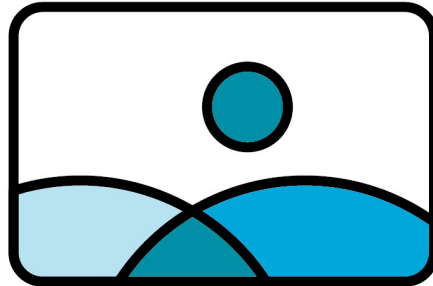


# Action Town



Research and Action for SCP

## **Better & New NGO Strategies to Tackle the Sustainable Consumption and Production Challenge? Roadmapping...**

Discussion Paper

11 December 2009

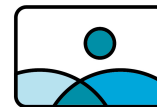


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## 1. Introduction and purpose

Climate change, insecurity of food supply, draughts, resource scarcity and poverty are different sides of the same global sustainability crisis. The capacity of the earth to supply resources and absorb waste is exceeded while at the same time the growing global consumer class with its constantly increasing resource consumption is adding more pressure on the planet's eco-systems.

*"We will not change course by addressing each of these [symptoms such as global warming, deforestation; desertification; poisoning of soil, water, air; etc.] as separate issues; we have to address root cultural cause" (Sacks, 2009)*

Many bigger and smaller environmental NGOs in many countries are working to influence policy makers, businesses and individuals with the ultimate aim to achieve a sustainable human use of the earth's resources. Given the magnitude of the current environmental crisis this is clearly a huge and difficult task. Successes cannot be identified easily and many effects can be expected in the long-term. However it also requires constantly questioning of whether the way civil society is dealing with this crisis is adequate or whether new ways of intervention need to be found.

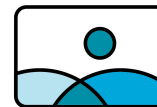
Various academics and leading practitioners from civil society organizations have drawn similar conclusions about the role and influence of the environmental movement. Our literature review has revealed that NGOs have well developed skills in analyzing and assessing environmental problems, but often lack knowledge and capacity on how to effectively resolve them in terms of understanding the complex functioning of the economic and social systems within which both the problem and the potential solutions exist. On the other hand, academia has long experience in these related areas, but are seldom involved in actively creating and promoting solutions, as well as being somewhat isolated from civil society organizations. What seem to be missing are the capacities and the mechanisms of joining these knowledge areas in order to design tools that can successfully resolve these environmental crises.

The Action Town Project<sup>1</sup> addresses this gap through developing a roadmap that will provide non-governmental organizations with better knowledge and capacity for more effective strategies and tactics for their actions towards sustainable consumption and production (SCP).

The work stream of "Building a roadmap" has been kicked-off in the framework of the EU FP7 funded project 'Action Town'. The purpose of Action Town is the first step for the ambitions of the roadmap: to develop partnerships between research and civil society organisations with the aim to increase the effectiveness of civil society organization (CSO) actions towards SCP. The prime focus of 'Action Town' is to enhance CSOs knowledge and understanding on the opportunities that lie in making better use of public policy instruments, assessment tools and indicators. The project focuses on knowledge exchange between civil society organisations and researchers and the establishment of partnerships between both

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<sup>1</sup> The Action Town is an FP7 project and kindly funded by the European Commission. Its official name is CSOContribution2SCP. Project partners are the CSCP, SERI, SEI, ANPED and WWF-UK. The accession of the new partner CSOs, namely ECODES, Green Liberty, MAMA-86 and TTGV is currently being processed.



groups to help CSOs to develop more effective strategies and develop more effective actions towards their goals.

While Action Town in itself is laying the foundations by initiating several partnerships between CSOs and research organisations in three areas (exploratory actions on policy instruments, assessment tools and indicators), **the aim of the roadmap is to develop concrete tools to bring the collaboration between research and Civil Society to the next level and suggest a way forward for after the end of Action Town Project.** 'Action Town' has a wider scope on CSO actions, whereas the work stream of "Building a roadmap" focuses on activities of environmental NGOs.

