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50 Years

# Connecting for common goals

Exploring IIED's role in ten sustainable  
development movements



**Steve Bass**

## About the author

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## Preface by Dr Andrew Norton

“Let us at least be bold enough to hope and, where we can, begin to act...”

*Progress for a Small Planet by Barbara Ward (1979)*

As we mark our fiftieth year, it is my pleasure to introduce this reflection on IIED's contributions to sustainable development. Steve Bass has captured so many of the ways in which this small but unique think tank has stimulated and supported a rich range of intellectual and social movements.

When I took over from my brilliant predecessor, Camilla Toulmin, in 2015, the world was on the cusp of two landmark agreements for sustainable development. In September, the Sustainable Development Goals finally moved development towards a global framing, superseding the tired narrative of global North 'delivering' solutions to global South. The 17 interlinked goals also represented the full range of issues we must improve on for a just and sustainable future — taking on board inequality, healthy ecosystems and democratic governance, as well as the human wellbeing concerns embodied in the Millennium Development Goals. In December, the first global framework for climate action was agreed: the Paris Agreement on Climate Change ushered in a new era of hope.

Arguably these promising moments arose from sustainable development movements that evolved over decades, involving a host of inspiring individuals and organisations. IIED's contributions have been achieved through partnership with many diverse organisations — the vast majority representing communities and organisations in the global South. In the seven years that I have had the privilege of leading this unique organisation, I have seen significant work across many fields, including:

**Climate justice.** IIED's focus on assisting the countries and communities most at risk from the climate crisis is seen in our ongoing support for the Least Developed Countries' Group at international climate negotiations, as well as in our collaborative, imaginative and effective approaches to help ensure that communities at the frontline of the climate crisis receive the resources and support they need to build resilience.

**Biodiversity loss.** A long-time champion of the vital role Indigenous Peoples and local communities play in protecting biodiversity, IIED has taken numerous approaches to promoting Indigenous and local knowledge and safeguarding community rights, from applying legal tools to preserving biocultural heritage. As the world prepares to agree a new ten-year global biodiversity framework, this message remains critical.

**Urban resilience.** Working with some of our longest-standing partners, IIED is exploring a broad range of issues, from housing justice to the effects of forced displacement. Since 2020, our urban focus has included an equitable recovery from the pandemic: informal settlements in the global South bore the brunt of the impact but have little access to vaccines and investment.

**Sustainable, inclusive and just markets.** IIED continues to make the case for a green economy, inclusive energy provision, and mobilising tools to help indebted poor countries to access the resources needed to tackle the triple crisis of climate, nature loss and debt — as well as recover from the global pandemic.

Across all these areas we emphasise locally led action, seeking new ways to help communities — as well as local government and business actors — to develop their own agendas for action through financial and other support that respects their rights and agency.

With IIED's strategy for 2019–2024, we had shifted gear to address the urgency of a range of global challenges, emphasising the connections between rising inequality and the crises of climate change, nature loss, broken markets, and unsustainable urbanisation. Having already

recognised inequality as a critical crosscutting theme, we were able to react to the pandemic swiftly, adapting our activities and supporting disrupted partner organisations. And while there have been notable successes for sustainable development since 2015, progress remains far short of where we need it to be. Countries' cumulative commitments to tackle the climate crisis fall way short of what is needed; inequality is growing at a dramatic rate; after decades of headway, hunger is rising and global food security is declining; and we are struggling to put in place frameworks which can protect the natural world as well as defend the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Surveying the world in 2022, the building blocks for a new kind of society, politics and economy are still not fully in place.

*Connecting for common goals* shows IIED has been there at key moments when the world started to grasp the seriousness of its challenges, and why we will be again. Our bottom-up approach to knowledge and skill in connecting the right people at the right time are as necessary as ever, and applicable to a changing world. Even as I write, we are assessing how current geopolitical challenges will impact the full range of aspirations represented by the SDGs, and the global to

local partnerships that will be needed to tackle the crises of rising inequality, nature loss and climate change. In recent years, powerful social justice movements have influenced IIED's increasing recognition that tackling inequality will require deploying a range of tools, placing a spotlight on power relations, and addressing how intersecting inequalities — based on identity, race or other — impede social and climate justice.

I recommend this paper to anyone wishing to learn more about IIED or the evolution of sustainable development. And when I hand over to my successor later this year, I am confident IIED will continue to contribute to a great range of sustainable development movements, including some we don't yet know.



**Dr Andrew Norton**  
Director, IIED

May 2022



## Introduction: a 50-year reflection

As part of [IIED's 50th birthday celebrations](#), IIED's staff and [partners](#) are looking back at half a century of debate and action on sustainable development and looking forward to what lies ahead. As part of this process, a group of IIED 'friends', current and former staff and trustees, and close partners have contributed their thoughts to this reflection. Fifty years of global action is a much bigger time span and geography than we usually have reflected on through, for example, our regular project reviews and [five-year IIED evaluations](#). A time span of 50 years over which knowledge, actors and spaces for reform have all changed. Indeed, the energies and narratives, the processes and instruments of sustainable development have been diverse and dynamic. It has not been a simple linear process of designing and implementing a blueprint.

As a relatively small think tank, we have found our niche in support of a number of 'movements' that have shifted debate, expectations, and action on sustainable development over 50 years. In drawing attention to these movements, we acknowledge partners' roles and wider debates — rather than making too many claims of IIED directly achieving success. We also turn down the usual focus on international milestone moments in the sustainable development timeline — not because they are unimportant, but because much attention has already been given to them, which can crowd out other major influences.

This short reflection on movements is one attempt at retracing IIED's history while still connecting it to key 'moments'. It is not a comprehensive history of sustainable development, nor simply a list of IIED's 'greatest hits'. But we do attempt to illustrate how we contributed, identifying eight key roles of IIED, principally as a connector of environment to development, local to global, people to science to policy: essential connections that have led to progress for people and planet.

The paper is primarily based on key informant interviews with past and present [IIED staff](#), [trustees](#) and close partners, supplemented by discussion through IIED's LinkedIn alumni group 'IIED ReUnited'. Key facts were drawn from a review of [IIED's annual reports](#) over decades, IIED evaluation material, and the wider sustainable development literature.

Both the environment and the development sectors are sometimes rightly accused of avoiding rigorous self-examination. To avoid such pitfalls, IIED has invested significantly in monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. We are determined to continue in-depth learning in this way. But for the moment, this reflection is simply a birthday piece for IIED — and we hope a confidence-inspiring call for others.





# PART 1

# Vital movements for sustainable development

Before getting into the stories of ten sustainable development movements, we offer a little context — half a century of the entire global sustainable development endeavour seen through an IIED lens.

**Table 1 (see page 8) summarises how the ideas behind sustainable development have matured over 50 years**, innovating ways to achieve its radical vision of integrating economic prosperity, social equity and environmental sustainability. As we will see, the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment was pivotal. Governments soon responded to its vision by writing countless formal (if under-resourced) national plans. Unprecedented global scientific cooperation has clearly and starkly mapped out the pathways of unsustainable development and increased the sense of urgency, especially around climate change. Yet it has often been community groups, local organisations and businesses that have shown how to make progress on the ground.

Table 1 also indicates key moments in the evolution of sustainable development. On the one hand, it shows how many moments are linked to intergovernmental machinery — global events, assessments and formal agreements. These mechanisms have become clearer and stronger, notably the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the climate agreements. On the other hand, the table indicates that 'black swan' events — such as famines, finance system crises and pandemics — have also driven change, forcing us to reconsider our current ways of working.

**Table 2 (see page 9) highlights ten sustainable development 'movements' in which IIED engaged.**

Few are formal movements, that is, with formal members, a defined mission and a name. Instead, they are broad strands of work where key people, ideas and energies have come together to pursue a common aim. They include, on the one hand, the long top-down endeavour marked by intergovernmental processes, from the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment to the recent SDGs and Paris climate goals. But they also include bottom-up movements born from local people's agency and ability to control local resources for environmental and social benefit. The movements evolve as new scientific findings are made, new voices are heard, new public concerns come to be expressed in policy and market arenas, and learning is shared through dialogue. They become more urgent in response to events such as financial and natural disasters. They tend to be circumscribed by the opportunities that arise (notably UN and governmental processes), but they also evolve as diverse movements come together, often linked by IIED.

We explore each of these movements below. Each represents a stream or river of activity, bringing together rivulets from different places and traditions which, combined, have formed a powerful flood of ideas and innovation. To an extent, our categorisation of ten movements is a little arbitrary as the boundaries overlap significantly. Of course, movements evolve, and new ones emerge. In Part 2, we draw some overall reflections on the movements and IIED's role in supporting, shaping, channelling and sometimes leading them.

Table 1. Evolution of sustainable development: a 50-year timeline

1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
<b>A 50-year evolution of sustainable development across the world: key stages reached</b>					
<p><b>The vision emerges</b></p> <p>First global environment and development conference held, which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognised developing country environmental interests are also development interests</li> <li>▪ Defined environment and development problems worldwide</li> <li>▪ Spawned environment ministries worldwide</li> </ul>	<p><b>The idea matures</b></p> <p>Government leaders become engaged</p> <p>Much research on related issues globally</p> <p>The concept developed.</p> <p>Participatory approaches begin</p> <p>Limited by structural adjustment, debt crisis</p>	<p><b>Government responses</b></p> <p>National strategies and Local Agenda 21</p> <p>But tend to focus on environment</p> <p>Not yet informed by early innovations in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sustainable livelihoods</li> <li>▪ Community activism</li> <li>▪ Business responses</li> </ul>	<p><b>Agency beyond government</b></p> <p>Governments prioritise poverty (MDGs) and climate not sustainable development</p> <p>Climate change adaptation with LDC development high profile</p> <p>Decentralised efforts show the value of local control, rights, resources</p> <p>Sector standards emerge</p>	<p><b>Firm targets and evolving new markets</b></p> <p>Science confirms tipping points are looming</p> <p>SDGs and Paris/1.5°C finally offer clear goals</p> <p>Investors demand green, move away from brown</p> <p>Leave no-one behind in an unequal world</p>	<p><b>Political change — reform for a divided world</b></p> <p>COVID exposes multiple system vulnerabilities to climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, debt</p> <p>Youth/public demand social and environmental justice</p> <p>Work on financial and economic reform</p>
<b>Sustainable development 'moments' — key dates over 50 years. Note: IIED was involved in almost all of these moments, those with major IIED inputs are highlighted</b>					
<p>Stockholm Conference on Human Environment 1972</p> <p>UNEP formed</p> <p>'Limits to Growth' 1972</p> <p>Small is beautiful 1973</p> <p>Habitat 1976</p> <p>Chipko India 1973</p> <p>Greenbelt Kenya 1977</p>	<p>World Conservation Strategy introduces sustainable development 1980</p> <p>Law of the Sea 1982</p> <p>Brundtland 'Our Common Future' 1987 defines sustainable development</p> <p>Grameen Bank Bangladesh 1983</p> <p>African famines 1984</p> <p>First joint commodity/sustainability agreement ITTO established 1988</p> <p>IPCC established 1988</p>	<p>Rio Earth Summit 1992</p> <p>Agenda 21 sustainable development principles</p> <p>(W)BCSD launched 1992</p> <p>Conventions on BD (1993), Climate (1994), Desertification (1996)</p> <p>Kyoto Protocol (1997)</p> <p>Slum/Shack Dwellers International forms 1996</p> <p>Sustainable livelihoods framework adopted by major dev players 1999</p>	<p>Millennium Declaration and MDGs 2000</p> <p>World Sustainable Development Summit 2002</p> <p>Millennium Eco Assessment 2005</p> <p>Stern Review 2006</p> <p>Finance collapse 2008</p> <p>Planetary boundaries 2009</p>	<p>Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity 2010</p> <p>Rio+20 and SDGs 2012</p> <p>Addis Finance Agreement 2015</p> <p>Paris Agreement 2015</p> <p>Habitat III New Urban Agenda 2016</p> <p>Donut economics 2017</p> <p>LDCs 2050 Climate Change Vision 2019</p> <p>LIFE-AR Partnership Compact, 2019 (COP25)</p>	<p>Thimphu Ambition Summit, 2020 (first LDC led)</p> <p>Climate Adaptation Summit 2021</p> <p>Glasgow Declaration 2021</p> <p>Stockholm+50: solidarity for Only One Earth?</p> <p>Pandemic 2020–present, including resurgence of populism and nationalism; 'Zoom world': increase in online interactions</p>



# Global agreements on sustainable development and climate: ensuring equity and effectiveness

## Summary

To start, we need to look at the wider context: the 50-year evolution of global agreements on sustainable development. This is a 'meta-movement' and the one most often reported on — the long and largely intergovernmental endeavour from Stockholm 1972 to the recent SDGs and Paris goals. It has been the common ground for many who seek agreements on global public goods in environment, climate and development. But it is also the arena in which more specific related movements are born, tested, become mainstream or die out.

