

Umbrella Groups: good, bad and fugly

The Real World Coalition, Jubilee 2000, Stop the War, Make Poverty History, Control Arms, Stop Climate Chaos: These are just a few of the 'umbrella groups' formed by UK charities, think tanks and pressure groups over the last decade.

Why

- Synergy of membership/strength in numbers.
- Pool resources (Though it's not really an umbrella group, the Disasters Emergency Committee [www.dec.org.uk]- shows what theoretically could be done. Established in 1963, it represents 13 leading UK aid agencies.)
- Big NGOs get to dominate, get 'street cred' from association with smaller ones. They get their hands on specialist research which they'd otherwise have to buy in or set up specific units to do.
- Little NGOs get to increase their profile, find a marketing opportunity, and if they are clever, get access/leverage they wouldn't normally get.
- It's a 'new' story/slant. This makes it more likely for journalists to write stories, at least initially.
- Media is less likely to ignore “combined membership of x million” than it is “8 different NGOs today said”
- Generate simple message that can get pop stars on board. (War Bad, but forget Capitalism and Industrialism and the Military-Industrial-Oil-Entertainment Complex; Your Donation/Feet count)



Not all umbrella groups have a effective media strategy...

What they are good at

- Getting a simple message, often with a celebrity attached, out into the World through sheer weight of repetition. e.g. at the time of Jubilee 2000, the factoid “19,000 children die every day from easily preventable diseases” became (relatively) broadly known
- Coming up with media friendly events (those slebs again...)
- Coming out with mildly scolding press releases/demands, chiding this or that politician to make that or this speech, sign this Early Day Motionlessness, vote for that parliamentary bill.

What their weaknesses are

- Because different partners in any coalition have different perspectives and goals, you often end up with the “lowest common denominator”, meaning the demand/goal everyone can agree on is usually very weak; often it is “the Government should pass a law”. Any law, with any amount (or lack) of teeth to it.
- Similarly, big coalitions find it hard to move quickly (SCC has done very little since its march).
- The bigger partners in the coalition tend to dominate. Sometimes they mean to, sometimes they do it accidentally. The end result is often the same, though sometimes they shift slightly 'left'.
- There is often a tension between the large institutional partners, who want to maintain their 'credibility' with the Establishment and the smaller, usually more radical and activist NGOs, who would rather have a sharper analysis put forward.
- Bigger NGOs often put more money into these coalitions. They want to recoup that by retaining and extending their membership base. Radical analysis and rhetoric scares off potential supporters...

*This isn't a new phenomenon. The Disasters Aid Committee formed in 1963, but this was to reduce duplication of fundraising effort. Popular Fronts, my many Trot friends tell me, go back even further... But that's politics, and NGOs don't do them... The above comments do not apply to elite lobbying outfits like Aldersgate group and Forum for the Future, or to clearing houses for local campaigns like Road Alert. Those are different kettles of marine protein.

*At an international level, one of the more remarkable umbrella groups has been the Climate Action Network, formed in 1988. “*The Climate Action Network (CAN) is a worldwide network of over 365 Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working to promote government and individual action to limit human-induced climate change to ecologically sustainable levels.*” Kate Hampton, in her “Understanding the International Climate Regime and Prospects for Future Action,” reckons CAN is seen as a “reliable source of insight and information by governments and journalists alike. Public perceptions of the successes and failures of the climate regime are largely a function of NGO messaging around the COPs. Lobbying focuses on maintaining the environmental integrity of the regime and promoting public participation and transparency.” www.climatenetwork.org

See bottom of next page for a further quote from the Hampton article about the imaginatively titled “Umbrella Group”

What normally happens to them

or "up like a rocket, down like a stick"

Owing to the above weaknesses, there is a pressing institutional need to be able to declare victory as early as possible, send out a "We won" message to subscribers/members and move on to the next Issue. There is a literature around this; it's technically known as the Issue Attention Cycle. You might almost say the NGO 'strategisers' were an army of clowns...



Also, there is a revolving door between political parties/civil service, NGOs and 'soft'/'green' Capitalism. People come to get 'real world' experience as campaigners in (big) NGOs, need victory points for their CV so they can then (re)turn to the place where 'proper power' exists. The motivation is therefore to set goals low, and thus achievable. Then victory can be declared as soon as possible.

Limited repertoires. Because these coalitions can only agree on limited common ground, the 'actions' they tend to take is usually limited to the release of books and reports, 'counter-conferences' with acceptable 'experts' from universities, petitions and marches. Pretty quickly that becomes old news, gets less media coverage and gives the whiff of a movement beyond its sell-by date. Then rats jump ship.



So much for the pockets of resistance



One particular problem for Stop Climate Chaos is that Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace can't sit in the same room without bickering or worse. The two outfits are chasing the same limited target audience of supporters and financiers. Although their approaches are slightly different, ultimately they are in a long-running turf war. And as the old Vietnamese saying goes, "when the elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled." (Also, as "alpha organisations", admitting mistakes would lose them credibility and dent their self-image. But that's another story).

Further reading

On "Make Poverty History"

Make the G8 History by Stuart Hodkinson, Red Pepper July 2005
G8- Africa nil by Stuart Hodkinson, Red Pepper November 2005
both articles available on-line from www.redpepper.org.uk

On NGOs (the example is Pakistan, but the lessons are global)

The Professionalisation of Political Culture Aasim Sajjid Akhtar, Capitalism Nature Socialism Vol. 17 No. 3 September 2006

On Citigroup and their umbrella

Citygroup ready to furl a dated symbol of success
by David Wighton, Financial Times 16 Jan 2007

Issue attention cycle

www.anthonydowns.com/upanddown.htm

www.abdn.ac.uk/pir/notes/Level3/PI3037/Agenda%20Lectures%201%20and%202%20notes.doc

Ambient Devices Intelligent Umbrella

Leaving your brolly at home is the easiest way to guarantee a downpour on the way to work. This smart umbrella picks up wireless weather data (currently broadcast in US cities only) and flashes its LED when rain is forecast that day. The price is yet to be confirmed.

www.ambientdevices.com

From Kate Hampton's Understanding the International Climate Regime:

The Umbrella Group, formally JUSSCANZ, includes the US, Japan, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Russia, Norway, Iceland and the Ukraine. The Umbrella Group is loosely coordinated and is unique to the climate negotiations. Umbrella Group countries often make joint proposals and are the strongest advocates of flexibility, sinks and weak international enforcement. However, their interests in the Kyoto negotiations are widely divergent at present - not least on the issue of actual Kyoto participation. Switzerland left the Umbrella Group after Kyoto and, since election in 2001, Norway's positioning is increasingly distant from that of other Umbrella Group members. It is not clear whether and which subset of these countries will function as a group in future discussions.