

Roles of NGOs for a greener society

The debate over whether a top-down or bottom-up approach is more effective in bringing about beneficial change is like the debate over which came first, the chicken or the egg. However, if the goal is related to nonprofit activity, long-term objectives, or socially and/or ethically bound issues, grassroots participation by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is necessary.

Global warming, the destruction of ecosystems, and environmental degradation have led to the creation of more NGOs with environmental orientations. They play a major role in pushing for sustainable development at both the national and international levels. Accordingly, the necessity for sharing country-specific issues and establishing NGO networks has become more urgent. To achieve this, the APO organized a workshop on Global Environmental Issues for NGOs in the Region in Tokyo, 11–13 December, to provide an open forum for representatives of environmental NGOs from APO member countries.

Prof. Ryoichi Yamamoto, University of Tokyo, who is actively involved in the APO's Green Productivity Program, was requested to share his expertise and concerns on environmental issues. His keynote presentation began with warnings on the consequences of global warming and climate change. The vivid images set the tone for discussions seeking solutions via eco-innovation, such as the potential of eco-design, eco-materials, eco-components, and eco-products. A site visit to the Eco-products Exhibition 2007 held in Tokyo's Big Sight provided representatives with an invaluable opportunity to see for themselves the efforts of Japanese NGOs, businesses, and the national government. Coordinator of Programme Development Amna Shahab, World Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan, indicated, "The exhibition was an eye-opener and it was amazing to see what innovative solutions have been devised by people, companies, and government which are environment friendly."

In addition, the presentation by President Saburo Kato, Research Institute for Environment and Society, Japan, provided a detailed case history of the Japan Association of Environment Society for the 21st Century. "It was a good case



Participants at the Eco-products Exhibition 2007

study to understand how an NGO in Japan was able to influence policy at the government level. There is a paradigm shift in the role of NGOs. NGOs can effectively influence government policy in relation to environmental protection and sustainable development," commented Head of Service Yap Siew Fuen, Malaysian Nature Society.

The workshop confirmed the great diversity of environmental issues and problems faced by participating APO member countries. Many problems can be attributed to differences in history, geography, stage of economic development, and differences in political and socioeconomic systems. However, despite these differences, participants identified four universal areas that needed to be addressed to achieve sustainable development: natural resources management; pollution (air, water, and soil) control; urban issues such as population increase and critical infrastructure such as solid waste management and transportation; and coping with natural disasters such as droughts, floods, typhoons, and earthquakes. 🌱