IIED quickly established a reputation for supporting evidence-based and balanced inputs to successive global conferences and resulting agreements. IIED helped clarify the linked problems, set an integrated agenda, point to solutions that work in diverse contexts (especially in developing countries), and provide a vision for the way forward. It did so by getting the right people to the table, especially those traditionally marginalised from global agreements, such as in focused support for the least developed countries (LDCs).

## The story

Many have traced the beginnings of sustainable development to the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. This is where IIED's history began, and IIED has stayed with the intergovernmental processes ever since. To what could have become a succession of rich-world dialogues on the environment, driven by industrialised countries' then contemporary interests in issues such as acid rain and pesticides, Barbara Ward, IIED's founder, made a different case. The Conference would have to focus on the much broader human and development dimensions, include developing countries and invite others alongside governments. This was a Copernican leap in vision. Ward, already internationally well connected, had been called to support the Stockholm Conference but insisted that the two-thirds majority of the world that was poor had a very strong interest in how the environment is used. Before Stockholm, Ward had

“IIED helped stop these UN meetings on sustainable development being about governments speaking just to governments.”

David Runnalls, IIED's first staff member

worked on the 1971 Founex Report, the first international paper to identify key environment-development objectives and relationships,

which contributed to bridging the differences that separated developed and developing countries in Stockholm. In the years that followed, Ward used her contacts to work behind the scenes: she persuaded the Pope not to oppose the world population conference; she held pre-meetings with top thinkers before further UN environment conferences to influence the conference agendas, and she subsequently briefed the press, enabling them to ask tough questions of the negotiation process. Above all, Ward asserted that we all have a 'duty to hope'. IIED has usually presented an optimistic view of what empowered groups can do and, while extending Ward's call for a social justice approach in how the environment is managed, has been careful to avoid victim and crisis narratives.



IIED's further contributions to the movement over 50 years include:

**Influencing the agenda for global conferences.** This formed much of IIED's early work, not only for Stockholm in 1972 but for the World Conservation Strategy and the Brundtland Commission in the 1980s and the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. As successive intergovernmental meetings became larger and more complex over the years, IIED was often less of a player in the main event and more of a catalyst, offering side events that served as a marketplace for ideas — such as Fair Ideas at Rio+20 — and for coalition-forming — such as actively supporting the LDC caucus. But IIED has also often been privileged to have high-level access and was able to make constructive links between these new sources of innovation and the main event.

**Synthesising evidence and ideas** to inform conference outcomes. IIED generates evidence that is balanced and non-partisan, big-picture but also focused on priorities, and of global relevance but with the latest information from developing countries. IIED has been able to clarify the problem and the potential solution, set an agenda and offer a strong vision: sustainable development. It has done so by, for example:

- Supporting the 1972 UN conference with a book instead of endless conference papers (*Only One Earth* has remained in print for the past 50 years)
- Shaping the 1974 World Food Conference and its declaration on the right to be free from hunger
- For the 1976 HABITAT conference, emphasising not only the problems of poor urban people but also their potential to lead sustainable solutions

- For the 1987 Brundtland Commission, IIED was commissioned to write much of its *Our Common Future* text, showing how sustainable development action was possible
- Devising decision-centred communication frameworks around which to synthesise findings and ideas drawn from numerous partners — Fair Ideas at Rio+20 in 2012, and
- For the 2015 Paris climate conference, supporting LDCs to make the case for the 1.5 degree target.

**Keeping up the momentum.** In the initial years after Stockholm, progress slowed down — too much hope was placed on governments, and many were paralysed by the comprehensive nature of the sustainable development vision. David Runnalls and Richard Sandbrook, in shaping the early IIED, saw the importance of supporting the nascent United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); it had significant support from developing countries, partly because it was based in Kenya. Later, IIED identified the promise of the 1980 World Conservation Strategy and found ways in which it could be implemented in developing countries. IIED has also provided continuity through narrative: the Stockholm Declaration and particularly the Brundtland Report text included strong traces of IIED (in the language, terms, principles and ideas), many of which have become mainstreamed in subsequent agreements: we can trace the IIED 'DNA' through multiple threads of argument and analysis over the last 50 years. And this has not slowed down: IIED played a central role in shaping the narrative of the UK's COP26 presidency, the Glasgow Imperative.

**Balanced treatment of tricky issues likely to impact negotiations.** This has become a significant contribution of IIED, especially in the fraught arena of responding to climate change. IIED picked up on the importance of working on international climate finance and adaptation in developing countries (and has run the international conferences on Community-based Adaptation to Climate Change for the last 15 years). IIED recently led on exploring the imperative of loss, damage and compensation, drawing on strong evidence of climate impacts from the global South. Where relations have been difficult, IIED has played a critical country-bridging role, notably in the successful negotiations for the Paris Agreement. While the Make Poverty History campaign that successfully targeted the 2005 Gleneagles G7 summit was considered a high point for UK development NGOs, it rejected climate action as an aim. IIED organised the Up in Smoke campaign to make explicit links with development NGOs, many of which have now mainstreamed climate justice. IIED also introduced the 'Development & Climate Days' side events at the annual climate COPs to attract development people to engage early on with what some say is 'just another environmental issue'.

In other global agreement tracks, IIED has:

- Included urban issues in *Our Common Future* — despite initial lack of interest within the Brundtland Commission
- Helped to shape the narrative and direction of the Desertification Convention — given that the majority of countries facing desertification were LDCs/low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)
- Worked on the 1992 Rio Forest Principles — fending off a premature global forest convention that would have weakened the BD, CC, and Desertification conventions, and
- Strengthened links between biodiversity and indigenous groups by promoting the idea of biocultural heritage — embedding indigenous knowledge and control in policy and practice — which is now core to the Global Biodiversity Framework.

**Collaborative research networks with developing countries** — to generate the evidence in-country, make the case, show 'what works' and bring some key (and often unusual) players to the negotiations. This has meant not only engaging with LMIC research organisations but engaging stakeholders on the ground in the research:

- IIED's Human Settlements work was set up with LMIC players from the beginning. Its research networks with academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) across the world have produced new, quality evidence grounded in local people's realities. They have also accelerated consensus by holding pre-conferences to 'rehearse' the negotiations that would soon follow, for example, in Vancouver before Habitat I.
- IIED's climate change work has focused on the LDC Group in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), designed to influence global negotiations by providing a strong collective voice, and has supported collaborative research such as an influential review of the effectiveness of adaptation responses.
- All other IIED groups also have deep networks which are not primarily designed for global dialogues but have been mobilised for them and strengthened by them, including for biodiversity conservation (the Poverty and Conservation Learning Group), forests (the Forest Governance Learning Group), land, water, energy and food.
- For the 2002 Johannesburg summit, the first World Summit on Sustainable Development, IIED brought together The Ring, a global network of 'think-and-do' tanks, notably those based in the global South.

- During and after the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development — or Rio+20 — key players in the Ring also contributed to the LDC Independent Expert Group (IEG), formed to shape the SDG process. Between 2013–17, the credibility of their collaboratively-produced evidence, and the quality of their compelling co-constructed ideas, exerted a strong influence on some national delegations, many bilateral donors, and the negotiations.
- Finally, the SDGs present a clear picture of sustainable development as a universal and global agenda, not just for aid recipient countries. Development NGOs and many aid agencies had wanted a new round of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but IIED and the IEG's case for the universal SDG agenda helped change minds.

**Helping LDC/SIDS negotiators.** IIED has supported groups of nations in generating evidence, case-making and negotiations.

- Early climate work focused on legal support to the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Later, IIED catalysed the LDC group's joint work on climate — advising high-level officials in this group of climate-vulnerable countries. Set up in 2001, the LDC Group aims to help strengthen the LDC caucus negotiating position in climate talks, and IIED still provides technical climate and legal advice. IIED's support has helped to shift the LDCs from being seen as victims of climate change to heroes — by following the climate science, by holding high ambition, by making their own case and commitment clear, and by punching hard above their weight — with the moral authority of being low emitters and with great solidarity. Small countries do not have the number of delegates needed even to follow the negotiations, and staff change all the time. IIED has multiplied their eyes and ears and provided continuity from conference to conference. This helped LDCs make a huge difference to the Paris outcome and the 1.5 degree target, although IIED's contribution was necessarily almost invisible.
- IIED supported the creation of the 1983 International Tropical Timber Agreement — the first commodity agreement that includes sustainable development. IIED provided evidence of the sustainability of both forest management in producer countries and trade with consumer countries, and hosted critical meetings of parties to air the case and build relationships prior to negotiation. It then helped shape the agenda and research for the new International Tropical Timber Organisation.

**Promoting the idea of the sustainable development triad.** By the time of the 1992 Rio conference, it had become clear that sustainable development would not be driven by governments alone and intergovernmental

processes needed to respond. Policies were not enough — investment, production and consumption had to change wholesale, but little would change without people's understanding, societal demand and business confidence. IIED director Richard Sandbrook missed no opportunity to promote the simple idea of a sustainable development triad — government, business and civil society — as being as significant a foundation as the three interlocking circles of environmental, social and economic objectives. This concept infused IIED's work in shaping and implementing global agreements. Two innovations stand out:

- Engaging the private sector in global agreements: IIED ghost-wrote much of the book *Changing Course*, the founding text for the (World) Business Council for Sustainable Development, launched at Rio. This led to much work on the paper and mining industries (below).
- Encouraging the global federation of slum/ neighbourhood groups in Slum/Shack Dwellers International and bringing their leaders directly into UN discussions in New York, and notably the 2005 Commission on Sustainable Development.

