

ÉQUITERRE: FROM IDEALISM TO INDIVIDUAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalization of international trade over the past decades has exacerbated the negative impacts of the dominant economic system, socially, environmentally, culturally and politically, all over the world. Job insecurity, worsening working conditions, the loss of State control in many areas now dominated by multinationals, environmental degradation and corporate concentration are only a few examples of trends affecting societies in both the North and South.

At the same time, people are becoming acutely aware of the unsustainability of this system, which poses a real threat to many collective values (democracy, cultural identity, environmental quality, health, justice, etc.). They also have a greater understanding of the interdependence of various facets of economic activity and their repercussions. A rising social consciousness uniting humanitarian and environmental concerns is emerging in many parts of world. It is in this context that Equiterre was founded.

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Équiterre focuses on activities that incite citizens to action. By raising awareness of how people are both complicit in creating problems and responsible for solving them, especially with respect to their consumption habits, Équiterre attempts to guide them towards more environmentally and socially equitable behaviour. Although at first glance this approach might seem to provide only short-term and insignificant results, in reality, it contributes to laying the groundwork for a citizen's movement based on the determination of individuals to act for long-term, deeply-rooted societal changes. The principle driving the approach is that every simple daily act brings us one step closer to a more holistic awareness of issues and to political action.

This case study outlines Équiterre's strategy through a description of its origins, philosophy, organizational structure, programs, projects and accomplishments over the years. The first section discusses the organization's origins, mission and vision as well as its governance and financial structures. Its founding principles, approach, and distinctive aspects are presented next. The third section of the study describes how the programs, projects and campaigns in place reflect the organization's values. The conclusion focuses on lessons that can be learned from Équiterre's experience in building more just, democratic and environmentally-conscious communities, both locally and globally.

ORIGINS

Équiterre is a non-profit environmental organization. The term "environmental" is defined along the lines of the concept of sustainable development, which includes social and economic considerations. The organization promotes socially and environmentally sound consumer choices and practices. Founded in 1993, it was originally named A SEED (Action for solidarity, equity, the environment and development) and was incorporated in 1995 before being renamed Équiterre three years later.

A group of young Quebeckers created the organization after having participated in the Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. This group of activists was profoundly disturbed by the problems plaguing our planet, such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity, poverty, North-South inequities and the impact of international trade and fiscal policies, and by the difficulty in finding solutions to these problems. The creation of Équiterre, as an economic solidarity, environmental protection and social justice movement, enabled them to join in a common vision of sustainable development that would take into account a myriad of social cultural, economic and environmental issues.

MISSION AND VISION

Équiterre's ultimate aim is to bring about progressive social, economic and environmental change to ensure the well-being of all citizens. To reach this goal, the organization's mission is to educate the public and raise their awareness of the environmental and social effects of their consumption choices, based on research, while providing practical day-to-day alternatives to those choices. Équiterre also participates in grass-root and democratic initiatives in order to promote its vision and influence policy-makers.

In 2003, after ten years in existence, Équiterre updated its mission statement to better reflect its evolution and concerns. Its mission statement asserts that Équiterre will contribute to building a citizen's movement by promoting individual and collective choices that are socially and environmentally equitable.²

Équiterre's decision to explicitly use the terms "citizens' movement" and "collective choices," concepts that have always been important to the organization's founders, clarifies the organization's orientation, especially for its partner organizations, volunteers and the public. Équiterre has recently shifted its vision and aims to become by 2012, "a leader in a movement that will make Québec an exemplary society in environmentally and socially sound consumerism."³

STRUCTURE

GOVERNANCE

Équiterre has adopted an organizational structure that does not rely solely on its employees to carry out its mandate through their daily tasks but one that strongly depends on building close ties to the community through membership. This structure is dynamic and permits a more participatory and democratic governance process whereby members determine the organization's orientations and elect its Board of Directors in a general assembly.

On December 31, 2004, Équiterre had 2061 members in good standing, of whom 1986 were individuals. The remaining 75 were organizations, farms and businesses. Its members are invited to participate in many activities throughout the year that both increase their awareness of pertinent issues and consolidate relationships among the various groups making up the organization, thus ensuring its cohesion.

The organization's eight board members meet four times a year. Seven of them come from different sectors of society (community, environmental academic, ag-

² Équiterre, 2002 Annual Report (in French only)

³ Ibid.

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riculture, financial, civil service, etc.) and one is an employee. The General Coordinator and the program and service coordinators participate in these meetings without voting rights.

