

Ecologistas en Acción





Constellation
of the Commons

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What is your relationship with Environmentalists in Action?

My relationship with Environmentalists in Action (EA) started about fifteen years ago, something like that, more or less. I started out as an activist in a small group of environmentalists in action in Móstoles, the city where I've always lived, which is on the outskirts of Madrid. Then I joined a group in Madrid, and for the last six years I have been the General Coordinator of the organization.

How is Environmentalist in Action structurally organized?

We are formed by federations that, in turn, are formed by groups. In 1998 there were more than 200 environmentalist groups that decided to come together under the same name. They already existed with different names and they all joined together. In Spain, each group is autonomous in its decisions and budget. For example, if you live in Barcelona you are a member of the Barcelona group, and if you live in Madrid you are a member of Madrid. So, all the groups have financial and organizational autonomy. That is how they function at the group level, but to coordinate with each other, we have state structures of coordination. As state coordinators, the three of us coordinate biweekly meetings with other coordinators of three areas of work; the sea, energy and water. And, quarterly, we have a meeting with representatives of the territories who attend the bi-weekly meetings as well as territorial representatives. This is our coordination scheme.

How does Environmentalists in Action make decisions?

It depends on what decision it is. Most decisions of the daily functioning of the association at the state level are decided at the biweekly meetings. If we cannot wait until the biweekly meeting, it is decided by the specific area. For example, if it is the topic of energy, it is decided by the energy area. If it is an issue that does not relate directly to any group, it is decided by the three state Environmentalists in Action coordinators, unless it is a subject linked to a particular place. In this case, the Environmentalists in Action coordinators have no authorization to make territorial decisions, and the decision is made by the specific territorial group.

How do people who associate with Environmentalists in Action participate?

You participate as an activist. Most of the time activists are members of the organization and pay a fee to their group, but no one will ask you to pay the fee. You can participate in Environmentalists in Action if you cannot pay the fee, it is not an absolute requirement. As a

participant, you decide when and how you will contribute to the group in order to organize things in your territory. You participate from where you are in your territory, organizing the activities that are considered necessary in your territory: discussions, protests, talks, etc. And any participant can go join any decision-making group within Environmentalists in Action. However, such groups usually end up being smaller groups of people, as people do not have time to participate in every group.

Environmentalists in Action celebrates 20 years in 2018.

What would you say are their strengths?

Our organization is truly territorial in its implementation. That is one of our great virtues, we are located in all territories. And we are with activist people who dedicate the part of their lives beyond work to the cause. They don't dedicate their working life to it, they dedicate their personal lives by defending the territory they live in. And this really happens in all of the territories of Spain, there are few places where there is no Environmentalists in Action presence. To have been able to maintain autonomy while organizing ourselves is a great virtue because we've been able to join together to forge a very powerful path, in fact we are basically the only environmentalist group that works on social environmentalism. And it's a discourse that is closely linked to forming relationships. Overall, we work directly with social movements. Other environmentalist organizations are much further away from what goes on in the street. Environmentalists in Action is on the street because we use a territorial strategy. This combination of a state-level structure, which generates a powerful discourse, together with having smaller groups scattered around various territories, is a very good format.

What about the difficulties?

Well, in the end, the same things. It's difficult to support all of the groups. Groups work with very little money, making people's time the most needed resource. There are some powerful groups, but there are also groups that have very few people. When smaller groups lose members it's often because someone has to move, or to a generational change. Smaller groups that lose participants are a little helpless when they have to manage a time-consuming project. In these situations, we do have the ability to respond to those situations, but of course it is difficult.

Has working for Environmentalists in Action and being an activist redefined your concept of the working world?