**Communicating global agreements on sustainable development.** IIED realised that potentially ground-breaking agreements could dissipate into legalese and never see the light of day — unless there was popular and media awareness, with practical information to help countries and actors understand their local relevance and plan their responses. IIED set up the publishing house Earthscan to provide books, briefings and training to journalists, especially (but not only) in developing countries. For years, it was the biggest publisher in this field (and for years, too, it struggled with the challenge of helping bookshops and libraries to categorise all the subjects under the all-embracing sustainable development agenda). IIED co-produced popular readers' guides to the Brundtland Report and the Rio conventions. IIED has more recently collaborated on a guide to the Paris Agreement, now a core text in many courses on climate change. Ever since Richard Sandbrook first scribbled the three overlapping circles — economy, environment and society — on a piece of paper to illustrate the integrating vision of sustainable development, IIED has aimed to explain it in as simple and compelling a way as possible.

During the 1990s, IIED increasingly realised that communications need to be strategic, not just focused on 'end-of-pipe' publication. This led to a more focused investment in communications. Alongside books, the trend was for journals and magazines and, of course, websites. Over the last twenty years, options for developing better creative content have expanded, as have opportunities to share this with different target audiences around the world. IIED's focus on writing for the time-poor and sharing complex evidence in accessible formats was helped by the move from print to digital outputs. IIED's website successfully made the

journey from a simple brochure platform to a vibrant, ever-changing hub of knowledge and debate. IIED's growing reach through social media, with so many possibilities for interactive exchange and dialogue, moves IIED into a future where communicating is not just about sharing information but also about mobilising movements.

## Where are we now?

Today we can identify two movements focused on global agreements: sustainable development and climate justice. These fluctuate in their prominence and promise, but IIED and its partners have a 'duty to hope' for each, and a continuing role in bridging them:

## Movement 1: equitable global agreements focusing on sustainable development

The SDGs and Paris Agreement give us universal, comprehensive, equitable, transformative and clear objectives that balance environment and development. While they reflect low-income country (LIC) positions and needs, they have also achieved a high profile and elicited action in all kinds of countries. Unlike the MDGs, which were focused on poverty and perhaps too strongly linked to the siloed 'aid' agenda, in the SDGs we have a basis for common action towards sustainable development. Many of the principles and norms that the SDGs embody have derived from other movements that IIED has been involved with (below). IIED has played a continuing role in this long and continuous process of international — and increasingly multi-stakeholder — dialogue, learning, visioning and planning. Indeed, many see IIED as providing the essential continuity and connection over the decades.

## Movement 2: global climate justice

While most climate change work across the world was focused on mitigation and was very technical, IIED introduced a strong social/power angle from the beginning. IIED was an early mover in recognising the significance of adaptation to climate change at a time when for many scientists and NGOs, accepting the need for adaptation was an admission of defeat. With the notion of loss and damage now embedded in the Paris Agreement and limiting global heating to 1.5 degrees being accepted as a just target for all countries, what had been a technical climate change agenda is now firmly one of climate justice.

The challenge now is to reform policies and access to climate finance and markets to deliver that justice.

**“The entire LDC Group benefited from IIED’s real-time support in the complex climate change negotiations. This support was grounded in science and informed by principles and positions that guide the most vulnerable to deal with climate change...”**

Giza Gaspar Martins,  
Chair of the LDC Group (2015), Angola

But if the global agreement movement still endures after 50 years and has sometimes elusive success, it is perhaps because other movements have contributed new people, energies and ideas. We touch on these below.

## Movement 3: participatory appraisal, learning and action

### Summary

From the mid-1980s, development NGOs, academics, and some open-minded donors kicked off what became a worldwide movement of experimentation in comprehensive, participatory field-based assessments. To start with, the idea was to make the local environmental, social and economic complexities of development much clearer, and give voice to local knowledge. Soon after, it was to ensure that marginalised groups' perspectives and aspirations for development were better understood, and their solutions were no longer crowded out by external planners. It also drew together a range of practical techniques and tools that enabled participation to be authentic and productive. The rich findings from what came to be known as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) had technical implications that were in sharp contrast to the external expert-led analyses that had been the norm. IIED nurtured a network of 'resource centres' for PLA globally, especially in the global South. These also revealed the strong political implications of what the participatory processes of PLA and their findings revealed. Over the years, PLA has come to change the assessment norm so that participatory approaches are now standard practice in most sectors and countries — and not only at the level of analysis but also in dialogue and engagement throughout planning and implementation.

## The story

As the notion of sustainable development took hold, NGOs wanted to ensure that it would draw on local capabilities and serve local needs — and would not usurp or replace them. Some donors, too, wanted to ensure that their support suited local contexts and real needs and had enduring impact. IIED was able to help. Barbara Ward's concern for social justice and voice and evidence from developing countries infused IIED's approach to change: that it must reflect local realities and needs. Since then, IIED's work has always privileged local knowledge and tried to present it in ways that are accessible to decision makers. Where others have focused on local problems and constraints to achieving often external development agendas, IIED has emphasised local visions and solutions as much as a deep analysis of local problems — pointing to the agency of poor countries and groups as potential sources of solutions.

PLA is a suite of methodologies developed and tested by many partners in both the global North and South from the 1980s onwards and widely communicated to development organisations, many of which have since embedded them. One of the earliest approaches was Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), a multi-dimensional method spearheaded by IIED's sustainable agriculture team and the Institute of Development Studies. Still expert-led, this paved the way for the more overtly inclusive PLA with urban equivalents — where local people are facilitated as systems analysts and organise themselves to act on their analysis. No longer was participation a 'rapid' assessment task; it was about embedding community engagement throughout the development process.

“Where RRA notes began simply as ‘notes from the field’, PLA Notes evolved to become a polished and much-cited international journal.”

Nicole Kenton, series editor

facilitated the RRA (subsequently PLA) Network and published the journal PLA Notes to share innovation experience and co-create guidance, with very wide reach among development organisations.

PLA's confirmation of the value of participation throughout the policy/project cycle fed into the routine decision-making of many governments and international organisations. IIED helped development players in many countries link with relevant global and national participation movements, including a flourishing network of practitioners in francophone Africa. IIED continued to innovate, establishing learning and leadership groups (LLGs) and learning

journeys. LLGs have been facilitated in-country for fields as diverse as mining, environmental mainstreaming, poverty and conservation and forest governance. They have helped diverse stakeholders learn from each other and then — having found common ground and broken down some of the silo walls that keep them apart — begin to co-lead change. IIED's climate change work continues to be rooted in this thinking: those who have signed up to the [Principles of Locally-led Adaptation](#) engage in an agreed process, attending between one and three meetings per year and reflecting on and sharing their learning, for example, via blogs. The Devolved Climate Finance (DCF) Alliance of governments and NGOs is built around learning between countries on devolving climate finance to local government level for inclusive climate adaptation. The LDC Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR) has a community of practice for learning about developing whole of society delivery mechanisms at scale (see below).

## Where are we now?

- Participatory approaches are now a legal or procedural requirement in many governments' and almost all development organisations' work, both at the field level and in policy.
- There are now higher public expectations for participation: no government, NGO or even business can get away with making significant plans if it proceeds without participation.
- Participatory approaches have led to key marginalised actors being recognised and listened to — first being engaged in the research process and increasingly in decisions, implementation and review.

## Movement 4: planetary science processes for sustainable development

### Summary

Science, in so many forms, both old and new, can rightly claim to have driven sustainable development. Planetary and sustainability science initiatives have proven how the environment and development are linked, have developed interdisciplinary methods to handle those links, have sometimes embraced the holistic approaches that characterise much traditional knowledge, and have gained increasing policy influence. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provided not only the evidence for climate agreement and action but also, through its continuing and deepening inquiry, showed how problems were growing over time, thereby seeking to increase political commitment. The Millennium

Ecosystem Assessment (MA) from 2001 to 2005 brought together more than 1,300 experts to assess the consequences of ecosystem change for human wellbeing. The MA revealed our dependence on nature for wellbeing and the right response options that would lead to sustainable development.

IIED staff have contributed to most of these global science processes. Notably, as Coordinating Lead Authors in the IPCC and the MA, IIED staff highlighted community-level issues and options for both policy and practical responses that work for poor groups. IIED colleagues also contributed to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the World Bank's International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) and ongoing assessments such as the UNEP GEO assessments. IIED has helped these processes navigate the room to manoeuvre between global planetary boundaries that will limit development and the development needs and rights of poor people.

## The story

While universities and international science unions have been the active players on the supply side of planetary sciences, the drivers of planetary science on the 'demand side' were UN bodies, multilateral development organisations and sometimes the bilateral aid system. Planetary science grew from one-off global initiatives such as the IPCC and MA. Some of these initiatives have become institutions — the IPCC has a strong momentum and is a principal driver of decisions made at the annual climate COPs. Others played time-bound roles but have not yet been mainstreamed; the MA, for example, came to an end but its connection to the achievement of the MDGs helped pave the way to the broader SDGs.

IIED was able to use its contacts on the demand side to make the case for global assessments to better reflect developing country issues, poor people and their solutions. On the supply side, IIED's network of academic contacts has enriched global science processes with different kinds of scientists and science, notably from developing countries. This proved to be a good complement to the global North, academic, single-issue research (and sometimes rather abstract systems research) that otherwise dominated early global processes. IIED pieced together more compelling evidence of complex livelihood realities, of what poor countries and people can do, and of the value of local knowledge.

IIED's work on human settlements has always had a strong developing country academic basis, and this remains today, with IIED taking a lead in urban climate issues in the IPCC. IIED work has established the centrality of low-income cities and their social and physical infrastructure as critical in climate mitigation and adaptation. It has brought LIC academics and CSOs

into the IPCC process to become established lead and contributing authors.

IIED's work on policy that works for forests and people in LICs and its work on biodiversity and livelihoods meant it had the expertise, connections and evidence to be invited to lead on response options in the MA. IIED became a central player in the governance, research and communications work of the UK's official response to the MA: Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation.

For all these, IIED was not selected for its pure science role but rather for its link to developing country scientists and key informants and for its understanding of practical policy and practice solutions. And perhaps also because IIED's science has always been attractively presented in accessible ways: IIED hired two science writers early on (Gerald Leach and Lloyd Timberlake), and its research has been increasingly complemented with innovative communications aimed at achieving strong engagement.

## Where are we now?

The IPCC has become a key driver of the intergovernmental climate convention, focusing policy, media and public attention on priority issues, shaping dialogue around the Global Goal for Adaptation and the Global Stocktake, validating or critiquing action and garnering public support. But for sustainable development more broadly, science has been less joined up, coordinated and powerful, and has not become mainstream. While the MA fed into the Biodiversity Convention and IPBES processes and into policy understanding of ecosystem services and inspired much follow-up research, including Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA), we still lack a 'sustainability science'. It is economics (see Movement 6, page 17) that has more frequently attempted to fill the gap.

## Movement 5: integrated national policies, laws and plans

### Summary

Most global environment and development agreements call for national strategies to domesticate international commitments. However, many of the resulting national sustainable development strategies and some local plans were put together too hastily — with too much donor input in developing countries, without much debate and learning, with little stakeholder participation or economic literacy, without dealing with prevailing incentive structures and without strong local ownership. As a result, many of these plans were like dreams that rapidly faded away.

