

Two years of oikos history as remembered by Georg Birkner

A few weeks ago, I met Frédéric de Terwangne and Nicolas Ferrand, the team working at the oikos International office in St. Gallen during this academic year. Like every new team, they have their own plans on the future of oikos. But they were the first team to decide that the past of oikos needed to be written down. I was asked to give a short summary of the key moments of the two years in which Alexander Barkawi and me, together with so many others, started what was to become oikos International. Giving a summary of that time on a few pages is simply impossible. Too many moments and too many people have been important in this "history". I therefore apologize that I will not even try start to name the people, organizations and companies that were involved in the first two years of oikos International, except for the two or three that were most important for me, personally.

My own, private oikos history started in summer 1996, when I met a student from the University of St. Gallen called Michael Müller during summer holidays in Italy. I was studying architecture at the ETH in Zurich at that time, and Michael was the president of a St. Gallen student initiative called oikos. Having different backgrounds but similar interests, we met quite often in the months to come, spending many an hour discussing political and economic issues. I was to make my diploma in autumn 1997 and so one day Michael would ask me if I had already made plans for the time after my studies. Well, I had not made any plans. And so, Michael would arrange a meeting with Alexander Barkawi and me in Zurich.

Alexander Barkawi was the successor of Michael as President of oikos St. Gallen and led this small and very successful organization through its ten-year anniversary. Since 1987 a group of enthusiasts had worked on a local level to integrate "green thinking" into the curriculum of their university. They had already achieved some dramatic results and an excellent reputation far beyond the walls of their own university. While most people involved were quite satisfied with the situation as it was, Alexander had a vision that went far beyond the status quo. In the first ten years of its existence, oikos St. Gallen had changed education at St. Gallen University. Now it seemed to be time to have oikos groups at faculties for Economics and Management everywhere! The new vision was an international student organization for "Sustainable Economics and Management" that would promote the integration of ecological and social issues into research and teaching at universities worldwide.

In general, visions are not being welcomed very enthusiastically, when first being formulated. In fact, it took Alex many months of negotiations to convince all parties involved that his task was worth the risk. When support for internationalization was finally strong enough within oikos St. Gallen, Alex needed a few more things: a few years time, some money, an office and a teammate.

On occasion of our meeting in Zurich, I was given a first insight into the existing organization and into what Alex was intending to achieve in the two years to come. And although we would meet for some more times, I think it was already during this meeting, that both of us had decided that we would do the job together. For me, the task was extremely fascinating. I had the opportunity to build up something new, to learn a tremendous amount of things, to do something "really useful" in my life, while having nothing to lose. A little later I was invited to the ten-year anniversary conference of oikos St. Gallen, where I could experience the high professionalism and dynamics of the whole group. Having seen this, and having been caught like so many by Alex's promotion skills, I officially decided to join in, under the condition that I would only start to work for oikos after the first sponsor would be found.

By February 1998, Alex had organized a small room with two desks (but no computers, yet) provided by the University of St. Gallen. Even more important, he had been able to convince the first private enterprise to invest 10'000 Swiss Francs into an organization that was nothing more than an idea at that time. On the 16th of February I had my first day in office, which we would spend by painting the whole place and buying some new carpets.

During the following year, our aim was to build up a number of local student groups at the best universities of Europe that should have the common aim of changing the way students of Economics and Management were being taught. Also, we would try to convince existing groups that shared our visions to join our network. These local teams should then meet to found their own umbrella organization - oikos International.

In the months to come we would visit universities all over Europe and help founding new oikos teams in Prague, Cologne and Vienna. Megha Stockholm was the first group that already existed, with their own history of many years of successful work, to join the oikos family. While these local teams already started to organize events at their universities, we would start to draft the future organizational structure of oikos. The statutes had to be drafted, but also our own job descriptions, tools to help our successors, the first web site, the first edition of the "oikos Manual", PR material, a database and so on. As oikos International did not yet exist, there was no Executive Board nor an Advisory Board by our side. The local team and the Advisory Board of oikos St. Gallen, the teams in Prague, Stockholm, Cologne, later Ljubljana and Warszawa but also many interested students from cities that eventually would not see an oikos group like Rome, Budapest, Rotterdam, Helsinki, Istanbul or Sofia helped us with their ideas, advise and support. The fact that our office was next to the office of AIESEC St. Gallen was also quite important at that time. AIESEC had already solved many of the problems we were still to encounter - and the people at AIESEC were always very open when it came to sharing their knowledge with us.

In December 1998 the first five local teams would come together in St. Gallen to officially found oikos International as their umbrella organization. On this occasion they gave oikos International its own structure, statutes, budget, voting processes, Executive Board, President, Advisory Board and meeting schedule. But, most important, it was following this conference, that members of all the local teams and students from all over Europe would write a "Student Agenda for Research and Teaching". We saw the founding conference of oikos International as the starting point to achieve the goal of full integration of sustainability issues into mainstream curricula of management and economics. The participants defined important sustainability objectives, strategies and actors of change within the subjects "Innovation and Entrepreneurship", "Accounting and Controlling", "Human Resources", "Marketing", "Public Finance" and "International Trade". They discussed major arguments why the chosen objectives are important, why the selected strategies are realistic, why the specified actors of change are influential, and thus, why they should seek to integrate these issues into teaching and research on a worldwide scale. After the necessary structural decisions, the discussion about HOW to achieve our goals was finally launched!

On occasion of the annual meeting in Prague in November 1999, the job as Executive Director was going to my first successor, Robert Chlebik. Alexander Barkawi would stay for another six months in office to ensure the transition to the next ol team and the next President, Alexander Ott. Since then, I have had the opportunity to see oikos International grow and get stronger year after year as a member of the Advisory Board of oikos International. Six years ago, the task of building up an international student organization for sustainable economics and management almost from scratch, seemed like a rather crazy task. And there were many difficult moments in the past few years in which oikos only survived thanks to tremendous efforts of many people. But thanks to the enthusiasm of students all over the world and thanks to all the team members that have worked in the oikos office in St. Gallen since 1997, today, oikos International is a vibrant organization of about 20 local teams on five continents. To me, this is still a little miracle, and I am very grateful that I was given the opportunity to play my small part in achieving it.

At this moment, oikos teams worldwide are working on the task of fully integrating sustainability issues into research and teaching of their faculties. Since 1998, hundreds of students all over the world have organized speeches, workshops, simulation games, lectures, conferences, panel discussions, and innumerable other events to come closer to our vision. All of them have lived up to the oikos claim to "be informed, get involved" and "make a difference". And the first generation

of "new" managers is already out there! But there's still a very long way to go until sustainability issues are fully integrated into research and teaching at universities. When we started this whole endeavor a few years ago, all we did was putting an empty book on the table and writing "oikos International" on the first page. Since then, an ever growing number of authors has written their own oikos chapter. I'm looking forward to reading some of their stories in this first issue of the "oikos history" and in many more issues to follow!

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