I schedule half of my day to complete work for Environmentalists in Action, but the truth is I end up dedicating a full day, and I do it because I really want to contribute to the organization. Dedicating long hours to complete work is very common in our organization, but also a bit messed up. We hire people to manage structural issues, to work in administration, to look after publications and coordination. We believe that those who are hired should only work for the hours they are paid for, but in the end, the line between activism and work is often blurred. There are people who do not understand that the work of an environmentalist includes being an activist-- we have 9 people employed at the state level, which is very few people for the massive amount of work we are doing, so there is this value of work that is beyond employment. Our concept at Environmentalists in Action is that every employee has the same level of importance and contributes equally in reaching our success. In other words, the person who cleans and organizes the premises in Madrid, which is the state headquarters, earns exactly the same as the General Coordinator

or the Economic Director of Environmentalists in Action, and that is very valuable and difficult to understand. We share the belief that all jobs are equally relevant and that all jobs help to sustain our organization. And if all jobs help to sustain our organization, then everyone should make the same salary. Some organizations have a small range of salary differences, which can be a good solution. For instance, the idea that no employee can ever earn more than twice as much as the employee who gets paid the least amount of money for their work. This takes place in some organizations that are trying to change, but the format we practice is probably unique.

How is taking care of people linked to work in Environmentalists in Action?

The concept of care affects all hired personnel, but it is especially applied to taking care of activists. In fact, in Environmentalists in Action, any activist is considered more important than any hired person, because they really are. They're out there, living like that. So, the hired staff are at the service of the rest of the people. And that's just something present in our work environment, it's not necessary to remember it. All of the activists are well taken care of, so as a result people have a much more expansive view of their work. The needs of working individuals are listened to-- to whatever extent is possible, but much more than in other spaces, of course.

What is social environmentalism?

For us, the key is that environmentalism labeled as "social" has a much broader and ecosystemic perspective of what happens in the world. It doesn't focus exclusively on environmental issues; it also focuses on where the causes arise and why we're in an environmental crisis. And when you look at the causes of the environmental crisis, you find capitalism and you find that structures and system formats are the culprits of this current situation. From a social-environmental perspective, we understand that we need to work on these structural things; that we have to denounce them. We cannot limit ourselves to only reporting on environmental problems and dedicating time to only those sorts of issues. At Environmentalists in Action, you can find yourself at a protest in support of wolves one day, at a demonstration in support of public health the next day, and at a demonstration to support refugees another day. And that is a discourse with a much wider perspective of what is going on in the world and what we have to protect. It is about much more than protecting the planet, much more than protecting ecosystems; it also has to do with our living conditions, health and education.

What connection is there between the Environmentalists in Action and Institutions?

Our path has involved a lot of hitting the streets, but we also do quite a bit of work with institutions. Working to create pressure, to hold meetings and do political lobbying at European institutions, as well as institutions on the state and autonomous level. So, all of the environmentalists do lobbying work with their administrations in order to change things. They often don't listen to us very much but, for example, with the Environmental Ministry we were able to create an action plan with them years ago and at least lay down what our priorities are on the environmental level and sit down to talk with them. In the majority of cases, and with the government of the Popular Party, it is practically impossible, we weren't able to get them to do the things we wished, but at least we have an agenda, we put those things on the table and that work is done. We work very much with the rest of the political parties even if they don't currently hold the presidency, from there you can still generate a lot of pressure. So that is why, at the institutional level, we also do a lot of work talking

to politicians about what it is that we do. For example, in the local government of Madrid we have spent many years reporting on the issue of air quality and the issue of mobility, and while it didn't go anywhere, our work was still out there. We continued insisting year after year until an administration took office that had the ears to listen to this message and there we were. So, many of the measures that the Madrid city government is putting into effect originated with Environmentalists in Action and we had been calling for such measures for years. We've made all of this available to them so, of course, what we want is for them to implement these measures.

And the relationship between Environmentalists in Action with educational institutions?