In some countries, however, IIED guidance and facilitation have ensured that strategies and plans were developed

through national processes and capabilities like national development planning and budgetary procedures, rather than as imposed external plans. IIED also showed how environment-focused plans (for example, national environmental actions plans (NEAPs), national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs), and nationally determined contributions (NDCs)) would be made stronger by mainstreaming poverty concerns and local people's objectives; and how development-focused plans (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Make Poverty History, etc.) can mainstream the environmental objectives that underpin any sustainable national development. In some cases, the IIED experience of planning with country partners fed back into intergovernmental guidance on how to do such planning, especially for National Strategies for Sustainable Development (NSSDs).

## The story

Many intergovernmental agreements mandate national plans or strategies to implement the agreements in each country: NSSDs for Agenda 21, nationally determined contributions for the UNFCCC, national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and so on. Almost all such agreements have followed the 1972 Stockholm Conference in calling for an integrated approach to planning but have offered too little guidance on how countries can deliver this, or have promoted guidance that is either apolitical or builds on external development assistance models that are not embedded in country systems.

A similar assumption was made by the major initiatives of international environment and development institutions. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), UNEP and WWF developed the World Conservation Strategy in 1980, which called for countries to 'Integrate every stage of the conversation and development processes, from the initial setting of policies to their eventual implementation and operation.' But their entry point for in-country work in the 1980s was almost always environment ministries and issues, with little development input and little financial engagement, and so the underlying governance and economic problems remained unaddressed. National conservation strategies pioneered a path to sustainable development, but that path was soon lost, and the strategies were not embedded in the machinery of government.

The World Bank and bilateral donors claimed there was an integrated approach to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). These documents were the foundation of many aid programmes in the 1990s. While their entry point was ministries of finance and planning, giving them clout, PRSP resulted in major 'trickle-down' economic growth programmes with few environmental or equity safeguards. They missed many opportunities to develop sustainably through better natural resource use by poor groups.

IIED has brought a practical and holistic approach to integration in planning. IIED (actually IIED's precursor, the International Institute for Environmental Affairs) informed the outcome document of the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment: 'States should adopt an *integrated and coordinated approach* to their development planning' (Introduction to Principle 13). IIED's integrated and balanced perspective on environment and development has been helpful ever since — in a world where these topics tend to be siloed and competing. There are too many stories to tell here, but glimpses include:

- Disappointment with the 'all-embracing and bland' outcomes from Rio 92 prompted IIED to shift its attention for a while from the intergovernmental 'circus' to national sustainable development strategies and Local Agenda 21 action plans, with a big emphasis on PLA and dialogue to anchor the term sustainable development in the needs, choices and conditions of people in their local communities.
- IIED's research on policy that works and on in-country environmental mainstreaming LLGs showed how to operationalise integrated approaches by embedding them in national systems rather than creating parallel plans. This research informed both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) and UN guidance on producing National Strategies for Sustainable Development (NSSDs), which IIED drafted.
- IIED's work on Local Agenda 21 and on making decentralisation work in the Sahel with local government and pastoralist organisations also revealed the integrating power of local government organisations to deliver sustainable development, and, moreover, the need for communities to be capable of demanding the right services from local organisations.
- The African Leadership Group on Biodiversity Mainstreaming, facilitated by IIED and the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), involved people from finance and environment ministries, plus NGOs and scientists from the same countries, listening and learning from one another through peer approaches. Many of the members then led on formulating five-year national development plans and NBSAPs.

## Where are we now?

Many NSDSs, NDCs, NBSAPs and 'green economy plans' have been prepared in dozens of countries, along with modest coordinating governance structures. But most remain beset with challenges. Firstly, the acronyms and stacks of international guidance documents for such plans have tended to suggest that a standard approach is needed. Secondly, the lack of good diagnosis, dialogue

and participation limits their ownership and 'bite' — so much of this guidance is ignored. It is too easy for decision makers to assume that their national plan will be implemented in practice. Thirdly, more informal politics, one-off major investments and public attitudes and behaviours matter at least as much as a formal strategy, and a balance is needed. This is why IIED has developed various approaches to political economy: to show what really matters, what might supplement formal planning guidelines, how plans might be adjusted and what institutional changes are needed to implement the plan. It is also why IIED is looking much more closely at the links between sustainable development and public financial management: the plan is one thing, but if it is not firmly embedded in the national budget, it may as well not exist. Our approach is clear: where IIED continues to work with national plans, we want to infuse them with the benefits of the other movements highlighted in this paper.

A great example of this is IIED's work on the LDC Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR). This responds to the LDCs' vision for a climate-resilient future and a call for a radical shake-up of the business-as-usual response to delivering on a plan. IIED's 'business unusual' principles are built into its support for six LDCs — linking governance layers and linking across sectors and actors so the whole of society can adapt to climate change. The aim is that at least 70% of climate finance flows will support local action. IIED's role in this work is very much back-seat and driven by the LDC governments and local actors.

## Movement 6: global business standards for sustainable development

### Summary

Over time, business has shifted from denial of environmental problems to acknowledging and managing its environmental impact, and now recognising its environmental dependence. More latterly, similar approaches have applied to social relations, with most companies now looking beyond their employees and a few aiming to 'do more good' and not simply adopting social safeguards to 'do no bad'. In many countries, businesses exposed to markets that discriminate in favour of sustainability are more progressive than faltering government efforts and call out for clear and stable policy and regulations to support the agenda.

As a trusted independent researcher and convenor, IIED was commissioned to conduct two of the earliest global stock-takes of key business sectors in relation to sustainable development: the paper industry in the 1990s and the mining industry in the early 2000s. The results endure today in the respective industries' principal dialogue initiatives and industry standards. Moreover, they

offered pioneering models for future industry and supply chain assessments, standards, certification and supply chain partnerships.

### The story

The idea of sustainable development has always embraced business, even if the demands that shaped early work came from government and civil society groups. Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the 1972 Stockholm Conference (and former IIED board member), had a business background. One of IIED's founders, Robert Anderson, was an oil industry executive who openly sought answers on his industry's impact on the environment. IIED director Richard Sandbrook, an accountant who understood the financial bottom line, asserted that sustainable development would fail if it were left to governments alone. In advising on agendas and research priorities, he continually promoted the indivisible triad of government, business and civil society (as well as the nexus of economics, environment, and society). So it was that Stephan Schmidheiny, a Swiss businessman, came to IIED to help launch the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD) at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and to write much of the book *Changing Course*. This offered an in-depth analysis of how the business community could contribute to sustainable development sector by sector. As the BCSD (later WBCSD, the World Business Council For Sustainable Development) grew in membership, it became confident enough to look at what one sector had to do to progress sustainable development — the paper industry. Sandbrook again insisted on involving the sustainable development triad, this time to avoid doing this as a mere corporate exercise.

Governments, still the main sustainable development protagonists in the 1990s, had been producing a 'policy inflation' of standards and regulations on the environment. But these policies were not joined up and had the potential to damage both economies and livelihoods. Worried about impending European legislation on paper recycling, Erling Lorentzen, a Brazilian forestry and pulp executive, asked IIED 'which is better, paper from virgin fibre or recycled paper?' At the same time, discussions in WBCSD made it clear that others working at different stages of the paper industry — from forestry, transport and milling to paper manufacture, use and disposal/recycling — were similarly concerned and wanted a credible and independent piece of research. IIED researched all facets of paper production, including impacts and winners and losers in current and proposed practice. The result, IIED's [Sustainable Paper Cycle](#), provided both an easy-to-understand analytical framework and a way to sequence dialogue, helping all sector players to develop clearer lines of responsibility for ensuring that the sector contributes to sustainable development.

WBCSD then asked IIED to undertake an even more extensive research, dialogue and consensus-building exercise looking at mining and minerals. We took the same approach to our work on [Mining, Minerals and Sustainable](#)

Development (MMSD), reporting in 2002. To strengthen the credibility of the research at a time of widespread greenwashing by business and to embed ownership throughout the industry, IIED established an independent assurance group and a balanced funding base (from the triad of government, business and NGOs).

## Where are we now?

The paper cycle's recommendations on forestry standards were influential in encouraging leading companies to take up forest certification and getting the emerging certification bodies to be more inclusive of social issues and smallholder and community forestry. On the one hand, our regional and global dialogue series proved influential in shifting many companies from denial to embracing sustainable development. On the other hand, we also showed that dialogue is a continuing need and not simply a brief stage in planning. This inspired industry members, academics and NGOs to set up a continuing function: The Forests Dialogue, run by Yale University. This is now the prime non-intergovernmental discussion body to work through tough policy issues, step by step.

Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development (MMSD) proved to be such a milestone for the industry that, 20 years on, it is still one of the most-downloaded resources on IIED's website. It led directly to the establishment of the core industry body for sustainable development, the International Council on Mining and Minerals, and its principles directly informed the agenda and approach of the Intergovernmental Forum on Mining. In retrospect, it may have been regrettable that part of the deal for IIED to lead MMSD as an independent was that we would not develop an IIED mining programme to analyse and critique the industry for ten years after the initiative ended. Still, a decade later, we reviewed what had been achieved and highlighted artisanal mining and community relations as a gap that it was legitimate for IIED to fill.

The Sustainable Paper Cycle and MMSD inspired subsequent WBCSD work on, for example, cement and plastics, and IIED remains a go-to resource for business sectors that seek to improve their ambition. For example, a new multistakeholder initiative was launched at COP26 on sustainable water footprints, and to inform it, IIED is assessing the drivers of sustainable business in key sectors: timber, fisheries, agricultural commodities and plastics.

## Movement 7: inclusive green economy

### Summary

While sustainable development demands a balanced approach to economy, society and the environment,

economics remains the primary discipline of planners, business people and development cooperation. Economic data and economic decisions still trump all others in policy and planning. Two linked movements challenge this pattern: the professional field of environmental economics and the policy arena of 'green economy'. The field of environmental economics has developed in ways that have improved the theoretical rigour behind sustainable development. It has enabled fundamental principles to be integrated into the economic, financial and fiscal analysis and decision-making that continue to drive the way the world actually works. IIED was an early leader in developing environmental economics. It remains a professional movement and is quite self-contained, although it is a vital contributor to the second movement: green economy.

The green economy movement seeks to change economic rules and systems — to get the economics right for sustainable development. It embraces large community with interests ranging from small green businesses to full-scale economic reform. IIED was chosen as the host for the Green Economy Coalition (GEC), a geographically diverse alliance involving UN agencies and civil society organisations in particular, and now with hubs in eight countries.

### The story

**Environmental economics:** prevailing development paradigms have principally been set by economists associated with the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for whom the environment, and the assets and needs of poor people, have been marginal. IIED was tough enough to take this on. IIED was a principal academic player in developing the field of environmental economics — David Pearce, Anil Markandya and Ed Barbier were in the vanguard with their 1989 book *Blueprint for a Green Economy* (the title was an Earthscan device — the term 'green economy' is even not mentioned in the book). But here, too, the UK Government can take credit. As part of its response to the Brundtland Commission, the UK Government expressed policy interest in exploring 'the economic underpinnings of the sustainable development idea... and whether it is a feasible, practical concept'. IIED was commissioned to make this early investigation.