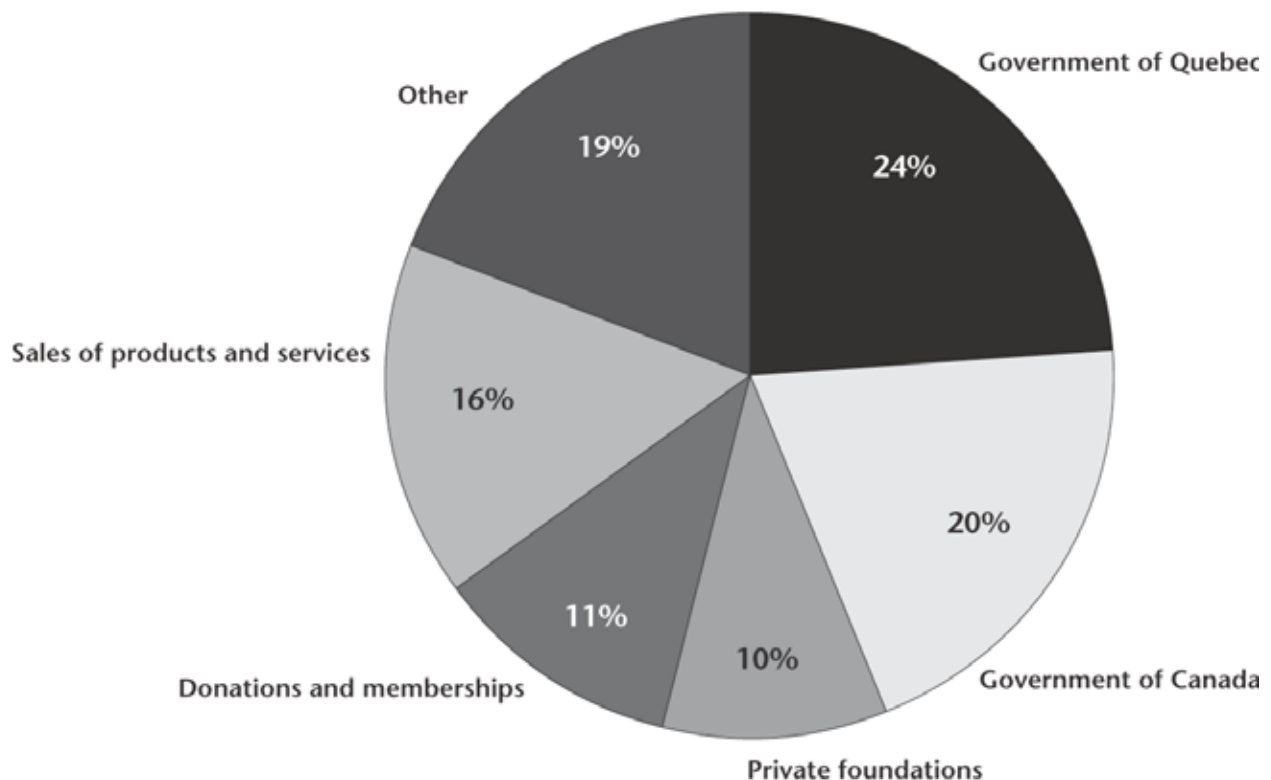
EMPLOYEES AND VOLUNTEERS

The organization has close to 30 employees who actively participate in Équiterre's development through the establishment of its goals and action plans. They are divided into eight teams: one for each of the four programs (see below); one for each cross-cutting campaign (climate change and responsible consumption); and two that provide administrative and communication support to the other six. Interns also regularly join the teams and Équiterre can count on many volunteers who provide support in various capacities.

PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

The organization carries out its mission through four educational programs: Fair trade, Ecological Agriculture, Sustainable Transportation and Energy Efficiency. Each program is composed of various interrelated interest-based projects. Its newly defined strategy further links the individual objectives of projects to the main goal. Équiterre also runs two transversal campaigns that address all of the organization's objectives. The first, on responsible consumption, emphasizes citi-

Breakdown of 2004 revenues



zen empowerment through its educational activities, while the other, on climate change, touches on several of Équiterre's political concerns: energy, transportation, North-South equity and agriculture. These programs and projects will be discussed in more detail in the third section.

FUNDING

Unlike some Canadian and Québec-based NGOs, Équiterre has adopted the principle to rigorously follow its member-devised action plan. The organization first develops its programs and projects and then searches for funders that share its priorities. This approach has ensured a wide diversity of financial support. In addition to funds raised through sales of services and donations, Équiterre can count on the support of over 30 funders, which ensures it the stability and independence necessary to pursue its mission.

