms, work towards a certification.

The last firm, *Grundnäs Kött* (Grundnäs Meat) was a butcher firm located on the way towards Skellefteå from Malå. During peak season the firm had approximately fifteen employees, but for the whole year it had seven. The raw material going into the butcher's house was reindeer and the firm had customers all over the northern parts of Sweden, but also some wholesalers in the south. The customers did not make any demands in the environmental area, but according to my interviewees, the brother and sister Fredrik and Jenny Eklund, it was an issue for the near future: "It's growing, this thing with environmental thinking, and it could develop into a requirement from the big ones [large firms/customers]". The municipalities had already started making demands, but in Fredrik's experiences it always came down to the price of the product: "It's the price, the quality doesn't matter". This was both a problem and an opportunity as Grundnäs' biggest competitive advantage was the quality of the product. As for many other firms, Grundnäs' largest environmental influence was transports when they had to be located close to the raw material and although reindeers sometimes move to the coastal areas, their main ground is the northern inland.

Jenny managed the firm's environmental work and it all started during fall 1998 when she attended the training I was engaged in. Through this training Jenny hoped that she, together with Erik, could further educate their staff. They had already initiated an environmental audit, which constituted the base for a possible certification according to an environmental management system, but both Fredrik and Jenny were skeptical towards the benefits of going for a certificate. Perhaps, they pondered, keeping up to date in their environmental work would be enough.

The final meeting

At the final meeting in June 2000, the discussions hovered around environmental management system certification. The participants emphasized that it would be good if such processes took place in a network. Co-certification and co-environmental work were some of the keywords reappearing and their thoughts had probably been influenced by the experiences of the

project, but also by the Hackefors-model mentioned earlier. However, they were careful to point out that they would preferably see a local model being developed. They also called attention to the need for industry-diversity in the group of firms working in such a process. Instead of dividing firms into industries, they should divide them in terms of ambition. Another key emphasis in the discussion was that they would not like to be left alone. They wanted to be pushed and supported in their efforts, as there was always a danger of falling into old habits. Perhaps some of the resource-persons could step in unless Erik or Staffan did not shoulder the responsibility.

Large organizations and external environmental managers

Studying the activities undertaken by firms participating in the Green Guide, there was a lot to retell. They made environmental audits and actions plans, participated in environmental trainings, implemented environmental management systems, received diplomas (Green Trade, trade associations), analyzed their transports (logistics), reduced dangerous substances, sorted and minimized waste, car-pooled, and so on. Behind these activities were a number of imperatives and stakeholders. One of the reappearing ones was *the customer*. At Bebos, large construction firms represented this pressure; at Malå Järn & Färg, the customer was the benchmark; at Öjeryds, their largest customer made environmental demands; at Baseco, the building contractors fueled the firm's environmental work; at Sorsele Såg, customers were turning to the FSC-labeled products supplied by the large forests owners; and at Grundnäs Kött, the municipality had started making demands. The customers applying a green pressure were predominantly *large organizations* and the pressure seemed to have its origin in these organizations' environmental work. From one perspective, this meant that there was a pressure on the small firms to deal with environmental issues on terms set by large organizations.

A problem with this is that it separates the environmental work from the reality of the local firm. Many firms also took a critical stance to the systems designed for large organizations. There were skepticism and criticism towards ISO 14001 (Bebos, Baseco, Grundnäs), industry associations' EMS (Bebos, Malå Järn & Färg) and the FSC label (Sorsele Såg). Some also argued that even though customers applied a green pressure, they still saw the price tag before the environment. The Green Guide firms' approach was at occasions one of resignation: Sure, we'll work with environmental issues. We really believe they are important. But what's the point if it doesn't matter when it comes down to business? According to Roger at Sorsele Trä, the FSC, as the current eco-label, was even bad for the environment! From this view, working with environmental issues meant adding to the expenses. Environmental work meant more money going the wrong way. Did this mean that environmental issues were unimportant for the local firms? No, it meant that the environment as defined in the pressure placed on the firms by their large customers were not clearly linked to the reality of the local firms. Often, the small firms did not see themselves as having such an impact on the environment as deserving a full EMS as in ISO 14001. Of course, many a little make a mickle, one can argue, but it might be a better deal if the tool (the EMS, for instance) is constructed based on the task. Not the other way around. For Baseco, for instance, focus seemed to be on satisfying the expectations (displaying a consciousness) on the large customers more than greening their firm. An alternative use of resources might have resulted in an even greener Baseco.

