

# 1 Appendix E - Research Proposal to Living Earth and Shell

---

## The Process of Collaboration towards Sustainability. The case of the Living Earth and Shell International

### Goal

The central aim of the research is to enable participants within NGOs and business to understand the interaction process that occurs when they enter constructive forms of dialogue, which are directed towards the development of solutions for sustainable development.

### Rationale

NGOs and businesses are coming together to co-operate with a solutions oriented mind-set with increasing frequency. Relationships between these two important, organised sectors of society appear to have moved from ones based purely on financial<sup>1</sup> or adversarial grounds to include those grounded in closer collaboration on specific issues of concern to the organisations themselves and to wider society.

In contrast to the traditional forms of relationship, collaboration between business and NGOs involves communication that is not only two-way but also interactive, iterative and participative. It has been suggested that, for the relationships to be effective, the organisations involved need to develop an understanding of the alternative perspectives brought to the relationship. This seems to assume the parties become more involved and engaged with one another. For some NGOs and businesses the interactive dialogue seems to be fairly easily handled. However, for others the relationships signify and result in substantial changes to their internal and external modes of working and relating; the central organisational values may be challenged; relationships with a network of other NGOs may be called into question; individuals within the organisation may experience considerable discomfort with organisational changes and so on.

The emergence of closer relationships between NGOs and business is a positive step towards achieving sustainable development in a participatory manner. NGOs form an important sector of organised society and their continuing autonomous operation should be highly valued. However, collaboration between NGOs and business has the potential to raise some organisational problems for NGOs. If such collaborations are to continue to flourish whilst at the same time ensuring the roles and abilities of NGOs are not diminished the individuals and organisations involved need to be able to understand the process of collaboration.

As an example of this novel form of collaboration the Living Earth is currently working with Shell International in Nigeria on approaches to development which are grounded in the community and essentially more sustainable. The organisations have expressed an interest in learning from the processes undergone in this collaboration, in order to apply the lessons elsewhere and have thus suggested becoming involved in research that will enable this reflection.

### Methodology

It is hoped that the research will provide practical forms of knowledge and not just academic output and therefore it is believed that individuals at the Living Earth, Shell and others involved in

---

<sup>1</sup> Financial based relationships concern essentially the philanthropic activities of business, which may take numerous forms.

the collaboration should contribute to the flow of the research. Thus, although the above research focus has been identified it is seen as important to allow the study to reflect the experiences of the participants. This implies that, once engaged in the field, the precise design of the study will emerge with further clarity.

As suggested, both the Living Earth and Shell are keen to learn from the experience of working together, in order to apply lessons to future collaborations. I am proposing to use a learning history methodology for this case study that will enable participants to reflect in-depth on key moments and the general process of collaboration and also promote the development of shared understanding and organisational learning.

The learning history involves a six-stage process. An initial planning stage will determine the scope and range of the history. A series of reflective interviews within Shell and the Living Earth will then allow for focused exploration of the issues with participants<sup>2</sup>. The stage will ensure that a wide range of points of view will be taken into consideration. Subsequently the data will be distilled and written up. These stages are significantly different from traditional forms of research or consultancy as they will attempt to retain the voice of the participants and the “story” of the relationship whilst also ensuring rooting in the data. The learning history will be presented in an engaging fashion as a document containing two side-by-side columns – the right hand column containing “campfire narrative” in the participants own words and the left hand column containing evaluative comments and questions about assumptions and implications designed to create reaction and reflection. At this stage the draft will go back to the organisations involved where participants will see their quotes and validate the material. Finally, and significantly, the history will be disseminated through groups in which reflection would enable the participants to conclude about the meaning of the relationship for themselves and future collaborations.

The time required to complete such a learning history would depend upon the depth of analysis and the extent of reflective learning that is wished for. Initially it has been suggested that interviews might take place over a period of 3 months. In order to complete the learning history successfully and enable the greatest amount of learning it would subsequently be important to allow enough time for distillation, validation and dissemination amongst participants for which a subsequent period of three months can be envisaged. A budget is provided below, including an estimate for the cost of a field trip to Nigeria.

Since the research is action oriented the outcome of the study is expected to develop the understanding of participants in the studied context to allow for improved reflection and action and perhaps further study. At the same time sufficiently thick description in the report will allow others in similar contexts to transfer findings to their situation.

## Outputs

This research is expected to form a part of the second phase of INTRAC research into relationships between NGOs and the private sector. As such it is expected to contribute towards the third key research question identified by INTRAC: “what internal organisational/psychological changes are required for, and result from, NGO-Private Sector engagements?” It is also expected to provide the organisations involved with a document and process of learning that may be used for dissemination and further reflection. Finally, it is also expected that, since the researcher is conducting a Management PhD in the subject area, the data gathered and analysis undertaken will be available for use in his study.

---

<sup>2</sup> Initial interviews would take place with members of Living Earth and Shell International in the UK. It is hoped that it will also be possible to involve individuals in from these organisations based in Nigeria.