ÉQUITERRE'S APPROACH

FOUNDING PRINCIPLES

The principles adopted by Équiterre's founders mirror their environmental and humanitarian aspirations for sustainable development, democracy, environmental protection, justice and responsible citizenship.

The espousal and application of these principles on a societal scale requires citizens to take more responsibility for their actions and the consequences of their choices. It implies that citizens have the capacity to evaluate the consequences of their actions, to choose alternatives and to act on them. Through its activities, Équiterre encourages this individual and collective capacity by providing alternatives to detrimental practices and by working to shape social structures that will support and encourage us to make sustainable choices.

Convinced that our small day-to-day actions have a global impact, Équiterre has adopted the philosophy of "thinking globally, acting locally" to mobilize the public.

ACTION STRATEGY

CREATING A RESPONSIBLE CONSUMERS' MOVEMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

According to the principles of democracy and citizen responsibility promoted by Équiterre, social change must come from the people. However, in the context of highly individualistic societies in which participation in public life does not nec-

essarily mean working for the common good, it is unrealistic to believe that a mass movement can be created through a strictly political approach in the short term. While it is essential that citizens be informed of the impacts of our economic system, many of them, although they agree with the message, feel overwhelmed by the scale of the problems and powerless to effect change. Others, who are perhaps more individualistic, pay little attention to calls to action that are strictly politically motivated.

A survey carried out by the Canadian polling firm CROP Inc. showed that Quebecers sharing Équiterre's values are, quite surprisingly, individualists. A good number of them enjoy fine dining, have a liking for handcrafted products and take care of their health. Sixteen percent of the province's population falls within this category, with the percentage rapidly rising. Hence, mobilizing them could greatly contribute to bringing about the types of social change we seek.

In order to win them over to the activists' point of view, thus reaching the critical mass needed for the rest of the population to join in, Équiterre has decided to put its energy into very concrete activities, carried out on a local, even individual scale. It is why the organization opted for a progressive approach to responsible consumption that is easy to follow, corresponds to the values of those being mobilized and is relatively simple to set up. Although it may seem paradoxical at first, Équiterre proposes that instead of a head-on attack on the economic system and the exaggerated pro-consumerism media messages it promulgates, to "navigate" this corporate message and integrate into it more ecological and socially equitable values. Instead of demonizing consumerism, Équiterre encourages people to BUY local, BUY fair-trade products, BUY bicycles, and SAVE by using public transportation. In this, they are inspired by the idea of the boycott, and above all, the "buycott," in their participation in new social movements that invest in the economic sphere to spread their political message and initiate social change.

FROM BOYCOTT TO "BUYCOTT"

A boycott may be initiated for a variety of reasons. The California grape boycott was originally undertaken in the interest of higher wages and better working and living conditions for the mainly migrant workers picking the grapes. In later years it was widened to focus attention on the environmental and health costs of using toxic pesticides. The boycott of British cloth by Ghandi and his followers was undertaken in response to the Indian market being flooded with cheap machine-woven cloth from the UK, which threatened the existence of the Indian textile trade. That boycott, and others, which resulted in a huge civil disobedience movement, provided the spark that ultimately led to independence for India.

"Buycotts," however, are generally seen as being a means to force corporations to change, through actions that range from purchasing from small local businesses

instead of from large retail chains to pressuring Starbucks to sell fair trade coffee. In general, consumers who buy fair trade products have at least some awareness of Third World poverty, global trade imbalances and other associated issues, notably those related to the impacts of free-trade agreements. However reforming the WTO is not the explicit objective of fair trade.

It is on this note that Équiterre's approach is different. Équiterre promotes fair trade as a means to inspire people to act, to learn and to care about the WTO's practices, even if this ultimate objective will not be easy to achieve. The same principle applies to Équiterre's other programs as well. The ecological agriculture program not only informs health-conscious consumers of alternatives to conventionally bought food but also disseminates information about the underside of the present agro-industrial food system. This, it is hoped, will lead these better informed citizens to demand a general reform of the structures that support this system. The sustainable transportation program, instead of being anti-car, encourages the public to diversify their modes of transportation through a "transportation cocktail," by choosing those modes most appropriate to their needs. It is an approach that will systematically reduce car use, and will also lead people to think, for example, about the levels of pollution caused by cars and inhaled by cyclists, and why the government is reducing public transportation funding. In essence, instead of a simple corporate reform, Équiterre proposes a delicate balance between corporate reform, strong legislation and a greater role for the social economy.

