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**Sustainable Development through Biocultural Diversity:  
The Role of International Non-Governmental Organizations**

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Professor Hedley has published extensively in the areas of technology, social change, and development. His most recent book, *Running Out of Control: Dilemmas of Globalization* (Kumarian Press, 2002), contends that globalization is reducing our ability to control our life chances in an increasingly interconnected world. In 1995, as Vice-President of the International Institute of Sociology, Hedley initiated the Dialogue Graduate Scholarship Program for Women in Developing Countries.

## **Sustainable Development Through Biocultural Diversity: The Role of International Non-Governmental Organizations**

### ABSTRACT

Language is one of our principal assets. It provides us conscious intergenerational memory and continuity; in both written and oral form, it is the repository of humanity's accumulated wisdom. In content as well as structure, each human tongue has encoded within it unique and complex experiential guidelines on how to survive in a diverse world that we are nowhere close to understanding (Mühlhäusler 1998). Thus, the loss of *any* language represents a potential threat to our collective being.

It is the very diversity of languages that contributes to our continuing existence as a species, for as Ashby's law of requisite variety states, "the variety within a system must be at least as great as the environmental variety against which it is attempting to regulate itself" (Buckley 1968:495). In other words, variety within a system or society is essential for its perseverance and ongoing evolution. The world's languages represent alternative 'solutions' for human survival under varying ecological conditions.

Although we are increasingly aware of the cogency of Ashby's law as it applies to the biosphere (American Museum of Natural History 1998), in Eurocentric cultures, we are reluctant to acknowledge its applicability to human society. Even though humans are perforce an integral part of nature, and therefore subject to its laws, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century we have conceptually separated ourselves from nature through Cartesian dualism (Swenson 1997), and since the industrial revolution we have physically removed ourselves from nature through technologically built environments (Hedley 2002:145-54). As a result, we have developed a decidedly anthropocentric worldview of the planet, a view that postulates that humankind somehow represents an exception to the laws of nature. However, to persist in such a worldview imperils our species, hence the movement toward *biocultural diversity*, which supports "the challenge of supporting diversity in nature *and* culture" (Terralingua 1997; emphasis in original).

The biocultural diversity movement is particularly concerned about protecting indigenous languages, for herein lies the knowledge from thousands of years of adapting to human-environment interfaces. In fact, some experts claim that traditional hunter-gatherers have been the most successful of all humans in reaching a harmonious and flourishing relationship with their ecological surroundings (Diamond 1987), which makes the preservation of their languages even more compelling.

Yet it is these indigenous languages that are most at risk of extinction. Whereas human linguistic diversity is estimated to have reached its apex about 15,000 years ago, when "a world population five hundred times less than it is today is supposed to have spoken some 10,000 languages" (Leuprecht 1998), today, due to the ravages of colonization, nationalism, and now, globalization, living languages total barely 6,800 (Ethnologue 2000). However, "about 97% of the world's people speak about 4% of the world's languages" (UNESCO 2003), which means that within this century alone, 90 percent of these living languages could disappear forever. The powerful homogenizing forces of globalization – electronic mass media, international trade and foreign

investment, global consumerism and pop culture, tourism, and the Internet – are all putting extreme pressure on traditional languages and the cultural groups they represent.

This paper examines the forces *against* global uniformity. Specifically, what is the role of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in furthering biocultural diversity? Reflecting the three interrelated themes of this Congress – language diversity, sustainability, and peace – we can distinguish five types of NGOs involved in advancing various facets of biocultural diversity:

- NGOs exclusively supporting linguistic diversity;
- NGOs preserving cultural diversity in all its manifestations;
- NGOs sustaining biodiversity, thus protecting indigenous peoples (and their languages) who live in ecologically threatened regions;
- NGOs promoting peace, i.e., increased tolerance and acceptance of *all* peoples and their cultures;
- NGOs facilitating biocultural diversity.

Using the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (UIA 2003) as my primary data source, I examine each of the above categories to document empirically what various international NGOs are actually doing to bring about biocultural diversity. However, because nearly 90 percent of the headquarters of these international NGOs are based in the North (Diversitas n.d.), there is a distinct likelihood that I could present a limited, and therefore biased, description of the various feasible perspectives and strategies that are in fact being offered. Therefore, I over-sample international NGOs from the South (and indigenous peoples' NGOs everywhere), as these are the areas of the world where the problems of linguistic diversity are most acute.

My analysis reveals that the sheer multiplicity of international NGOs, together with the variety of their approaches, contributes to their quest for biocultural diversity against the monolithic impact of globalization. Although success is by no means assured, given the powerful capitalist world-system in place, Ashby's law of requisite variety suggests that the forces for biocultural diversity certainly offer a significant challenge to hegemonic globalization.

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