*Blueprint for a Green Economy* was a milestone. It showed how the environment and economy interact, that the environment is a critical and largely non-substitutable component of wealth and that environmental factors must be mainstreamed at macro and micro levels in order to change investment and consumption patterns. But it was more than an economic textbook: it helped translate the concept into real-world economic governance — offering practical policy proposals, albeit with an emphasis on the environment rather than poverty reduction. IIED presented *Blueprint* in its 1988/9 annual report as 'economics: a new defence

for the natural world'. (That the book was credited with 'greening Margaret Thatcher' was not an accolade that IIED felt the need to promote, however).

IIED's early leadership in developing the field of environmental economics was in partnership with academics like Pearce of the London Environmental Economics Centre at University College London — and increasingly engaged with developing country economists, too. IIED brought an increasingly practical focus to this work, developing fiscal mechanisms that would help terrestrial ecosystems and their stakeholders, notably payments for environmental services (PES) and marine ecosystems (notably management and financial regimes for 'blue economy' fisheries). Other IIED publications have also become standard texts, such as Silver Bullet or Fools Gold? — an assessment of PES best practice.

This work has been well-networked and, for many years, emphasised capacity development in the global South (see Collaborative Research in the Economics of Environment and Development, or CREED). It is led by IIED's environmental economists and no longer primarily engages with economists. Rather, it has moved closer to finance ministries and seeks to increase investment in the natural resource base for poor people.

**Green economy:** in 2006, IIED participated in an IUCN process reflecting on the future of sustainable development. Its principal conclusion was that current economic paradigms were fundamentally inimical to sustainable development and economic reform was essential. IUCN, UNEP, WWF, IIED and others decided to join forces and leverage the growing 'green economy' political space to establish the Green Economy Coalition. IIED was chosen as the GEC's host because of its research and independent convening strengths.

IIED also advocated for a green economy. In 2009, the Commonwealth Foundation commissioned IIED to canvas leading Commonwealth civil society figures on economic resilience. The report, Road to recovery: mapping a sustainable economy, helped to focus a private session of the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and IIED subsequently addressed Finance Ministers.

IIED developed and organised dialogues and diagnostics to help the GEC deliver its participatory approach in developing countries. GEC has emphasised narrative development, barometers of how far changes have been made, and trackers of GE policies to pull together the community and combine energies and ensure top-down GE ideas interact with 'societal demand' and are progressive. It has followed IIED's strategy of decentralising — GEC's regional and national hubs are all collaborations with local NGOs and universities.

The movement has bold ambitions: 'nothing less than economic reform' in the late 2010s, and now, for a 'new eco-social contract' for the 2020s. At the same time,

it tackles more politically modest but still huge-scale ambitions to increase micro and small enterprises in the 'bioeconomy' — creating sustainable businesses using indigenous biodiversity.

## Where are we now?

Today, the Green Economy Coalition, still hosted by IIED, has evolved into a geographically diverse UN and civil society alliance working to change the economic rules that have been failing the wellbeing of people and nature. It has become the biggest civil society movement for green and fair economies. Its conviction that a green economy is inclusive and aimed at nothing less than economic reform is now widely shared by intergovernmental organisations and CSOs alike. In 2019 the GEC launched the Five Principles of Inclusive Green Economy, which were co-constructed with GEC members, plus the other leading international players active in green economy, green growth, etc.

The GEC has built on this process, facilitating these other initiatives to form the international Partners for Inclusive Green Economy. The result is strong coherence and collaboration amongst forward-thinking partners working on green economy.

However, the world is now in a time of significant economic instability. COVID-19 quickly led to debt distress, economic fragility, and livelihood downturns in LICs, and unpredictability in aid and trade. The 2022 Ukraine crisis has brought great uncertainty into commodity markets and fundamental security issues. The imperative of resilience has grown very strong, and new ways are now being sought to finance an inclusive, green recovery for LDCs: this is where IIED and GEC are focused. An exciting new area of IIED's work is one shaping sovereign debt instruments that work for climate and nature.

**“It's clear that we need to transform the way our economies work, and the way we value the things that we consume. The goal is to break the link between growth and increased resource use and end our throwaway culture.”**

Joyce Msuya, previously Deputy Executive Director for the United Nations Environment Programme and Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations

# Local agency: empowering and financing communities

## Summary

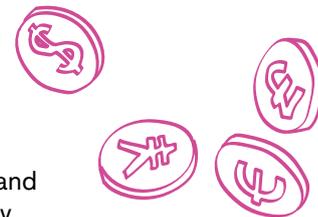
Before we introduce two further movements — on grassroots sustainable urbanisation (8), and on local control of drylands, forests, farms and biodiversity (9) — it is worth exploring their common roots. These lie in concerns for equity, inclusion and empowerment. In 50 years of exploring the relationship between environment and development, IIED consistently promoted fairness and social justice as a bottom line. IIED's research confirms that environmental and economic problems have common root causes — governance failures that mean some people are favoured over others. A few have control over the resources needed for a good life. IIED's research and action have promoted three strands of fairness: recognition, procedure and distribution. It has supported the empowerment and financing of poorer and marginalised groups as the principal 'bottom-up' drivers of sustainable development. This can provide for local needs and also global public goods such as climate and biodiversity protection. IIED has led progress in grassroots sustainable urbanisation, and in empowering the local individuals and communities who can manage drylands, forests, farms and biodiversity to meet local and global needs.

## The story

This is not a simple, linear story. Many have been seeking sustainable ways to improve local agency for sustainable development:

- Key leaders like Jorge Hardoy (who set up IIED's Human Settlements work) and Ana Hardoy in urban contexts, and Akhter Hameed Khan and others in rural contexts, were pioneers in demonstrating what poor groups can do through cooperative action to improve their infrastructure, productivity and livelihoods. But they also showed that these kinds of local successes could only be achieved if local people's rights were recognised, their powers improved, and finance was channelled to them. These leaders helped with innovations such as generating collective community savings as collateral for loans, and organising into neighbourhood groups.
- Slum and squatter citizens have been organising into neighbourhood groups, uniting for self-help, advocacy and establishing better 'deals' with local authorities. Many federated at city and national levels — and were then helped by IIED to internationalise into a global network.

- Academics developed 'sustainable livelihood' frameworks that emphasised what poor people have (their assets and capabilities) and not simply what they don't have (usually measured as lack of financial income); as well as the importance of enabling contexts for those assets and capabilities to be put to sustainable use.
- The aid community's more progressive members, inspired to early action by those mentioned and driven by the need to improve the impact of aid, became key players providing opportunities to test and scale out approaches for poverty reduction through local agency.



IIED was able to connect with and link many of these pioneers. Barbara Ward's call to hear the voices of local groups and to seek their evidence had influenced IIED to approach sustainable development through the lens of social justice — that it must reflect local rights and realities and serve local needs.

By 1990, IIED was promoting four steps to sustainable development. Firstly, empower poor people — secure their rights and participation. Secondly, deploy economic policy to incentivise sustainable development and roll back the protectionism of elites. Thirdly, mobilise stakeholders for the long-term, including for what IIED was then calling 'primary environmental care'. And fourthly, get money to where it matters, usually locally to communities, but also to fund other providers of environmental services. But it is only recently that the political and financial context has been more conducive to aligning money with local sustainable development, and IIED has been able to help with key innovations. This approach to local agency and getting 'money where it matters' has been core to two movements: grassroots sustainable urbanisation; and local control in rural areas.

## Movement 8: grassroots sustainable urbanisation

IIED has facilitated a large epistemic community on sustainable urbanisation involving poor groups: one that combines slum-dwellers, academics, local government officials and activist NGOs that help federations and homeless groups with legal, political and funding support. Some highlights of this work include:

**Knowledge resources** — IIED's high-impact academic journal, *Environment and Urbanisation*, was established in 1982 in Latin America and went global in 1989. It is notable in uniting a very wide community of contributors from the global South, who form a majority of authors — which partly explains its high academic standard with an impact factor of 3.5 citations per article each year. Many landmark publications have established IIED and its partners as leading authorities on environmental and poverty problems of developing country urban areas. For example, *Squatter Citizen: Life in the Urban Third World*, published in 1989, put urban issues firmly at the heart of sustainable development. It demonstrated how the environment matters to poor groups, how they have agency and sustainable solutions if the enabling conditions are right, and how too often they are invisible to those planning initiatives.

**Slum and squatter citizens' federation and funding** — IIED helped Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) to form from national federations of neighbourhood slum groups. This platform has, with IIED's influence, enabled slum and squatter citizens to access UN negotiations and global funds. In 2007, SDI and IIED set up the International Urban Poor Fund to distribute Gates Foundation funding to where it mattered most: community-driven initiatives. By 2010, the fund had: supported a network of 1.1 million savers and 16,000 savings groups; funded the building of over 4,000 homes; secured tenure for 30,000 families; and got over 100 memoranda of understandings agreed with city authorities to work with federations of the urban poor.

## Movement 9: local control of drylands, forests, farms and biodiversity

“Recognising local rights returns power and decision making to the people who count. They have the knowledge and institutions through which to invest in regenerating ecosystems, conserving the soils, pastures, ponds and trees on which their livelihoods depend”

Camilla Toulmin  
former director of IIED

and not the wastelands of popular imagination. IIED research demonstrated the knowledge, organisation and agency of both farmers and pastoralists in managing highly variable, disequilibrium environments. The establishment of a regular drylands-focused journal *Haramata* and the associated issue papers provided an essential bridge between governments, aid agencies, researchers, NGOs working to build more resilient dryland systems with local people. A close sister organisation, Dakar-based IED-Afrique, grew from these roots in local participation and community empowerment. This rural focus mirrored what IIED was doing in poor urban contexts in many ways. As in urban contexts, the fragility of poor people's land tenure was identified as a critical issue:

### Land tenure and rights in the context of investment.

There are growing challenges to local people's land rights, notably land grabs by external investors — foreign investors or local elites — that undermine sustainable development (even if they are sometimes made under the guise of sustainability, for example, for carbon storage). Land tenure is necessarily diverse and dynamic in non-equilibrium ecologies and is often contested. IIED has shown that land titling is not always helpful for marginalised people, and often leads to evictions. Instead, collective tenure may work better, and transferring land administration to the local community level, where customary rights are better understood. IIED's work with partners has also shown that the gender dimension of tenure is critical if solutions are to endure. Today, IIED continues to improve tenure outcomes in specific international arenas — for example, investment treaties and investor-state dispute settlements — and at the national and local level with partners to support the recognition of rights and sustainability in land-use investments.

### Advancing Land-based Investment Governance

(ALIGN) works with governments, civil society, local communities and those who support them to strengthen the governance of land-based investments — from agriculture to infrastructure, extractives and manufacturing. In particular, it ensures investment rules will support the rights and empowerment of local groups.

**Conservation, communities and equity.** From the outset, IIED's in-country engagements revealed concerns that conservation offered little to local people if they were displaced from the lands they knew how to manage for multiple uses — including for biodiversity. By the 1990s, IIED had published a well-researched early challenge to international conservation norms: the collaborative studies in Africa for *Whose Eden?* questioned who was benefitting from conservation and who was best placed to run it. It pointed to mechanisms that increased the value of community-driven conservation for both sustainable local livelihoods and global public goods. This led to a practitioner network, the Poverty and Conservation Learning Group, a new social code for pro-poor conservation, and increasing adoption of a framework developed through IIED's collaborative work on protected

areas which offers practical approaches to 'fairness' in three dimensions: recognition, procedure and distribution.