The progression from individual action to a collective movement introducing more profound and permanent change—such as fair trade becoming the standard for exchanging goods and services or organic farming becoming the main type of agricultural practice—is inspired by the concept of social innovation. Fontan (1988) defines it as [free translation]:

*An action leading to the creation of new social structures and interactions as well as new decision-making processes. It begins with a rising awareness of the need for social change. At first rooted in one's own dissatisfaction with a given situation, it then develops from a collective desire to improve this situation [...]*⁴

The evolution from corporate "boycotting" to political action for deeper and more holistic change is cultivated through raising awareness, education, a constant flow of information and by encouraging activism through example. Équiterre's various activities are designed to guide this progression of citizen action. Over and above the information and educational activities it provides, Équiterre has put in place concrete programs that serve as examples of alternative courses of action for citizens to follow. Individuals are thus able to see that

⁴ Jean-Marc Fontan, "Innovation sociale et société civile québécoise." *Possibles*, 22, 3-4: 116-135.

change is possible and that their decisions can make a difference, motivating their transformation from passive to proactive consumers. From more or less conscious actions, consumer choices become a manifestation of people's values and vision of what the economic system should be. As articulated by the Équiterre slogan "to buy is to vote," consumption becomes a political act.

FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL ACTION

All of Équiterre's activities are related to important global issues and thus to the global citizens' movement. Whether the issue is energy efficiency, sustainable transportation, ecological agriculture or fair trade, Équiterre tries to raise public awareness of the link between local actions and their effects on a global scale. For example, with their program on sustainable transportation, the organization works at many different geographic levels, both locally and nationally.

Locally, they have pressured officials to build a bicycle path in the Côte-des-Neiges district of Montréal; they have lobbied against public transportation fare increases in Montréal; they have participated in the creation of Montréal's Sustainable Development Plan and in consultations for building a Québec-wide sustainable development plan. At the national level, Équiterre was part of the Rio+10's Canadian Consultative Committee and took part in pressure tactics to push the Canadian government into ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. Équiterre is also part of a number of virtual civil society networks worldwide and participates in international conferences as well as special projects such as the *Building Local and Global Democracy* conference initiated by the Carold Institute.

UNIQUE ASPECTS OF ÉQUITERRE'S APPROACH

Looking to move beyond merely reacting to social issues, the founders of Équiterre decided to focus on providing solutions to problems rather than the problems themselves. Consequently, the organization has chosen a constructive attitude to situations that run counter to its principles, viewing them as opportunities to provide alternatives. The organization therefore works, first and foremost, towards designing and developing concrete alternatives.

While it shares the same vision as many other NGOs, Équiterre's approach is different. For example, unlike Greenpeace, which runs campaigns on GMOs, the loss of biodiversity, climate change, etc., Équiterre proposes examples of sustainable development in many sectors of activity. In fact, the names of its programs say it all: Sustainable Transportation, Energy Efficiency, Ecological Agriculture and Fair Trade.

For Équiterre, being committed to the concept of sustainable development means that social and economic concerns are emphasized as much as environ-

mental concerns in its actions. This kind of holistic vision, matched by concrete action, is rarely found in other groups. Moreover, the evaluation and understanding of global economic and environmental problems and the implementation of action strategies in the community in response are also quite uncommon, although not unique, in Canada.

Today, the anti- or alter-globalization movements see Équiterre as their natural ally. Its constructive approach of promoting solutions is attractive to many activists. They spontaneously adopt Équiterre's message because it can easily be used to mobilize today's youth. For instance, it is much easier and more inspiring to provide alternatives to international trade through fair trade instead of having to explain the fine details of the WTO and FTAA accords. Équiterre's endorsement of radical values and reforms made it a trailblazer for the "Seattle generation".

However, unlike many other groups, this does not prevent Équiterre from believing that anti-treaty movements and governments should establish relationships to work toward the common good in order to avoid sterile confrontation. The organization therefore works toward building such links between the two sides. For example, Équiterre was one of the organizers of the first Fair Trade Fair and Sustainable Trade Symposium in Cancun in September 2003 just a few steps away from the site of the official WTO negotiations. Ministers from several States attended the Symposium and supported the initiatives proposed. However, within the WTO meeting, they were often unable to reach a balance between the trade and human development objectives of their respective countries.

