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Fouad Hamdan
Press Officer
Greenpeace Germany

Ziviler Ungehorsam als Protestform gegen Umweltsünder und öffentliche Resonanz in Deutschland
Civil disobedience as a form of protest against environmental offenders and public response to it in Germany

A document worthy of greater attention remained relatively ignored at the United Nations Environment Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. The book, written by the Swiss businessman Stephan Schmidheiny, was published by the Business Council for Sustainable Development. Its title: "Changing Course - A Global Perspective on Development and Environment".

The document, today still relatively ignored, describes requirements for environmentally protective management aimed at implementing "sustainable development" in national economies. Under "sustainable development" the UN International Commission on Environment and Development understands "a form of progress which covers the needs of the present without taking away from future generations the bases for the satisfaction of their needs."

It is true that companies have made great advances in environmental protection in their operations, partly because of legal regulations and also after pressure from environmental groups like Greenpeace. They have sometimes been able to make considerable reductions in emissions into the air and water, and to reduce the use of raw materials and energy.

But in most cases the problems have merely shifted. Sewage plants and filters may retain the filth. But they do not get rid of it. The waste often remains in highly toxic sewage sludges and filters. No one really knows what to do with them.

Hundreds of thousands of tonnes of toxic waste are today the consequence of technical environmental protection in which pollutant substances are disposed of. This development is in flagrant opposition to the principle of sustainable economic management. Sooner or later it will not only break the capacity of our ecosystems to absorb pollutants, it will also lead to energy and other resources being squandered at the expense and burden of present and future generations.

Swiss manager Schmidheiny says an essential element in sustainable environmental protection management must therefore be to avoid emissions of pollutants into the air, soil and water. Waste must be avoided. The requirements for sustainable environmental protection management are tough. They include responsibility for the whole product cycle. This means that entrepreneurs must consider the effects of their goods during all stages of production, when they are used or consumed, and when they are disposed of.

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Vereins- und Westbank, Kto. 1/471 300, BLZ 200 300 00; Postgiroamt Hamburg, Kto. 20 61-206, BLZ 200 100 20
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Managers ought to abandon any claim to the global ecological responsibility they so loudly proclaim if they do not make serious efforts to achieve a sustainable economy in their factory and in the political arena. Venturing forth verbally while in practice putting on the brakes in the political lobbyrooms leads to a credibility gap which provides Greenpeace with a broad area of attack.

Greenpeace today works harder than ever before to find and publicise solutions repressed by industry even though they are technically and economically viable. Such solutions are a positive form of confrontation and in their effect no different from that achieved in climbing chimneys or blocking the entrance to polluting factories.

As an example, Greenpeace Germany published in 1991 the "Plagiat", an imitation of the Spiegel magazine. It was the first magazine of its kind worldwide on chlorine-free gravure-printed paper. It exposed the whole paper industry as a stubborn-minded ecological wet blanket. Before it pulp and paper managers had repeatedly told us that chlorine-free paper was technically impossible for high-quality magazines.

Another example is the first refrigerator without CFCs or FCs, now on the German market thanks to a Greenpeace campaign. This fridge was made by the Eastern German company Foron in cooperation with Greenpeace. Its cooling system and its insulation function with the natural gases propane and butane. The fridge needs neither CFCs that damage the ozone layer, nor FCs that worsen the global warming effect. We organized a media campaign that ended with 70,000 orders for the Foron fridge, proving that the German consumer, that is the market, wants such a fridge.

The large Western German companies like Siemens, Liebherr and Bosch, who at first claimed that our fridge was a dangerous joke, suddenly presented their own CFC- and FC-free fridges a few months ago. Consumer pressure and an alternative solution forced them to change their attitude. They feared losing market shares. We are now working on propagating this cooling technology we call "Greenfreeze" to other countries, including developing nations like China and India. A high-ranking Chinese delegation visited us this month at our headquarters in Hamburg.

Greenpeace Germany is currently trying to convince German car companies to mass-produce a car consuming less than 2.5 litres of petrol per 100 kilometres (at least 95 miles per gallon). A few days ago, our forest campaign propagated the economically viable idea of ecological forest management. The aim is to spread the production of paper from clearcut-free forest management. Clearcutting tropical or northern boreal forests destroys biosystems for ever and endangers species.

Our campaigns would not be successful without professional media strategies. Greenpeace activities, in all fields, including lobbying in international organisations, would be useless without reaching the media. Politicians and industry would never be forced to change their attitudes and policies if the press did transport our messages exposing those responsible for polluting nature and poisoning people. A dialogue with politicians and managers would be impossible without our aggressive press releases.

Bayer, Siemens, Hoechst, BASF or German Federal Environmental Minister Klaus Toepfer would only talk to Greenpeace activists because they damage images, threaten economical

interests and publically compare words with deeds.

Greenpeace Germany has become part of the world's largest non-governmental environmental organisation because in Germany alone more than 500,000 people support us politically and financially. This has made us a political factor that cannot be ignored.