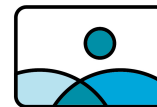
Part of the Action Town project was a survey conducted with more than 20 leading practitioners and researchers. One of the conclusions of this survey was that better knowledge of policy instruments, assessment tools and indicators, while seen as useful, leaves many questions about how CSOs can effectively make use of them. Any recommendation to use any of these technical elements can only be meaningful if they are put into the context of a comprehensive strategy to be pursued by a CSO. For example, the tactics used by CSOs to influence the effective implementation of a policy instrument have to take into account the socio-political context and consider what type of unintended consequences it might have on behavioural systems by building on the existing research (especially in the social sciences). Exactly here is where many of the interviewees saw a gap in knowledge and capacity in the CSO community.

## 2. The Sustainable Consumption and Production challenge is systemic

The sustainable consumption and production challenge has a systemic nature. This means changes in technologies, production methods, laws and regulation of the economy, as well as in the way we choose and consume products and services can have multiple effects in many different domains. Sometimes an intervention (like laws to increase the efficiency of buildings or cars) can have a direct effect of reducing energy consumption, but because it can lead to making energy cheaper, it might have a long-term negative effect on the absolute energy consumption as it might induce demand (rebound effect). Similarly, growing tomatoes in winter in Spain might be less carbon intensive than producing them in for example the UK, but the water stress levels of this type of intensive agriculture in Spain might be unsustainably high. Likewise, we might be able to produce enough renewable energy in the future to cover the increasing demand for individual car transport and thereby reduce the pressure on climate change, but what we won't solve with this strategy is the pressure on land sealing, habitat fragmentation from the infrastructure needed for car transport in addition to the social impacts from noise, accidents, commuting time, traffic jams etc.

As a more positive systemic interlinkage, if a city achieves to reduce the total need for urban transport by making the city more compact, cycle friendly and with easy access to shops and services, this can have a multiple co-benefits besides the reduced energy use and carbon emissions. It could increase the quality of life, social cohesion, economic competitiveness, while decreasing local air pollution, stress levels of citizens etc. in the city.

These examples show us that systemic thinking is necessary in order to adequately resolve environmental problems. By focussing on limited aspects of environmental issues, we run the