MGV, however, was an interesting exception to this picture as they had decided to proactively approach environmental issues as defined by large firms. For this firm, the competitive imperative was strong (Shrivastava & Hart, 1995). MGV also resembled the ones applying the pressure on the other small firms and they were indeed a growing group in terms of employees and turnover. They were on the way of becoming big. Besides the large customer as a driving force, though, there was a diversity of imperatives in the firms' environmental work. There were hints of a political imperative (Bebos), an owner pressure (Samhall), an ethical imperative (Öjeryds), and so on. But, if a synthesis is constructed out of all of this, environmental issues were, to some extent, driven by larger organizations. This seemed to have resulted in environmental issues being approached as external issues in the eyes of the small firm. The issues were complex and not easy for an ordinary person to combat.

Environmental issues have also been framed as especially complex, cross-disciplinary and emotional (c.f. Fineman, 1996; Wolff, 1998; Söderbaum, 2000).

A problem linked to this was how the project managers and their accompanying students were perceived. When scanning what the participating firms were doing within the project and in their environmental work, it seemed as if they themselves had little time to encounter the matters. They were spending their time on the “factory floor” and time was indeed best spent producing. If they were left alone, the environmental work would most likely be set aside. Bebos referred to Stellan and Staffan, and tried to keep a minimum of environmental work in the organization. There was no time to indulge in environmental matters really, as it meant new expenses for the firm (although Anders actually mentioned the waste reduction, car-pooling and the environmental entrepreneur on the firm’s board). A similar impression was drawn from Baseco, where other actors (students and Erik) carried out the environmental work and when they left, there was no time for additional environmental work. Järn & Färg in Malå also emphasized Staffan’s accessibility in their environmental work, as they did not have the time to engage in the environmental work. At Sorsele Trä, they needed assistance and received it from Erik and the students. The environmental work would otherwise most likely fall between the chairs. There had to be someone driving the issues for the organization. Even in the account of the farmers Carina and Kjell, Erik’s support was singled out not only as a good thing, but he had even become a mentor in everything! Also, at Samhall, Lars-Gunnar felt alone in the matters and it was not easy for a regular person dealing with environmental issues. Staffan here constituted the support needed in the EMS work. The final meeting at Sandsjögården also indicated that the firms wanted *an outsider* to take the steering wheel and to push them in their environmental work.

The project was, however, financed to assist participating firms in their environmental work. But, there were few signs of an internal commitment to environmental management at the firms. The commitment predominantly lay with those entering the organization from the outside (Erik, Staffan and the students). Is this a problem? Well, it might be better than no environmental work at all, but it might be a problem when environmental matters are left to a shelf in the manager’s office. Erik and Staffan, as project managers and as representatives for the municipalities, became the *fire souls* in the project as they made personal visits, rescheduled information meetings (evenings and mornings), adjusted every audit and action plan to the particular firm, enrolled students for extra training, followed the project through change of ownership and delays in project start-finish and financing, and so on. They were floating over community borders, both in terms of geography and social category (business, public, academia). Many project participants also expressed their satisfaction of the two managers and even revealed some anxiety in asking “how long are we going to keep them here”. But, what is more important is that they became the participating firms’ environmental managers. Environmental issues were in these cases carried by an external person and perhaps this was necessary for the issues to be lifted onto the agenda in the first place.

As was also brought up by firms in the project, there was a need for collaboration with other firms in similar situations. There was, hence, particular strives for knowledge and support to deal with environmental issues from the outside. Networking was also a strategy applied by some firms. Two examples were the Sorsele Farmers and Sägab. Another is the Green Guide. A point is, though, that large firms (and MGV!) often have enough resources (time and money) to create positions entirely devoted to managing environmental issues while the small firm, albeit considering the issues as important, do not have the slack to devote themselves to the issues. If environmental issues are to be combated on large firm’s terms, small firms need external support from, for instance, municipal experts or other small firms in similar situations.

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