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The Ring alliance of policy research organisations

Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development:

A Keystone of the Johannesburg Plan

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'Implementation' is rightly the strong emphasis of the *WSSD Plan of Implementation*. In today's dynamic and uncertain world, however, implementing sustainable development commitments will be very difficult without integral research. The certainties of the past now rarely apply. The uncertain effects of climatic and environmental change, market liberalisation, and increased migration and social mobility, will all radically affect the prospects for sustainable development (SD). This gives rise to many technical research challenges – such as how to get more value out of fewer resources and eliminate harmful side effects. But the fundamental knowledge gaps for 'implementation' tend to be institutional: How to create governance structures and incentives to encourage technological innovation in the first place? How to encourage investment in millions of new jobs each year? How to establish and protect rights to sustainable livelihoods? and How to develop empirical baselines for assessing SD?

Too few people are attempting to answer such basic questions, or if they are, they rarely involve policymakers, investors, producers and consumers in their efforts. SD research cannot be a detached and long-term endeavour. Research institutions need to partner with other stakeholders so that everyone can learn, adapt and innovate.

This need was recognised by the Secretary-General of the WSSD when he asked IIED and the Ring to examine the state of SD research. He was especially interested in how research could be more closely linked with the key initiatives for SD – notably the United Nations in its attempts to improve global governance, the various national policy processes such as National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDSs) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and the drivers of innovation at local levels. IIED and the Ring organised three workshops with the 'users', 'funders', and 'suppliers' of research. The following points summarise the conclusions and recommendations:[1]

1. **The 'social contract' for research for sustainable development is changing – researchers are expected to service action-oriented partnerships**. Research for SD is no longer a detached 'laboratory' affair – researchers are increasingly expected to fully understand user needs, user knowledge, and a variety of driving forces, and to get involved in joint learning processes. *Action research* is used to move towards SD: stakeholders pool their knowledge on specific

KEY CHALLENGES:

- **Sustainable development (SD) requires leadership, innovation, investment and learning. Research is integral to these processes. The WSSD Plan of Implementation calls for extensive research involvement, yet many of the 'big' SD initiatives have made only derisory provisions for research.**
- **In contrast, a few SD initiatives have encouraged effective research partnerships, such as the Climate Change Convention's work with the IPCC. *We propose a comparative review of recent research partnerships – to help design future partnerships.***
- **Global research partnerships are needed to agree vital SD research questions, to encourage diverse ways of answering them, to share information on 'what works', and to link researchers with concerned stakeholders. *We propose a biennial conference on research for SD, under United Nations auspices.***
- **SD research also needs to be driven locally, yet international institutions can too easily dominate, marginalising local capacity, knowledge and needs. *We propose a campaign for research partnerships in and between countries with particular SD challenges – LDCs, countries in transition, and countries recovering after conflict.***

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problems, and together they experiment, review and improve. *Synthesis research* can be as useful as 'cutting edge' work: stakeholders review current practice to identify 'what works' in real conditions. And most effective research for SD tends to be *multi-disciplinary*, since SD integrates social, economic and natural systems. This set of effective approaches is becoming known as 'research partnerships for sustainable development' (RPSDs).[2]

2. **The *WSSD Plan of Implementation* calls for research partnerships in decision-making**.[3] The WSSD confirmed new policy imperatives and targets, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that will require – and should encourage – RPSDs. Many WSSD commitments were adopted without clear guidance on how they could be realised, which itself presents major research challenges. The WSSD established 2015 as a target date – a longer time frame than for earlier UNCED initiatives. This offers considerable scope for action research and learning. The WSSD also opened up the space for new regional institutions to bring stakeholders and researchers together, notably in Africa through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). Moreover, the WSSD called for the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to improve the quality of involvement of the research community as partners, not only in providing better *information*, but also in *decision-making*, so that conclusions reached at CSD sessions are more effective and credible. Clearly, there is an increasing understanding of the considerable rates of return that can accrue from action research on 'public goods'.[4]

3. **Too many of the major SD initiatives are a big step behind – since researchers are only weakly integrated into their work**. A weak emphasis on knowledge generation creates a real risk that the protagonists of the big global and national SD initiatives merely impose external values in local conditions. For example, PRSPs and other SD initiatives of the multilateral agencies may need to be rethought to change the balance of short-term, quick analysis with longer term learning, and the balance of external expertise with supporting local knowledge and research capacities. One good example to learn from is the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which benefits from an effective research partnership: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

4. **SD research is too often dominated by a few privileged researchers – which can promote a standardised or 'globalised' approach to SD knowledge**. This is often a result of the preferences and practices of the funding institutions. Many of the 'elite' researchers are not from the countries concerned, and may be poor at engaging with local stakeholders, or dealing with local values, knowledge traditions, and sources of innovation. Traditional sources of knowledge in developing countries, potentially applicable to SD, are rarely acknowledged (if they are not actively being dissembled). All of this increases the risk that local stakeholders may turn into mere consumers of outsiders' knowledge and technologies. This is especially the case for developing countries. For example, the big SD research opportunities (such as the MDG Task Forces) tend not to work with Southern institutions, but with a few 'elite' individual researchers.

5. **The United Nations system should help to ensure that the right questions are asked about SD, then recognise and support those who can offer answers**. Too much research effort is wasted, often on issues that do not really matter to stakeholders. It is important for stakeholders to agree which research questions are critical for SD, and to encourage various routes to answering them. Although there are global scientific and technology networks, and many *ad hoc* meetings on certain topics, currently there is no global facility to bring together the potential suppliers, users, and other partners to address SD knowledge as a whole. The IIED/Ring meetings suggested the need for a biennial *conference* on SD research priorities between the multilateral agencies and research networks – perhaps linked to the CSD – or at very least the inclusion of research in other SD conferences. In the longer term, this interaction might help a 'bottom-up' global 'federation' of RPSDs to evolve.