**Locally-controlled forestry** — IIED worked with partners in the 1990s to put people and livelihoods at the centre of both forest policy and private sector forestry. This has led to a recognition that local forest rights and local enterprise are an essential basis for sustainability. IIED proposed and facilitated two new alliances around locally-controlled forestry in the 2000s: the [Forest Governance Learning Group](#), which works on getting policy focused on local control; and Forest Connect, which supported locally-controlled forest enterprises. This work paved the way for the [Forest and Farm Facility](#), a successful partnership between IIED, IUCN and FAO that IIED continues to co-manage. The Facility strengthens and scales up the powers of local forest and farm organisations, women's groups, enterprises and their federations to improve local incomes and livelihoods.

## Where are we now?

**The idea of participatory urbanisation for sustainable development is becoming established.** There has been a significant shift away from governments demolishing slums and resettling people, towards slum upgrading undertaken by the people who live there, and often in partnership with civic authorities. Urbanisation is now less often seen as a problem — rather, well-managed, participatory and accountable urbanisation processes are seen as potential solutions. Key rural-urban links are also seen as important for driving national economies and invigorating local sources of development. However, all of this is still constrained by the growth-first economic paradigm.

**Recognition is growing that land and resource management must be locally led.** Large-scale land acquisitions and agri-business investments, big forest concessions, monoculture plantations and exclusionary protected areas are rarely socially legitimate and even more rarely environmentally sustainable. Local organisations can run much better systems for sustainable development, but they need national governments to recognise their rights to do so. Recognition of this is influencing international and national investment rules and individual resource investment deals and contracts, which are being re-worked to support local groups' rights and empowerment. [IIED continues to pick its fights and work through its partnerships](#), pursuing resilient livelihoods and landscapes and supporting equity in conservation and biocultural heritage. Place-specific solutions are always needed, based on patient and deliberative processes to integrate diverse perspectives — and expert local facilitators are nearly always key to making this work.

## Movement 10: greening aid

### Summary

The multilateral and bilateral aid system has been an important driver of sustainable development across aid recipient developing countries, even though its fast-changing emphases have sometimes distorted efforts rather than supported them. Aid agencies were bold in funding critical analysis in preparation for major conferences such as Brundtland, Joburg and Rio, and for shaping the three Rio conventions. They launched a particularly influential framework and network on poverty-environment links at the Johannesburg World Sustainable Development Summit. Many of them encouraged and adopted sustainable livelihoods approaches — at least for a time.

Donors have also collaborated well to work out how to integrate environment concerns through the OECD Environet. A particular 'win' was the 1996 [DAC's International Development Goals](#) covering environmental sustainability as well as economic wellbeing and social development; these were powerful in informing the later MDGs. While monitoring the level of aid going to each of the Rio conventions has been a preoccupation, and there has been lots of innovation for climate action, most development assistance is still not aimed at sustainable development. This is partly because its programming is inadequately based on local contexts and needs. And in some agencies, those in charge of policy and planning are still paralysed by the complexities of the agenda.

### The story

Barbara Ward, Maurice Strong and others involved in the Stockholm Conference had strong connections with the World Bank and other multilaterals, and the UK, Sweden, Canada and other bilaterals. They successfully mobilised donors to get developing countries involved in the early succession of global environmental agreements, engaging local experts and leaders in exploring environmental issues and their human and economic connections. And the donors came back to IIED for help, especially with research but also with programming and evaluation, and with developing safeguarding systems such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). Indeed, much of IIED's work over 50 years could not have been achieved without the financial and often political support of donors, and it is clear IIED is deeply indebted to the visionary aid staff who understood IIED's unique roles.

As well as supporting IIED and developing countries' work on sustainable development, the aid system itself has regularly been the subject of IIED's research and capacity development. Some highlights:

**Banking on the biosphere** (1979) was IIED's first critique of external aid and its impacts on the sustainable development prospects of developing countries. It reviewed the practices of nine development banks. This established an independent, evidence-based role for IIED, which evolved to include IIED engaging more closely with aid recipients in ways which aid itself couldn't.

**The Greening of Aid** (1988), produced for IIED's 'Only One Earth' conference, aimed to show how sustainable development can be more than a 'vague, abstract buzzword' for donors only if it matches development aid with what works locally and what fits with local norms. It contrasted aid's 'export of Northern approaches in ambitious schemes' with forms of development that allow people to control their own resources and promoted sustainable livelihoods approaches, participatory and integrated planning and human and institutional development.

**IIED helped the OECD's Environet to develop its positioning for Rio 1992.** IIED's previous work with development assistance had built up enough trust to encourage the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to seek IIED's support in devising the agenda and ways of working for its Environet network — which still thrives today. IIED undertook many of the studies commissioned by Environet and has a cherished observer status. It has recently helped peer learning on environment mainstreaming among donors. In 2018–19, IIED facilitated visits between OECD donors and discussions at the DAC on 'raising all boats' especially to shift from 'do no harm' approaches to 'do more good' ways of improving the links between people and nature.

**The Poverty Environment Partnership (PEP)** was a multi-donor discussion forum that acted as an informal counterpart to Environet (but also included international NGOs). It had a horizon-scanning role and a continuing eye on mainstreaming — of environment, climate, BD or whatever related component seemed important or threatened at the time. Especially in the years between 1995 and 2015, when the concept was on the back burner for many donors, IIED helped with essential case-making work, without which more extensive climate finance may not have been forthcoming. Moreover, IIED was the principal external adviser to the 'daughter of PEP', the multi-donor UNDP-UNEP Poverty Environment Initiative, which, for nearly 15 years, sought to integrate poverty and environment planning and action in many developing countries. The programme embedded regular budget coding, public environment and climate expenditure reviews, and tools such as natural capital accounting in several developing country government systems. IIED led on many of its analyses, tool developments and evaluations.

## Where are we now?

Most aid agencies have shifted from 'do no harm' safeguards on the environment to adding 'do more good' approaches to at least gain environmental 'co-benefits'. But they have embraced neither the extensive transformations needed to achieve sustainable development — in developing countries and in their own systems — nor the need to root their plans in local contexts, needs, aspirations, assets, norms and capabilities. It is still the case that the Environet, PEP, and donor initiatives on sustainable development are primarily run by environment, natural or climate professionals, with little involvement of mainstream and highest-level aid officials — or of those involved in close fields such as health and gender.

While the best donors have always been concerned to expand the ways in which real poverty is assessed and tackled, the economic models that most donors use still work against this. In brief, the theory is still: 'macro-economic policy + good governance = economic growth + trickle-down to the poor'. While aid foot-soldiers know that a better formula is to support the enabling conditions for participatory, bottom-up, mobilising of local people, their assets and the organisations that can support them — which is IIED's view, informed by evidence of what works.

The remaining 'colonial' norms behind aid agency culture and practice are increasingly in question. The current challenge is framed in stark terms of 'decolonising' aid, the international system and the way its staff work. IIED's work shows the importance of building local capacities, local systems, and local norms, and embedding local technical advice as a strong basis for sustainable development. IIED's embedded approach to technical advice — IIED has never had a country office — and its profound commitment to partnerships stand in contrast to almost all external technical assistance.

## Where next?

During the last 50 years, aid has been a hugely significant catalyst for sustainable development thinking and planning in developing countries. But in the next 50 years, its catalytic role needs to shift to the major transformations in governance and investment needed for bottom-up progress. Moreover, it should no longer be burdened with lead roles in funding global public goods (tackling pandemics, mitigating climate impacts, reducing threats to biodiversity). These cannot all be tackled from the 0.7% GNI target dedicated to aid (agreed by UN resolution in 1970 and repeatedly re-endorsed in high-level international development fora) — if they continue to be, this will slash the funds available for the poorest countries and the core development challenges.

# Reflections on ten sustainable development 'movements'



Conversations with colleagues involved with these movements across the years reveal some useful lessons about these movements and a valuable reflection on IIED's principal role:

**Movements are where the energy lies for sustainable development.** The movements link people, give rise to innovation, shape norms and keep up the momentum so that positions genuinely change. They are rooted in all kinds of alliances and personal friendships. They stand in contrast to bureaucratic responses to 'implement sustainable development plans', which are often very limited. Movements are good exercise, too: they generally increase resilience and fitness — which is what we need in this unstable time of financial, health, inequality, resource, climate and geopolitical vulnerabilities.

**The diverse movements outlined above have been strongly influenced by the spirit of the time.** The 1990s moments were supported by post-cold war optimism on multilateralism, when it seemed that global problems of poverty, inequality, and environment could be addressed by collective action — for which sustainable development was perhaps the ultimate aspiration. The 2010s, however, saw increasing polarisation. Positive calls for change emerged from youth movements and social movements on climate change. But these have been up against narratives grounded in nationalism, populism and fake news that resist change. Arguably, in the 2020s, a consensus is elusive at precisely the time when linked environment and development crises are increasingly threatening. The COVID-19 pandemic has polarised some communities and hugely boosted inequality within and between countries, narrowing global horizons and undermining multilateral cooperation.

**Moments do matter.** There are 'black swan' destabilising moments when the linked challenges become painfully clear. These have included the African famines in 1984, the financial crisis in 2008, and the pandemic in 2020 — when crisis gave movements significant opportunities to become visible and make a leap forward. For governmental understanding and commitment to sustainable development, global events, including Stockholm, Brundtland, Rio 92, Johannesburg, and Paris were significant leaps. They are still perhaps the most enduring and well-recorded shared moments on the global journey. They represent a shared experience and a common pathway — one that is becoming more open to many perspectives and powers, even if it is still rooted within the UN machinery and its limitations.

In addition, there are countless moments that are particularly meaningful for countries, localities and sectors. Some of these are recurring moments: the annual cycle of COP meetings, the turning policy cycle of national five-year plans, with their regular opportunities to ratchet up thinking and action. For many developing countries, these have been very significant.

**Yet, despite important movements and moments, many trends have remained negative over 50 years — or worsened.** It is sobering that biodiversity, climate, inequality and some aspects of poverty are getting worse, and they interact to produce great uncertainty. The dominant development paradigm remains neo-liberal economics, and much work on sustainable development is still considered to be on the fringe — and is certainly not reflected in development budgets. It is difficult to imagine what the counterfactual would have been without these diverse movements and without IIED. The confluence of downward trends towards possible tipping points means that crisis language and tactics that challenge the prevailing paradigm now have real validity. IIED finds itself using these more, without abandoning its 50 year 'duty to hope' and search for solutions.

**In reviewing how these movements interact, we suggest there is also a 'meta-movement' that seeks an inclusive, just, and integrated approach to environment and development, and in which IIED is a clear leader.** Barbara Ward understood this space. Half a century ago, in *Only One Earth*, she championed the integration of 'people and planet — integrating environment, human development, and social justice... maintain[ing] the earth as a place suitable for human life not only now, but also for future generations.' From the 1972 Stockholm Conferences, to Brundtland, to Rio, to Paris and Glasgow, practically all agreements have consistently called for integrated approaches to environment and development. This call has been hard to implement. Instead, we have seen: (1) inconsistent practical action on integration, with countries lacking the experience, the institutional mandates and structures, and with weak trust between the players; and (2) constant swings between environment and development promoted by powerful countries and donors, with resulting imbalances that pain people or planet. It is in this space that IIED has played an almost unique role in seeking an inclusive, integrated and balanced approach over five decades. This has involved bridging environment and development knowledge, actors and spaces — as we explore in more detail below.