ACTIONS

DEVELOPMENT OF PROGRAMS, PROJECTS AND CAMPAIGNS

Each program, project and campaign to raise awareness initiated by Équiterre is developed in conjunction with an area of human activity that presents issues crucial to the future of our planet. Currently, Équiterre is conducting two awareness campaigns that are actualized through its four programs. The first deals with climate change and is reinforced through the Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Transportation programs. Équiterre's participation in the establishment and coordination of the Centre québécois d'actions sur les changements climatiques is a step in this direction. The second campaign focuses on responsible consumption and encompasses the activities of the Fair Trade and Ecological Agriculture programs.

Équiterre's campaigns, programs and projects are designed to work together. For instance, increasing public awareness of the importance of fair trade is reinforced by the Ecological Agriculture program's community farming projects (described

in the next section) which constitute a kind of “North-to-North” trade solidarity. Its *One Step at a Time* campaign, launched in April 2004, is an example of this integrative approach. The campaign aims to encourage citizens to adopt environmentally and socially responsible behaviour in their choices of food, transportation and home energy use. It sets forth twelve simple actions that anyone can easily integrate into their day-to-day activities to support ecological agriculture, fair trade, sustainable transportation and energy efficiency.

Every initiative includes three components: educational and informative, geared toward reaching and mobilizing individuals to action; concrete action, based on innovative examples; and promotional mechanisms to spread the message through major media outlets so that it becomes part of public discourse. The following paragraphs describe each of Équiterre’s programs.

ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

Équiterre chose to focus on agriculture and food issues because of their universality. The philosophy behind the Ecological Agriculture program is that the choice of what we eat is a political act. The organization wants ecological agriculture to take on greater importance in rural Québec and for it to be recognized as being essential to food security, the well-being of the rural environment and human health. Through its projects and campaigns, the program raises public awareness of local organic products and facilitates their distribution, informs various groups of the issues pertaining to the prevailing food supply system, and rebuilds connections between people living in cities and farmers. This last point is very important given that city-dwellers are often unaware of the difficulties faced by those involved in agriculture.

Équiterre’s main project in the scope of the Ecological Agriculture program has been to set up and coordinate a province-wide alternative marketing network for organic agri-food products, known as community-supported agriculture (CSA). The Québec network of CSA projects enables organic farmers to sell their produce, through the advance purchase of shares directly, to people living in the area who want to show their solidarity with the agricultural community. In less than 10 years, the network has increased its membership from 7 to 97 farms which supply food to approximately 20,000 people.

Over the last few years, CSA projects targeting a larger consumer base than individual households have taken root. It is in this vein that Équiterre launched the Organic Daycare pilot project in November 2002, which pairs daycare centres with the network’s organic farms in order to reduce small children’s exposure to pesticides in food. In addition to ensuring that young children have access to healthy, locally grown produce, the project teaches them, their parents and educators of the importance of a healthy diet and how their food is grown. With vis-

its to local organic farms, it also serves to let city kids connect with the countryside and to learn where their food comes from. Only two years after the project's launch, 20 daycare centres receive their food directly from one of the network's farms.

Équiterre also organizes awareness and informational activities on the predominant agri-food system and the risks it poses to local and global food security. Équiterre ran the *Moi, je mange bio!* (I eat organic!) campaign promoting local organic agriculture in 2002 and 2003.

FAIR TRADE PROGRAM

The Fair Trade program was developed so that people could use their purchasing power as a way of opposing the inequalities of the international trade system. Since 1996, several campaigns to raise people's awareness to the situation of small producers in the South and to the unfairness of the conventional trade exchange system have been organized in Québec and in other Canadian provinces. Taking consumer products such as coffee, chocolate, tea and handicrafts as an example, Équiterre examines the trade routes they take, from plantations in the South to retail stores in the North. The ugly underbelly of the international economic system and its impacts on developing countries are clearly exposed to people living in the minority world. They are then encouraged to contribute to the development of fair trade practices that will enable citizens of the majority world to reclaim their dignity and self-sufficiency and to build sustainable and democratic communities.

The organization uses various promotional tools to encourage consumers to purchase fair trade products and to ask for them from retail businesses, thus obliging importers, suppliers, distributors and retailers to follow fair trade practices, institutions to align their purchasing policies with fair trade principles, the media to promote fair trade, its product and issues, and policy makers to adopt rules and regulations to make commercial exchanges more just.