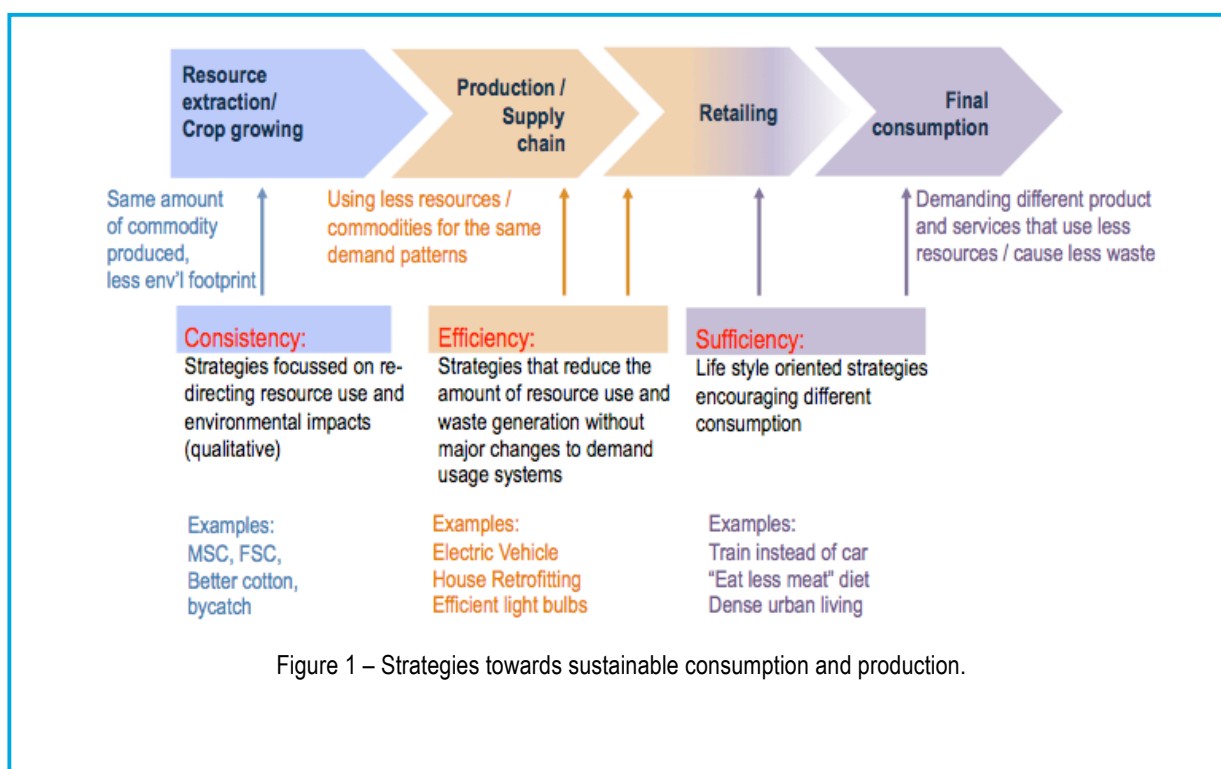


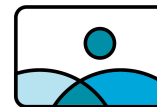
risk of resolving one environmental aspect while creating a new problem, or not taking sufficiently advantage of the positive side effects that a system intervention can have. This is what we refer to when we say that NGOs often focus on resolving “symptoms” and not the “root causes”.

### Strategies towards sustainable consumption and production

To tackle this challenge, researchers suggest three very different areas of focus for the necessary changes in our consumption and production systems (See Figure 1). These include:

- **Consistency:** Production methods that produce the same amount of a commodity, but with less harm to the natural environment – improving fishing methods to reduce by-catch, sustainable logging, reducing local water stress, but also the production of renewable energy (same amount of energy produced but with less impact to the environment)
- **Efficiency:** Producing products with less resource use and/or waste and/or emissions – energy efficient buildings, cars etc.
- **Sufficiency:** People consume less material goods, potentially seeking happiness in intrinsic values.





### 3. How environmental NGOs are trying to tackle the challenge of SCP

#### Today's Environmentalism

Environmentalism has many faces today. Advocacy around market based solutions and regulatory signals for adjusting levels of environmental damage arising from economic activity is fairly common. There are also grassroots organizers fighting against globalisation and for global justice especially for preservation of resources at the community level. But mainstream thinking is about nature conservation or other 'end of pipe' fixes (e.g. species protection or shifting individual consumption towards more efficient and less polluting products such as promoting the use of energy efficient household appliances). Approaches such as education and practical conservation, although important, are relatively well represented in terms of civil society effort and funding, while efforts that focus on system-wide drivers and their potential for delivering social and behavioural change far less thoroughly understood or explored.<sup>2</sup>

#### Findings and observations from the Action Town Project on civil society strategies

The survey<sup>3</sup> conducted within the Action Town Project also showed that the concept of sustainable consumption and production in its complexity and systemic nature has not yet been embedded in the work of most environmental NGOs.

The responses to the interviews show a huge variation in how civil society is tackling this challenge. Most appear to be approaching this challenge with strategies that limit themselves to, and focus on, their own key activity areas (food, energy etc.).

Where there are approaches to consumption in itself, these tend to be focused directly at changing consumer behaviour via strategies of Consistency and Efficiency, with little focus on Sufficiency.

The Action Town survey confirmed a number of generic strategies that cover most activities undertaken by NGOs. These span from publishing challenging evidence, undertaking consumer focused campaigning, government lobbying to community engagement and creation of coalitions. Table 1 provides a brief overview of this palette of generic strategies. It also became clear that in real-life projects undertaken by environmental NGOs, they usually combine different generic strategies, but that there's a great potential in improving these strategies.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, according to Gustave Speth's observations as mentioned in his book "The Bridge at the edge of the world - Capitalism, the Environment, and the Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability" as well as the Environmental Funders Network Foundation's own 'discourse crunch' exercise, in which they took around 40 discourse titles identified in the literature and distilled them down to 7 key discourse headings. For further information see 'Where the Green Grants Went 4' at [www.greenfunders.org](http://www.greenfunders.org)

<sup>3</sup> The survey is part of the first phase of the Action Town Project (<http://action-town.eu/>). The survey helped us to identify gaps in the way CSOs work towards sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in three key focus areas: public policy instruments, assessment tools and indicators. In addition it gave an overview of effective and less effective SCP strategies used by CSOs and about gaps in capacity and knowledge CSOs have in this field. The survey was conducted by means of in-depth interviews of a select group of 22 representatives from CSOs and research organisations.