We have an educational department that which has a pretty good relationship with institutions. Our relationship with the university system is not as strong as we'd like it to be. It's relatively small, in fact, although we do have university professors who are part of our educational commission, for example Jorge Riechmann. We do a lot of work on the topic of what educational curriculums should include. We've done some work with university curriculum, but have primarily worked with secondary and elementary schools, in order to see what kinds of content should be included so that schools teach the things that are truly important to know for life. We have a lot of evidence about this. We have sat down with the Minister of Education, with publishers to present to them what an alternative curriculum would look like, but not at the level of environmental issues, but rather alternatives for math, for literature, for history. We have put ourselves to the task of analyzing the curriculums of all subjects because, really, if they teach you in the subject of environmental studies that pollution is lethal, but in English they are teaching you business vocabulary, it makes no difference. So, we are working from a broader perspective. We have just now put together a network of teachers and it's working really well because it's something that the educational world wants, because these are topics that are very easy to work with when you meet teachers who themselves question things. And well, yes, we organized it this year and we are trying to create regional nodes so that there is one for the area of Barcelona and Valencia, another node in Madrid, and right now we are trying to create one for the area of the Basque country. We make materials available for teachers from there come debates and resources that they can use in the classroom. Our idea is that anyone who would like to get together with other teachers, wherever they are, can set up a teacher network and if they're outside of any network, great. We are going to make those materials available so that even if you're alone and you want to put them into practice, you can. The idea is that you get together with other people nearby to see how you're doing. The idea is to be able to have everyone meet once in a while, but those resources are going to be put on the internet. Our most essential resource is a document that we began making a couple of years ago that is called "99 questions and 99 experiences for a more just and sustainable world". They aren't just 99 questions, they are much more than that, and what they lay out are which questions the educational world needs to ask-- what questions a child should be able to answer once they leave school. It has questions of all types, ranging from why we die to what is your city's ecological footprint.

Taking into account the general deafness to the ongoing environmental crisis, what keeps hope alive in Environmentalists in Action?

Well I think that what keeps the dream alive is knowing that we are right and you have to fight for that because, in the end, the ecological struggle is also a struggle

for justice. What sustains groups who fight for social justice? Well, the importance of their mission, to know that you have to fight for it. And in Environmentalists in Action, what sustains us is the network of people making up our organization. In fact, many times we say that even once all of the environmental problems of the world have been solved, we'll continue meeting on Mondays--which is the day we meet in Madrid--to see one another. We have generated really important relationships of trust, of mutual support. I think that is one thing that sustains Environmentalists in Action, which is perhaps different from other organizations; that you do it from a place of altruism, that is your basis for doing it, because you believe in it deeply; and later, when they tell us we're right, well then we'll have a party.

Community is something that is essential. In fact, in Environmentalists in Action we have created an annual gathering of all of the groups and over two hundred people attend; for all that we are, it's not many people, but compared to the size of similar organizations' gatherings, we have ridiculously high turnout. It is because we are a community. Because you go and know practically everyone there, and we embrace anyone new who comes. The 15M movement was marvelous for us because it was what we had always wanted, people in the street talking about problems that we have spent our whole lives talking about. It's true that 15M 'emptied out' some social movements, but we'd say, "We have to continue working here." "We have to be in 15M, but also have to be at the Environmentalists in Action meetings." And now that 15M is still alive but its working groups no longer exist, Environmentalists in Action is receiving a huge influx of young people. Not only in Madrid-- I have seen it in Madrid because that is what is closest to me-- but I know that there are young people who are coming as a result of the 15M and that, thanks to the social movements we have maintained there, they now have a space to return to where they continue to build on that restlessness that 15M awakened in them. And yes, it is true that during those years leading up to 15M fewer new people joined Environmentalists in Action, because, of course, they went to the 15M. We understood it to be this way, but we could not stop our work in Environmentalists in Action, because this is our work.

What is your definition of progress in social-environmental terms?

Look, a definition of progress would be to actually live under a logic or under a paradigm that focuses on life and doesn't focus on the accumulation of wealth, that doesn't focus on living thanks to others living poorly--regardless of whether they are animals, humans or plants. Progress would be, truly, to find oneself in that way of thinking, of living, of generating what we need from a sense of caring for life and an understanding of eco-dependency and interdependency. That would be our idea of progress, if we could truly arrive at that.