Many criticise our spectacular actions as being a show. But these so-called shows provoke a reaction and change things. Greenpeace activists working for an environment in which future generations can live need the media. We need the cameras and the reporters to spread our message, to weaken the environmental offenders politically and sometimes economically. We need the media because we do not have the amount of money and influence the industry has.

The media needs events to produce news. So we create the events with spectacular and non-violent actions. We use the rules of the media market to pressure and change policies. Actions are typical Greenpeace. They are our way of civil disobedience.

Greenpeace is the only international environmental organisation that relies on actions as a mean of confrontation to change things. The German section of Robin Wood, a group that was founded by people who split from Greenpeace in the early 1980s, stages similar actions. The Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz in Deutschland (BUND), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and others do not. We nevertheless cooperate with all these groups at many levels.

The Greenpeace press office has a completely different philosophy from that of a company or advertising firms. We see our media work as part of an interactive communicative process to provoke a political debate on environmental issues and shape public opinion. The fundamentals of our work are therefore actions, dialogue, lobbying, research, media campaigns and scientific studies.

The political impact of Greenpeace depends on media activities. The quality of the facts we spread influence the capacity of Greenpeace campaigns to achieve their political goals. We can only convince journalists and public opinion with facts.

A study of the German "PR-Magazine" (October 1991) has found that 92 per cent of Germany's journalists dealing with environmental issues believe that Greenpeace is professional in dealing with the media. 62 per cent said Greenpeace is the organisation that achieves the most for the environment. Credibility is the highest principle in our work; and it is rewarding. Losing our credibility would be a disaster for Greenpeace.

Greenpeace sends research teams who gather information and prove environmental crimes with video films and photographs. We take samples from polluted rivers, seas and soils and send them to professional and independent laboratories for tests. We give the job of doing studies, the scientific backbone of campaigns, to respected institutes. We develop concepts to prevent waste, reduce traffic in cities, or save energy in order to switch off nuclear power stations.

Greenpeace has been the only environmental organisation fighting an international waste mafia over the past few years. Take Romania as an example: We found some 600 tons of German toxic waste in the Sibiu/Hermannstadt district in 1992. The waste had been illegally

dumped in apple plantations and near a school. The inhabitants were outraged. Romanian authorities demanded that Bonn bring back the waste to Germany. But nothing happened, the barrels of waste were leaking.

Greenpeace uncovered this scandal and succeeded in forcing Environmental Minister Klaus Toepfer to promise that the waste would be returned to Germany. Toepfer made his pledge after a Greenpeace media campaign and after we returned 12 barrels to Germany. But Toepfer dragged his feet and did not act until we sent him an ultimatum early this year: We told him that if he did not bring back the waste we would carry out and finance the whole operation and dump the 600 tons in front of his ministry in Bonn. Only then did Toepfer really act. The waste has been in Germany since May.

Looking at advertisements by industry one cannot but note a great loss of credibility. Ecological lies, or Greenwashing ("Öko-Lüge"), are in. One recent example is an ad in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung in which the paper industry claims that clearcut forest management has preserved biodiversity in Scandinavia. The fact is that 1700 species are endangered in Sweden and 700 in Finland because of clearcut methods and industrial forest management focussed solely on profits.

The German magazine "Advertisement and selling" ("Werben und Verkaufen") recently warned against "overfeeding people with ecological ads" ("Überfütterung der Menschen mit Umweltwerbung"). The magazine feared a fatal loss of credibility because once consumers uncovered an ecological deception, they would not forget it.

The industry should not put its credibility at risk with fake ads and empty speeches that cost much money. It should, rather, invest more resources into environmental-friendly technologies and in strategies to establish them in the markets. The famous advertising company Springer & Jacoby said: "What helps the environment are good deeds - not good ads (Was der Umwelt hilft sind gute Taten - nicht gute Werbung)."

We do not consider all managers and firms as enemies. Greenpeace cooperates with some to develop clean technologies. But if dialogue and cooperation fail to achieve any change, then we jump again into our boats or climb on chimneys to exert pressure.

A fact is that no manager would be willing to talk to us if he was not sure that Greenpeace was in position to damage his polluting business. We talk to managers, we cooperate with them, but quite often after having blocked the company's main entrance and publically spoiled its name. Rare are the managers who spontaneously cooperate with Greenpeace after we get in touch with them and point to environmental problems.

Greenpeace believes that humanity needs to move away from growth-oriented ideologies. Industry may fear the idea of doing without many consumer goods (Verzicht). But beware: More and more people are convinced that the wealthy should do without some of their superfluous luxury to secure survival of all in a healthy environment.

We believe that the environment movement in Germany and elsewhere will only be successful by communicating the positive aspects of an environmentally oriented lifestyle to people and not by preaching asceticism everywhere. The goal must be leisure, contemplation and fulfilment, not the madness of consumption that offers only an illusion of happiness.