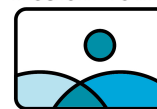
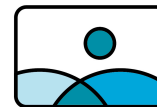


Table 1: An overview of generic civil society strategies identified for tackling sustainable consumption and production challenges.

Generic strategy	Description
Develop and publish challenging evidence	Identify and understand the impacts of unsustainable consumption and production, fill the knowledge gaps by developing and publishing challenging evidence. For example, the Ecological Budget Project by WWF and SEI or the FIN-MIPS Household project by the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation gathering Material Input per Service Unit (MIPS) data on household consumption.
Do consumer focused campaigning	Run campaigns that focus on consumers. For example, the Friends of the Earth campaign “Consume less, live more”
Lobby governments	Lobby governments by playing an active role in political and research discussions, ideally to re-define or challenge the agenda. For example, lobbying for more challenging Sustainable Consumption and Production National Action Plans, lobbying for stringer environmental legislation.
Engage with communities	Engage at the grass roots level with community groups to achieve behaviour change and build political pressure. For example, London 21, mapping change for sustainable communities.
Engage in business partnerships	Build civil society – business partnerships to create examples of best in class sustainability practices by business. For example, WWF Global Forest and Trade Network.
Network and create coalitions	Network with other civil society organizations to create common opinions and get the civil society’s voice heard more effectively. For example, the sustainable consumption network of Finish NGOs.
Convene multi-stakeholder processes	Convene multi-stakeholder processes with a diverse group of stakeholders to create the space to develop, test and implement sustainable innovations. For example, the finance lab founded by WWF-UK.
Build alliances	Build political alliances with partners who share the same purpose and have aligned objectives in order to influence political or societal decision-making processes for sustainable consumption and production. For example, Rainforest Alliance providing eco-label.

Several interviewees from the survey suggested a need to go beyond current reactive, “symptoms-related” actions. Especially some respondents with extensive policy experience saw a need for radical and transformative change. Some also link this to the challenge of the economic growth paradigm (as 3 surveys saw it) or to the call to change the whole value system of society (as one re-searcher said).

The need for proper monitoring and evaluation of the change achieved was also pinpointed. Where NGOs do evaluations, they tend to be about outputs rather than outcomes and impacts. As a consequence it must be assumed that there is little knowledge about the effectiveness of large part of the projects and actions undertaken by much if not most of the environmental movement.



Finally, it is suggested by several that most NGOs have short-term plans, due in part to limitation of resources and reliance on individual projects. As a result NGOs are often reactive instead of proactive. Many have a quite limited agenda that may result from following funding calls. This indicates that funders play a key role in shaping NGO activities. NGOs also have to demonstrate that their activities are having an effect, usually in terms of outputs. This means that projects and programmes may be designed from the very beginning to be easily monitored and evaluated, which limits their engagement with ‘bigger’ issues.

From our findings, we conclude that there is an urgent need for investigating how effective strategies can be developed, put in place and evaluated for transformative change, so that NGOs can start exploring opportunities for change in the underlying or wider frameworks in which our consumption and production practices take place. As Gustave Speth put it: “Deal-with-the-effects approach leads to quick fixes and to picking the low-hanging fruit. Quick fixes address the symptoms, not the underlying causes. They don’t get at the problem and can thus mask what needs to be done. Building codes can make homes efficient, but what if consumers and builders want ever-larger homes? Auto efficiency standards can be tightened, but what if consumers drive more and more miles in part because good rapid transit options do not exist?”

In the next section, we will look into what type of knowledge and research is already available to get closer to an answer to the question of what are effective NGO strategies and what needs and gaps exist that must be answered to improve the effectiveness of these strategies.

## 4. A literature review on NGO strategies towards SCP

Our literature review focused on two research questions:

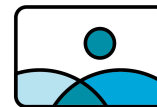
- How has been the true effectiveness of NGOs' strategies and tactics for addressing the systemic challenges and the root causes analyzed?
- What gaps in knowledge and capacities are identified and need to be tackled to improve the effectiveness of NGO activities?

An initial literature research was performed using and combining research questions' keywords such as NGOs, strategies, tactics, effectiveness, etc. in scientific journals published in English. In a similar way, relevant documents were also searched on the web, looking for seminars and conferences on the topic. The research was in particular related to the strategies identified in the Guidelines on Policy Instruments<sup>4</sup>.