# PART 2

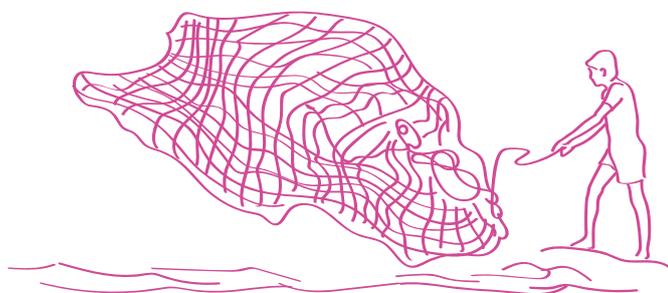
# IIED's contributions to sustainable development over 50 years

IIED has played consistent oversight, foresight and leadership roles in the environment and development 'meta-movement' over a full 50 years. A review of IIED's annual reports over the last four decades reveals a very consistent profiling of IIED's priorities and activities. Four key words recur, year after year, to explain IIED:

- **Bridging** — IIED links local and global, research and policy, the global North and South, social and environmental justice, and the sustainable development triad of government, civil society and business
- **Sharing** — IIED facilitates exchange, learning and partnerships
- **Shaping** — IIED and partners shape agendas, solutions, decisions, futures and new institutions
- **Changing** — IIED promotes ambitions and pathways forward, keeping up the momentum for progress.

This consistency in part reflects IIED's emphasis on five-year strategies and independent reviews. These have enabled learning and continuous improvement, which confers some resilience in the face of frequent flux in donor fashions, and has enabled IIED to forge a strong 'theory of change' for tackling all kinds of sustainable development issues and engaging with diverse movements. As Camilla Toulmin, IIED's director from 2003 to 2015, put it, IIED's theory of change sees us working simultaneously on 'knowledge, actors, and spaces.' In other words:

- a. Collaborative or independent research reveals the local realities of what people want and can do.
- b. Convening local people, businesses and policymakers in multi-stakeholder dialogue on these realities can shape constructive solutions that have societal backing.



- c. Inclusion and empowerment of marginalised groups is not simply a procedural requirement but a principal outcome.
- d. A long-term, partnership-driven approach will build the integrated, resilient institutions that can drive sustainable development.

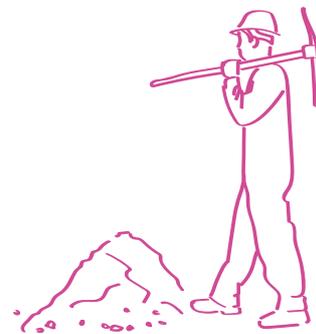
This does not mean that IIED's approach is fixed in stone: we should test its validity by reflecting on Barbara Ward's challenge: is IIED fit 'to react to new challenges, especially in the unfolding, often tragic but profoundly human areas where development and environment confront or complement each other?'

Conversations with IIED colleagues and partners are perhaps more revealing of what IIED has brought to the movements over 50 years, and with what impact. The conversations made it very clear that any contributions and impacts were not those of IIED alone, but very often IIED acting with partners. Nevertheless, Table 3 (on page 26) somewhat boldly attempts to summarise these diverse contributions. Analysing them over 50 years, we find those contributions were made by IIED forging and playing eight core roles that engage with knowledge, actors and spaces. Each of these eight roles is explored a little more below.

**Table 3. IIED contributions to sustainable development movements: key examples and milestone publications**

1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
<b>IIED contributions (note: these are not organised by movement, but by decade)</b>					
<p>Engaging leaders: to ensure development needs are considered alongside environment in Stockholm, Habitat, World Food conferences</p> <p>Convening researchers: from many LICs on linked environment and development issues</p> <p>Urban sustainable development research: IIED and 17 LICs set the tone</p> <p>Comms: 'Only One Earth' was shared inspiration.</p> <p>Earthscan set up as a sustainable development library and media resource</p>	<p>Global agreements: research and writing for Brundtland and ITTO</p> <p>Grassroots agency: participatory method innovation</p> <p>Research: new IIED drylands, forests, agriculture, economics programmes</p> <p>Aid: critiqued OECD aid on env and supported new aid responses</p> <p>Comms: media tour of Sahel and Ethiopia led to public interest, Band Aid</p> <p><i>Environment and Urbanization</i> journal established</p>	<p>Pushing the sustainable development 'triad': Not just government — but government + civil society + business</p> <p>An Urbanizing World: IIED publishes Habitat II</p> <p>Community roles: 'Primary Env Care' and local empowerment — urban, rural, pastoralist</p> <p>Conservation: whose Eden challenged models that exclude livelihoods</p> <p>Business: IIED challenged business to consider sustainable development — and wrote BCSD book</p> <p>Evidence coalition: ring of (LIC) think tanks influenced Rio agenda</p>	<p>Climate change and development: facilitated LDC Group for climate change leadership; Capacity Strengthening in Least Developed Countries for Adaptation to Climate Change (CLACC) for adaptation capacity</p> <p>Urban Poor Fund: getting finance to communities</p> <p>Land grabs: research on biofuels, climate change and land rights sparks big debate</p> <p>Environmental mainstreaming: many initiatives embed environment in aid, government systems</p> <p>Sahel decentralisation: making government processes work for sustainable development</p> <p>Locally controlled forests: facilitating rights and local enterprise as the basis for sustainable development in forests</p>	<p>Inclusive Green Economy: IIED hosts Green Economy Coalition, facilitates many national dialogues</p> <p>Money where it matters: via Urban funds, Forest Farm Facility</p> <p>Assessment: IIED M&amp;E innovations with LICs</p> <p>Learning groups: forest, conservation, climate, mainstreaming, urban and so on.</p> <p>China expansion: Africa preparedness</p> <p>SDGs and Paris: convened LIC think tanks to inform negotiators</p> <p>Climate change loss and damage: the earliest case for compensation</p>	<p>Climate finance: making it work for locally led climate action; principles for local climate change adaptation</p> <p>Debt for nature and climate: advocating a new case and new mechanisms</p> <p>Nature-based solutions: how to tackle BD, climate and poverty together</p> <p>Biocultural heritage: embedding indigenous knowledge and control in policy and practice</p> <p>Business: benchmarking against SDGs, net zero</p> <p>Transform institutions: social movements, intersectionality</p>
<p>Only One Earth</p> <p>Founex Report</p> <p>Banking on the Biosphere</p>	<p>Squatter citizen</p> <p>Blueprint for a green economy</p> <p>Africa in Crisis</p> <p>The greening of aid</p> <p>No timber without trees</p>	<p>Policies for a small planet (for Rio)</p> <p>Sustainable paper cycle</p> <p>PLA Notes</p> <p>Changing Course (BCSD)</p> <p>Policy that works for forests and people</p>	<p>Mining, minerals and sustainable development</p>	<p>Fair Ideas (for Rio+20)</p> <p>Delivering real change (in climate finance)</p>	<p>Beyond COVID-19: grassroots visions of change</p> <p>Principles for locally led adaptation</p> <p>Linking sovereign debt to climate and nature outcomes</p>
<p><b>IIED's added value — eight core roles that IIED has evolved to support sustainable development movements over 50 years:</b></p> <p><b>1) convening and bridging; 2) collaborative research on local realities; 3) Consistent integration and rebalancing of environment and development issues; 4) constructive solutions focus; 5) asserting a rights and equity bottom line; 6) communications and knowledge management; 7) getting 'money where it matters'; 8) long-term institutional support.</b></p>					

# Eight IIED roles in support of sustainable development



**Role 1: convening and bridging.** IIED brings environmental and development movements together to help them exchange and learn, mutually recognise, and align their energies and tactics for achieving sustainable development.

“From the beginning, IIED has been the crucible for environment and development visioning, research and solutions”

David Runnalls

explains why IIED feels unable to claim success for itself. However, IIED's hidden history is punctuated with many moments where its facilitation has proved critical, whether it is having Saleemul Huq and Achala Abeyasinghe deeply embedded in climate negotiations, or the late Duncan Poore brokering the birth of the International Tropical Timber Agreement. One aspect of IIED's convening has sometimes been contentious: it routinely brings the diverse players of the sustainable development 'triad' into the equation. Most notably, IIED has mainstreamed business perspectives and sustainable markets solutions in situations where others often deal only with government and civil society. Initially tough to swallow for some, this has proven essential in moving to real-world solutions.

**Role 2: credible, grounded, and usually collaborative research on local realities.** IIED has a history of rigorous and original research that helps drive progress by taking proven local solutions to influential global forums. It is IIED's approaches to research that make a difference: using pluralistic approaches, deploying deliberative and inquiry-based dialogues, engaging local people and policymakers, linking traditional knowledge with formal science. This brings together essential evidence that highlights the knowledge and perspectives of local stakeholders yet also embraces the need for global public goods. It makes a difference locally (as action research) but is also of global relevance. IIED was one of the first to grow a worldwide research network centred on developing country academics, practitioners, and communities — starting with human settlements, which began with Latin American players, and later in all other programmes.

**Role 3: consistent integration and rebalancing of environment and development issues.** IIED has pursued the sustainable development concept unwaveringly since 1972, even while other paradigms go in and out of fashion. It retained, in its name and its theory of change, the framework of environment **and** development, which

means keeping an eye on what is going on in both the environment field and the development field, clarifying where they are (or are not) working well together, always looking for course corrections, and promoting integrated research and action. The notion of environment and development links is frequently now mainstreamed in agenda setting, debate and some analysis on environment and development initiatives — a big win for IIED. However, this does not mean that IIED sticks to a simple binary approach — today, it is often more relevant to frame the challenge in terms of triple crises of nature, climate and inequality/poverty.

**Role 4: identifying and rolling out constructive solutions.** IIED has tended to stay in the positive solutions space, 'making change happen' rather than focusing on problems. From the beginning, IIED has busted 'crisis' myths, for example 'Africa in crisis' and 'Beyond the woodfuel crisis', by offering evidence of what local agency and resources can do with enlightened support. The livelihoods approach, for example, is about what people have and can do, rather than what they don't have. However, recently environment and development crises have become so significant and so linked that IIED has also been using a crisis and vulnerability framing.

**Role 5: asserting a rights and equity bottom line.** There is another key word that summarises what IIED seeks: fairness. It's often ultimately the equity aspects of sustainable development that IIED treats as the bottom line. Other organisations focus on the most economically efficient outcome, and others still on the optimum outcome in terms of environmental functioning. But IIED recognises that both environmental and economic problems have a common root cause: inequality. Some people are favoured over other people. In practice, IIED may have covered intra-generational equity more effectively than inter-generational equity — but inequality is now recognised as the primary challenge in addressing post-COVID recovery, and IIED's fitness in exploring it will help find future solutions.

**Role 6: facilitating ways to get 'money where it matters'.** IIED recognises three types of investors. Not solely private investors — although they are certainly key for investment at scale in many private and some public goods. Neither solely governments

“Equity is how Barbara Ward would have judged IIED today, and she would be pleased”

David Runnalls

— although they are clearly the principal investors in enabling conditions, incentivising sustainable and equitable approaches. But also, don't forget communities and individuals — they are often the main investors in their land, labour and other assets for private, community and some public goods. It is the latter whose potential really needs mobilising through investment by others.