6. **Lessons can be learned now from specific RPSDs – and fed into key SD programmes arising from the Johannesburg Plan**. Some global research partnerships have achieved much for SD – such as the IPCC, CGIAR, ICSU, MA, the Ring and others.[5] At the local level, too, national policy learning groups, corporate–community partnerships, and various action research examples could also be compared. Some of these are little known, but have facilitated rich mixes of local researchers, stakeholders and policymakers. To inform post-WSSD initiatives, it would be valuable to conduct a factual review of the different purposes, drivers, and funding mechanisms of existing RPSDs, complemented by information on their governance structures and rules, methods, products, dissemination pathways, and known impacts. This factual survey could usefully be followed by a participatory evaluation of those RPSDs' effectiveness and efficiency, and their credibility and equitability for different stakeholders. How have the partnerships changed assumptions and values? IIED and the Ring intend to conduct such a review, with a view to developing (a) guidance on partnership approaches to research, and (b) RPSD models for future international SD programmes.

7. **A balance of global and local RPSDs is required, with robust links between them**. Many SD issues in today's globalising world necessitate *both* global *and* local research and action. For example, for sustainable jobs to be created, global-level research is needed on the drivers of investment and technology, together with local research on incentives to invest in labour-intensive industry. Effective adaptation to climate

change draws on research on global climate patterns and commodity markets, as well as research on the resilience of local natural resource systems. We have noted the tendency for international research to ignore critical local values, information and capacities. The more successful global-to-local research invests heavily in strongly rooted networks; it enables shared agendas to emerge from the 'bottom'; it removes constraints to between-levels work (see Point 8); and it devises long-term, ambitious research agendas which also deliver short-term benefits for local people.

8. **Local research capacities need to be strengthened if SD research is to be driven locally**. Many of the last decade's SD initiatives failed, at least in part, because of the lack of local research involvement. This can be observed everywhere, but especially in developing countries. Here, SD research capacities tend to be particularly weak, scattered, unacknowledged or underused, and exert only weak influence on policy and investment. Funding and salaries tend to be poorer for long-term SD research than for short-term consultancies (that often serve the particular needs of the donor, or merely repeat old analyses). This is exacerbated by poor access to international sources of SD information, travel funds, peer review and mentoring. Therefore developing country research institutions need better acknowledgement, support, and integration into RPSDs. As one IIED/Ring workshop participant observed: *'Sustainable development today is as great a challenge as the Green Revolution was yesterday; yet Southern research capacity and partnership-building for the new challenge seem to be far lower priorities'.*

9. **IIED and the Ring propose a major campaign to support RPSDs in least developed countries (LDCs), countries in transition, and countries recovering after conflict**. A pilot approach could be useful, testing means to:

   - *Identify, use* and *strengthen local SD research capacities* with outside researchers preferably in support roles only
   - Develop and spread *communication and participation tools* that will enable researchers and other stakeholders to work together more closely (especially enabling the participation of disadvantaged groups in society)
   - Improve *research integration into key SD initiatives* (such as PRSPs, Local Agenda 21s, and sustainable business), as well as *formal decision-making processes* (such as environmental impact assessment), and *SD fora* (such as National Councils for Sustainable Development)
   - Improve understanding of, and help develop local 'road maps' towards, *institutional change for SD* – enabling local institutions to assess the implications of research outputs and to undertake appropriate responses. Research is of little use if you cannot act upon its findings
   - Develop programmes of *participatory learning and action research* with disadvantaged groups, e.g. with poor farmers and landless groups – and thereby keep SD research and policy debate based around the concerns of the poor
   - Improve SD *monitoring and information* concerning local progress and constraints in achieving the MDGs
   - Improve developing country *knowledge contributions to global SD initiatives*, the ability to *negotiate effectively* in international SD agreements and deals, and the capacity to access *financial and technical resources* from these initiatives

This approach might be tried in individual countries, or as support to regional SD initiatives such as Nepad, or as support to country groups – such as land-locked developing countries (LLDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS). Ecosystem-based approaches have also been suggested. A pilot in 5–10 countries might be a practical way forward. IIED and the Ring aim to pursue such ideas with UNDESA and UNDP, and the UN Under-Secretary General and High Representative for LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS. Advice and collaboration would be sought from many donors, research groups and NGOs active in the South, as well as global RPSDs.

To conclude, if the *WSSD Plan of Implementation* is a clear call for action, the message of RPSDs is equally clear: *'if you are involved in action, seek to build in research'.* ●

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1. See www.iied.org for further details, e.g. www.iied.org/wssd/pdf/31_RSPD_Cambridge_Report.pdf
2. The shorthand 'RPSD' is used in a very generic sense. No specific institution or affiliation is implied.
3. See *WSSD Plan of Implementation* paragraphs 106–19 (www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/summit_docs/2309_planfinal.htm)
4. DFID reports that research may have a higher poverty reduction impact than many other expenditures.
5. Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the International Council for Science (ICSU), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), and the Regional and International Networking Group (Ring)

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The **Regional and International Networking Group (Ring)** is a global alliance of research and policy organisations that seeks to promote sustainable development through a programme of collaborative research, dissemination and policy advocacy. It was formed in 1991, and there are now 15 Ring member organisations based in five continents.

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