The general conclusions of the literature review are quite along the lines of what Speth describes in his book “The Bridge at the Edge of the World”; “Today's environmentalism tends to be pragmatic and incrementalist. Its actions are aimed at solving problems, often one at a time. It is more comfortable proposing innovative policy solutions than framing inspirational messages.” These characteristics are closely allied to a third; “the tendency to deal with effects rather than underlying causes” (Speth 2008a, p.69).

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<sup>4</sup> One of the deliverables of the Action Town Project.



Effectiveness is a rather difficult issue and there seems to be few studies on it. The studies we found are mainly concerned with the **campaigning strategy**. It is observed that communication, both oral and written, has an important role in order to make these campaigns successful. However, our research suggests that environmental NGOs do not seem to build sufficiently effective communication campaigns. In this context, NGOs would strongly benefit from knowledge from sciences such as communication, sociology, psychology and behavioural economics in order to better understand their publics, and partnering with relevant organizations in academia would be useful. Regarding the strategy itself, it appears that the target people and the campaign objective are frequently not adequately framed and identified (Hounsham, 2006), as well as the organization often losing track of the overall strategy when designing activities. Crompton gives the example of trying to address consumption where promoting 'green consumption'<sup>5</sup> distracts attention from the fundamental problems inherent to consumerism" (Crompton, 2008, p.6), or, in other words these strategies, by focussing on "easy solutions" such as green consumption, keep feeding the 'more is better' view.

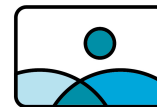
A second emerging theme is about **values**, but there is not total accordance on how this affects campaign design and effectiveness. The main differences lie in whether NGOs should push choices that are considered 'correct', 'ethical' and try to make them 'politically correct' and thereby preferred, or whether they should work more the indirect value system. Crompton and Kasser state "NGOs address the existing values instead of trying to create new values, undermining the possibility of a behavioural change". However Rose asserts that the report by WWF entitled *Weathercocks & Signposts* "is generally right about the limitations of many 'behaviour change' efforts but unfortunately its solution to this problem is to advocate what amounts to a crusade to change 'values'. According to the interpretation Rose gives of the solution Crompton suggests; "people should (only) do things 'for the right reason'" but this works just for a very little part of the population (Rose, 2008). Let us try to explain the last sentences with an example: if it is asked to people to avoid stand-by for electronic devices, the WWF's report suggests people should take this behaviour because it is the correct behaviour in order to preserve the environment, leaving apart other reasons such as saving money; but, according to Rose, only a tiny part of the population would adopt this behaviour because it is correct, instead a larger part would do it for economic reasons. Therefore, Rose suggests focussing on targeted, well designed campaigns and strategic thinking. For example, in Rose's view; "a strategic campaign to force the introduction of storage technologies<sup>6</sup> might involve the selection of a target which would change the market, competitive and investment dynamics, perhaps led by a public sector investment." Then, 'behaviour change' would be focused on achieving the goal of introducing energy storage technologies, through the involvement of consumers, shareholders and political activists (Rose, 2008, p. 4).

In spite of this, several authors focus on campaign effectiveness depending on the **identification and creation of values**. For example, according to Shellenberger and Nordhaus "the job of global warming strategists should be to determine which values we

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<sup>5</sup> Environmentally friendly products and services.

<sup>6</sup> This example refers to Energy storage technology, a technology that could eliminate the 'intermittency' problem of renewable energy.



need to activate to bring various constituencies into a political majority” (Shellenberger, Nordhaus, 2004, p.32), or Speth: “the environmental agenda should expand to embrace [among other things] a profound challenge to consumerism and commercialism and the lifestyles they offer, a healthy scepticism of growth mania and a redefinition of what society should be striving to grow [...] and a powerful assault on the anthropocentric and contempocentric values that currently dominate” (Speth, 2008b). Crompton and Kasser also state that “until an understanding of the person is integrated with current environmental strategies, and until the environmental movement begins to tackle these aspects of identity and the social norms and structures that enable them, we fear that responses to the environmental crisis will remain inadequate” (Crompton, Kasser, 2009, p.5).

When dealing with human behaviour it is also important to understand our **needs**. According to Rose; “if you want to increase engagement you must do it within value needs sets, not across them. People can be ‘promoted’ in terms of frequency, duration or scale of action but that escalation needs to resonate with their needs” (Rose, 2008, p.8). Therefore, NGOs should have the capacity to understand their target society's needs.