“These principles — including the focus on increasing resources to the local level, providing patient and predictable funding and investing in local capabilities — are a serious and meaningful response to the LDCs' ask of the international community as outlined in our vision”

Sonam P Wangdi, previous chair of the Least Developed Countries Group

More recently, IIED has strongly campaigned to get 'money where it matters'. Our work is continuing: for example, by promoting finance principles in support of localised climate responses, given that only 10% of [climate finance explicitly seeks to support local climate action](#). To date, more than 70 countries and international organisations have signed up to the principles for locally led adaptation, developed by a partnership of peers, formed under the Global Commission on Adaptation and including IIED and the World Resources Institute.

**Role 7: strategic communications to closely complement research.** Sustainable development is ultimately about culture change. It is about both needs (the goal of getting more) and limits (the need to get less). Many stakeholders are unsure of the implications of this for them — will they be winners or losers? To achieve the required change requires rich processes of exchange, learning and experience. IIED seeks to draw people in and listen, not just to broadcast IIED's view. It targets the 'doers' and not just those who read think tank reports. It aims to shape helpful narratives and interpretations and not just present the facts, making the facts more engaging, useful and easier to act on. When we set up Earthscan, we took on the challenge of presenting to readers hugely diverse and yet under-reported material, and it became the main source of information on sustainable development for many in developing countries.

Since then, IIED's communications have become a richer, more interactive and rapid mix of approaches, embedded across IIED's work, with growing digital content including animations, videos, podcasts and blogs. People want information quickly and in short soundbites — and they want to respond and share actively. The hybrid world of online and

in-person engagement has given IIED further opportunities. [Moving IIED events online](#) in the pandemic increased participation by 300% and extended IIED's reach to more participants in more countries, with more speakers from communities in the global South. Digital technologies mean IIED can tailor information to individuals and invite them to develop the most appropriate kind of relationship with IIED.

**Role 8: supporting authentic, accountable institutions that are deeply embedded in their country, sector or issue context.** IIED's institution-building role has been broad. One notable role has been strengthening the machinery of government that deals with environment, planning and, more latterly, finance. Another is IIED's role in helping local players to build new institutions from scratch, particularly CSOs and think tanks, often facilitating their financial management and research programme development. Examples include the Institute for European Environmental Policy, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) in Bangladesh and IED Afrique.

At the same time, other new institutions were kicked off and nurtured by former IIED staff and partners and were able to draw on IIED's 'DNA' and experience, including India's Centre for Science and Environment, and Canada's International Institute for Sustainable Development. IIED has never taken the route of growing an empire of national IIED offices; this would risk competing with local organisations. Instead, the network grows and thrives: the late Jorge Hardoy, head of IIED-America Latina, when asked if his work had impact, replied that any impact was due largely to being part of a large active network.

To sum up: IIED's diverse roles have helped to achieve the integration that has been called for, ever since Stockholm in 1972. They have supported integrated and interdisciplinary knowledge generation; trust-building and productive cooperation between actors; and all kinds of inclusive and transparent spaces for learning, debate and action.

“I have had a relationship with IIED for over three decades, first a partner based in Bangladesh then as a member of the board and then as member of staff in London for over a decade and finally again as a partner in Bangladesh. I am thus well placed to testify to the deeply ingrained sense of genuine partnership between IIED and all their southern partners over many years”

Professor Saleemul Huq, director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD)

# Brief reflection on IIED as a sustainable development organisation

In the conversations on IIED's contributions and the roles it has played, some reflections were offered on IIED as an organisation, its core characteristics and the challenges ahead.

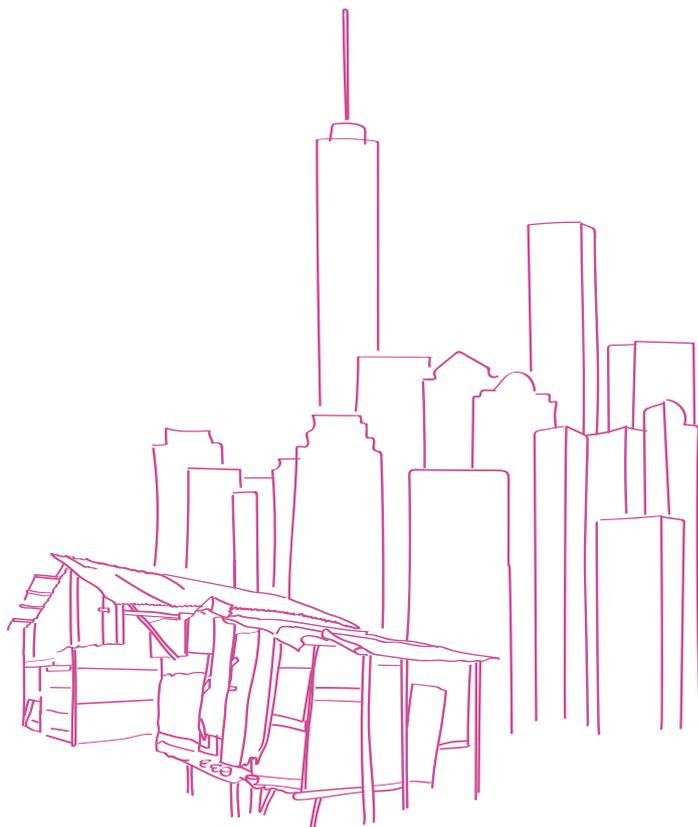
**A supportive research environment.** What kind of an organisation has IIED been for those who work in it? As so many staff have said, IIED creates genuine friendships. IIED's non-transactional, non-hierarchical relationships explain so much mutual learning and innovation. But its lack of formal institutional rules, technical procedures and formal 'positions' on issues frequently surprise others. For example, there are multiple ways of approaching political economy analysis in IIED. An analogy once used by Richard Sandbrook still seems to apply — that IIED is a 'sustainable development hotel' with just enough facilities and a platform for diverse and individual leaders from the global North or South and from many disciplines to shape their own work and networks.

**A strong commitment to partnerships.** All of the roles played by IIED are played with and often for partners. IIED is not a (post-)colonial creation: it has always aimed at universal challenges, not solely those connected to the global North or South, or development assistance. It has always sought local partnerships, in particular, to ensure authentic articulation of sustainable development issues, to ensure progress is embedded and to get money where it matters.

**Managing the growth of IIED.** IIED's 50-year journey has not been one for IIED's leaders and researchers alone. Those who run the finance, human resources, IT, and offices have faced and responded to many challenges: growth in numbers of staff and partners; their management across diverse geopolitical and donor regimes; the increasing stringency (and ever-changing rules) of IIED's funders; some organisational inertia in the face of expanding needs (even IIED falls into 'siloes' ways of working that are not always ideal); and growing expectations to respect diversity and the environment and demonstrate progress with limited budgets. Their representation in IIED's senior management has increasingly been welcomed as essential in shaping IIED's full value.

**Technological choices.** The technology available to IIED has shaped ways of working over 50 years. For example:

- Research used to be more 'text-book dependent' than today's rapid Google capabilities. Although the range of earlier sources may have been more limited, its academic focus may explain good rigour in earlier work.
- Partner liaison has shifted from monthly (by post) to weekly (email) to almost real-time (WhatsApp, Zoom and Teams). This increasing frequency has helped form strong teams with improved understanding and adaptability. The early decision not to set up IIED's own offices in developing countries became a win-win modus operandi, as IIED did not end up competing with local organisations and programmes developed through real collaboration, with all the benefits that brings.
- Travel is less necessary. IIED's earlier work was characterised by long trips to project locations and then moved to shorter city-based trips as more local organisations were doing the field research. Today, online communication platforms like Zoom are transforming research practice and programme management. New tools offer UK-based staff wider access to important conversations and provide more opportunities for collaboration — and all with a smaller carbon footprint.



# Towards new sustainable development movements

The hopes and desires that catapulted the sustainable development idea into prominence 50 years ago are alive and inspiring today's generation. Societal aspirations for achieving rich environmental and social goals are now widespread and growing, even if narrow goals for economic growth remain entrenched in decision making. And there are now plenty of well-proven ways to make the sustainable development idea a reality — many programmes from IIED and partners show how to mobilise local people and their energies, knowledge and resources to meet practical, sustainable development needs.

However, while it is clear what is needed, the geopolitical and economic context is so unstable that long-term goals such as sustainable development are compromised, especially where the goal is not yet embedded in the machinery of government and markets. Keeping up the momentum is an enduring challenge, but an essential task: colleagues believe that IIED's role in catalysing and working with new movements will help with that momentum and shape the resilience and systemic change needed.

“When I look out into the world, I still see a real need for what IIED does. But I also see a fast-changing world where we will be challenged in a way we've never been challenged before. The pace of change will be much, much faster and the scrutiny greater. IIED is not afraid of that change: it's a great opportunity and we have the skills to adapt”

Dr Tara Shine, chair of IIED's board of trustees

While a forward look is properly the job of another paper, we take this opportunity to group together colleagues' initial ideas of where sustainable development movements may evolve:

**Global issues.** It is time to address the global level more, having focused on national, local and sector regimes, for example:

- Legal aspects of improving planetary economic rules — working on fairness and sustainability in trade, debt, investment and similar regimes
- Equity on a global scale — assessing and improving the actions of powerful countries (such as OECD countries) and groups (corporations) that have effects on other countries and groups
- Evidence coalitions — progressive alliances across the global North and South to challenge populist and short-sighted narratives.



**Resilience and restoration.** These new defining notions of sustainable development warrant development with partners:

- Resilience — notably bottom-up approaches that draw on authentic local experiences and capabilities as a complement to the emerging 'resilience science' that draws from ecology and other disciplines. Reviving multilateralism and solidarity for resilience, and improving the agility of local and national institutions to respond flexibly to rapidly changing futures
- Restoration — a new imperative with potentially large finance flows and expectations for achievement. Local organisations should play central roles in the restoration process and resulting uses — a question of restoration by and for whom.

**Societal demand:**

- Working with wider social movements and citizen action where top-down policy enlightenment alone is at best too slow — for example, with youth groups as drivers of societal demand. This is likely to make for messy and much more political moments but will give rise to new leaders
- Supporting 'whole of society' responses, with citizen engagement in exploring futures where people and nature can thrive despite the changing world — an 'eco-social contract'.

The publications the author drew on for this piece are largely available on [pubs.iied.org](https://pubs.iied.org), along with other relevant further reading.

In IIED's fiftieth year, *Connecting for Common Goals* considers the organisation's role across ten key sustainable development movements. Rather than offer an 'official history', this reflection seeks to map and illustrate the organisation's contributions and their contemporary context over half a century. This exercise exemplifies IIED's commitment to monitoring, evaluation and learning: it will aid staff and partners in assessing a long history of debate and action on environment and development, as well as look forward to what lies ahead. Primarily shaped by interviews with past and present IIED staff, trustees and partners, the paper also draws on IIED annual reports and evaluation material, and wider sustainable development literature. *Connecting for Common Goals* proposes that IIED has found a niche within a number of movements that have shifted debate, expectations, and action on sustainable development over 50 years. Author Steve Bass identifies eight key roles played by IIED, principally as a connector of environment to development, local to global, and people to science to policy. These connections are judged to be essential in delivering progress for people and planet, while always acknowledging the leading role our partners and wider debates play in any success.