Simultaneously, Équiterre works with producers, distributors, certification agencies, etc., to develop the network of fair trade practitioners. It is in this respect that Équiterre is involved in developing the organizational structures of the coffee-growing cooperatives that are members of the Federación Zoque in Chiapas, Mexico. In addition, Équiterre works with other organizations to acquire deepen and share knowledge on how to develop fair trade. Recently, the organization completed an extensive research project that looked at the fair trade situation in Europe and included visits to organizations and businesses in the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Spain.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY PROGRAM

Équiterre developed its Energy Efficiency Program with the aim of reducing environmental impacts caused by the excessive energy use that characterizes North American lifestyles. The program was designed to raise awareness of the impact of our habits, mainly with respect to residential heating, on the climate, air quality and ecosystems. With its commitment to social equity, through its services Équiterre helps people who have difficulties in paying their monthly heating bills. Équiterre believes that energy efficiency must be at the core of any successful sustainable development strategy.

Équiterre has established a program in which some of its representatives, accredited by the Agence de l'efficacité énergétique du Québec, visit people's homes to evaluate and improve their energy use habits and lower their expenses.

Équiterre also focuses on the impacts of provincial policies regarding energy production and consumption. It was involved in the movement that forced the government to abandon its plans to build a natural gas-fired thermal generating plant in Suroît. The movement placed the issue of energy use firmly in the forefront of public debates and pushed the government to adopt programs to develop wind-powered energy plants and other efficient energy-use operations.

Équiterre has also been very active in campaigns to pressure the Canadian government to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. The organization intensified its activities in this area through helping to found and coordinate the Centre québécois d'actions sur les changements climatiques.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM

Through its Sustainable Transportation Program, Équiterre aims to make the public aware of the environmental impact of their transportation habits, the quality of their environment and the richness of the social network of urban and suburban areas. The goal is to help people change their transportation routines by reducing the single-passenger use of cars in order to become less car-dependent. To that end, Équiterre has produced a kit entitled *Transportation Cocktail Toolkit*, available online, that provides ideas to help people lead a more car-free lifestyle. The program also encourages people to pressure elected officials about these concerns and about the need to develop infrastructures that support ecological transport.

Équiterre strives to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of behavioural changes related to transportation. In order to meet this objective, it identifies policies and accompanying implementation strategies for decision-makers to adopt. It also takes part in civic and democratic exchanges to promote alternatives to achieve a more car-free lifestyle. Furthermore, Équiterre closely monitors the

federal government's policy plans to ensure they are aligned with the Kyoto Protocol's objectives. Since its inception, Équiterre has been actively involved in coalitions supporting the use of public transportation and securing its accessibility and budgets for its development.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Confronted by increasingly alarming social and environmental crises, many people choose to turn inward. What can one person do to help fight climate change, which, according to many scientists and international institutions, is the most serious environmental problem humanity has ever faced? How can we overcome the inequalities between the world's peoples? While most Canadians live in relative comfort with enough food and adequate shelter, the images of destitute children, women and men bombarding us through the media should revolt us. But often, people's reaction is to turn away or just not to think about it. The problems are too great, too overwhelming.

Nevertheless, Équiterre's experience shows us that many citizens have had enough of merely being guilty spectators: they want to act. They want to know what to do and where to start. Équiterre has found that the solutions it puts forward are well received by people regardless of their age, gender and vocation. The organization presents constructive ways of acting. Actions taken will turn an insurmountable problem into one that can be solved. In addition, the feeling of having the power to change things will provide people with positive reinforcement to continue their activities.

Once a critical mass of citizens become socially or politically active, more profound and community-wide changes will follow. If each individual changes her energy consumption and transportation habits to reduce her greenhouse gas emissions, then governments and corporations will have to act accordingly. It will therefore become politically impossible for a crown corporation to start up a polluting project to produce electricity using natural gas, for example. What at first seem like minor and quite benign actions can become effective instruments for mobilizing citizens to make major changes.

At the same time, there is a certain cynicism regarding sustainable development and responsible consumption. Some ask how we can overcome the selfishness that is a part of human nature and develop in a sustainable manner; others think that individuals and corporations may take a few small steps to ease their conscience or to boost their public image, but will never make the hard choices that are necessary. It is clear that the road to sustainable development will be plagued by falsehoods and broken promises. Some will twist the concept and its popularity and politicians and CEOs will not always do what they have promised. That

is why it is so essential for groups such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International to continue their crucial roles of raising the alarm and demanding change. Équiterre takes its place beside these organizations that constantly remind us of these problems. Without them, Équiterre's work would be meaningless.

Of course, the road to sustainable development will be difficult, but Équiterre's members believe it is the right one. Trying to change the world one step at a time (collectively or individually) is the only option for those of us who live in a democratic and non-violent society.