Other strategies identified in our literature review discuss the need to improve **communication** strategies. Important points here would be for example adapting the language to the public one is writing for (general/specific), or to the communication form used (website, leaflet, policy proposal, etc.). With regards to the communication content, the words, it is essential to build a message touching the heart, instead of “lists” of rationally presented arguments if one wishes to involve the public (Hounsham, 2006).

Several authors also focus on the need of **motivating stakeholders** and **building alliances** in order to make more effective campaigns. Shellenberger and Nordhaus point out that “America’s mainstream environmentalists are not articulating a vision of the future commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis. Instead they are promoting technical policy fixes like pollution controls and higher vehicle mileage standards — proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem” (Shellenberger, Nordhaus, 2004, p.6). This lack of collaboration has also been observed by Gelbspan<sup>7</sup>: “Despite occasional spasms of cooperation, the major environmental groups have been unwilling to join together around a unified climate agenda, pool resources, and mobilize a united campaign on the climate” (Ross Gelbspan as reported in Shellenberger, Nordhaus, 2004, p.11). Speth suggests involving organizations such as the labour union even if “there’s no guarantee that the environmental movement can fix labour’s woes or vice versa. But if we would focus on how our interests are aligned we might craft something more creative together than apart. [...] The new environmentalism must work with [...] a progressive coalition to build a mighty force in electoral politics”. This is important since “organizations that were built to investigate and lobby for environmental causes or to do sophisticated policy studies are not necessarily the best ones to mobilize a grassroots movement or build a force for electoral politics or motivate the public with social marketing campaigns. These things need to be done, and to get them done it may be necessary to launch new organizations and initiatives with special strengths in these areas” (Speth 2008a, p.80).

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<sup>7</sup> Ross Gelbspan, (2004), *Boiling Point: How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists, and Activists Are Fuelling the Climate Crisis and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster* New York: Basic Books.

## 5. Conclusions

Our above research findings show that there exists already a rich discussion among leading thinkers about the change in direction needed by NGOs to be considerably more effective in their pursuit of sustainable consumption and production and about their shortcomings in capacity and knowledge to be able to achieve this. Although there are a variety of opinions about the right strategies to be pursued by NGOs – e.g. changing values or tapping into existing values? and which behaviours do we aim to change? is it individual action or policy makers' and business' behaviour? – clear common themes emerge with regard to the shortcoming of current strategies and tactics:

- Environmental organisations frequently focus on single issues and symptoms rather than on the systemic challenges and the root causes.
- Environmental NGOs often lack knowledge in social sciences (psychology, behavioural economics etc.) and capacity to integrate these areas into their practical work.
- Environmental NGOs are rarely using the potential of joining forces between different interest groups to build alliances with aligned interests.

We will build on this groundwork and bring a group of leading thinkers from academia and civil society together at an Expert Workshop (Feb. 2010, Vienna) and discuss the following question:

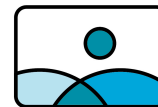
How can we make best use of our collective knowledge and existing thinking and develop and define an agenda for collaboration between academia and NGOs to provide NGOs with better knowledge and capacity for more effective strategies and tactics?

We suggest organising the workshop around three more specific themes:

- What do NGOs need to improve short-medium term focussed campaigning strategies?
- What do NGOs need to develop new and better ways to catalyse long-term social and political change towards a new paradigm?
- What do NGOs need in order to better measure and evaluate the success or failure of their activities?

**Expected outcomes:** Our ultimate aim is to use the outcomes of this expert workshop and write a roadmap document that contains the collective analysis, a rationale for action and a proposal for action. By participating in this workshop you will be part of the creation of the roadmap and acknowledged accordingly. We would like to explore a variety of channels to promote the roadmap and bring it eventually to life. Some specific activities that we have identified this far are:

- **Influence research agendas** by disseminating Action Town Roadmap conclusions among researchers and civil society organizations at events such as the Action Town Conference in October/November 2010.
- **Induce national and European funding programmes** (including foundations and trusts) to support activities that focus on root causes of issues, and develop funding monitoring tools that allow for this.



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## Acknowledgements

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