

SEPTEMBER 2012

OVERVIEW

IIED Partnerships and Communications teams, with all of IIED

Project name:

Fair ideas

Project leaders:

Tom Bigg and Liz Carlile

Time frame:

September 2011–August 2012

Cost:

£335,000

Objective:

To share ideas and information that can help improve policy and practice towards sustainable development. To contribute to discussions at the Rio Summit, bringing together diverse organisations and their expertise.

PROJECT SUMMARY

In the 20 years since the original Rio Earth Summit, what have we learnt about solutions for sustainability, and how has our context changed? IIED asked practitioners, researchers and policymakers these questions at Fair ideas, a two-day international conference before the Rio+20 meeting in June. Over 20 organisations held 37 sessions with 158 speakers for 1,000 attendees. We reached a wider global audience through over 1,500 views of the live web stream, and 150 media mentions in 34 countries. We also published nine papers and a series of blogs to promote key ideas from the event. The conference demonstrated IIED's intellectual leadership and convening capacity, and gives us a platform for follow-up, especially on the Sustainable Development Goals called for in the Rio agreement.

THEORY OF CHANGE

By organising Fair ideas, IIED provided a space for those directly and indirectly involved in the Rio+20 Summit negotiations to share information and ideas on cutting-edge research and policy approaches. A summit is a global marketplace of ideas, and Fair ideas aimed to position IIED

From 'Fair ideas' to mainstream change

At a pre-Rio conference on sustainability solutions, we glimpsed a better future than sluggish international talks.

IIED organised the 'Fair Ideas' conference to look at solutions for sustainable development around the world. Convened ahead of the UN's Rio+20 Summit in June, Fair ideas had 158 speakers addressing 1,000 participants about promising innovations – from glimpses of a green economy to community-designed urban housing, and from social enterprises to policies that shrink inequality.

But we came out of the event understanding that these solutions are not enough. The Rio Summit itself was clouded by widespread weariness and mistrust of international negotiations. Tasked with mapping out 'The Future We Want', countries struggled just to reaffirm goals agreed 20 years ago. As in UN climate conferences and other recent high-level talks, negotiators did not come close to making new, concrete commitments to address poverty, inequity and looming ecological limits.

Multilateralism is losing steam. Yet in a time of global change and ferment – of shifting power axes and multiplying social movements – creativity is bubbling. Fair ideas was just one of more than 3,000 side events at Rio. Similarly, climate meetings that are stalled on a global agreement have become trade fairs where a wide range of actors from different countries exchange information and innovations.

At Fair ideas, we heard that there is an urgent need to begin translating successful innovations from the fringes

and pilots into mainstream policy and practice. Brazil, for instance, is a world leader in schemes to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD), but private investment has lagged, in part because there is no overarching monitoring system to link the different schemes. In Fair ideas seminars on alternative business models, experts called for new finance models that could allow real scale-up.

Another example is federations of the urban poor: despite many inspiring successes in transforming slums, the scale at which these groups operate is still too small for the size of the challenge. Fair ideas helped generate greater recognition of urban issues and synergies with environmental factors (particularly in the context of Brazil), as well as new partnerships that could be a means to address this gap.

Nations who share one planet – and a global economy – must act collectively on many such challenges. Yet stagnant multilateral processes seem incapable of kicking off the systemic changes needed.

A new framework

One possible way through this impasse is a new UN process to develop Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – one of the few specific actions agreed at Rio.

Spearheaded by Colombia with support from Guatemala, Peru and the United Arab Emirates, the SDGs are a set of measurable indicators that would come on-stream in 2015, when most of the

prominently in this arena. Four themes — transforming economic systems, urbanisation, business models, and sustainable development goals — addressed major changes taking place now and over the next decade, where the interests of poor people and countries must be clearly articulated and strategies developed. By investing significantly in the event, IIED and a wider circle of partners showed a commitment to influence and challenge the drivers of change, and provide positive ideas and policy tools that can shape the future.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- Powerful solutions for sustainable development exist, but they must 'move from pilots to platforms,' as one conference participant said. Scaleup is the key challenge today.
- Stagnant multilateral processes are blocking systemic change. Sustainable Development Goals, defined outside global negotiations, could be a tool to highlight failings and reinvigorate leadership.
- With Fair Ideas we were unusually ambitious in taking the lead on a high-profile conference with a broad theme. Though demanding, this effort paid off internally in a more coherent vision and externally in a stronger position for future leadership.

PARTNERS' VIEW

To me, the main messages from the discussions held at Fair ideas were that we don't have more time to discuss concepts; all the scientific information we have shows us that it is time for action.

Mariana Brunelli, PUC-Rio

The formal outcomes of Rio+20 were disappointing. But [after Fair ideas] IIED has the opportunity to help build a strong network advocating renewed political commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice in the run up to — and beyond — 2015. IIED's work highlights how activities outside the 'formal' decision-making process are continuing to make an impact.

Adrian Ely, STEPS

IIED COMMUNICATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS TEAMS

The Communications team works to raise the profile of links between environment and development to improve research uptake, encourage more accurate reporting, influence policy and support good governance and democracy.

The Partnerships team oversees IIED's relations with key institutional funders; builds and supports IIED-wide collaboration with external partners; and promotes effective strategic decisions and planning across the organisation.



Photo: Tom Broadhurst

At our Fair ideas event, IIED and over 20 partners showed a commitment to influence and challenge the drivers of change.

time-bound Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) conclude. Whereas the MDGs focused on reducing poverty, SDGs would, for the first time, frame international collaboration around progress toward sustainability — recognising that the interlinked crises of resource scarcity, inequality and ecosystem volatility cannot be addressed piecemeal.

Colombia has pushed for the SDGs to be based on evidence, not political considerations. IIED is one of the think tanks charged with drafting the goals. For growing small to mid-sized economies like Colombia, a more effective multilateral system is seen as crucial to safeguard further development. And that system must be ready for coming shocks, not locked into structures built for 20th century challenges. The hope is that if meaningful, ambitious SDGs can be articulated externally — not negotiated by the UN — they will powerfully spotlight where governments are falling short. As well as countering complacency, specific goals might trigger more creative and farsighted leadership.

Fair ideas took SDGs as one of its four conference themes, so IIED will be able to inform the SDG process with insights from partners worldwide about how global targets might work. Conference participants particularly emphasised the need to focus on poverty and the role of the private sector. But there were concerns that SDGs will become a long, contentious and distracting debate; going forward, we will keep evaluating whether this path is a productive one.

IIED leadership

For IIED, the SDG process will also be a forum to use new leadership credentials

that we gained by running Fair ideas. In the past, we would have approached a high-profile, broadly themed international conference by teaming up on a planning committee with several other organisations. This time we chose to take the lead.

It was much more demanding than we originally anticipated; one lesson was that for a global gathering of this calibre, we need to start work earlier and buy in more expertise for logistics and publicity. And many participants expressed disappointment with turnout at the event. Though we used livestreaming to expand the Fair ideas audience, we could have done more to fill seminar seats.

Still, efforts paid off — particularly within IIED, in a growing sense of internal coherence and confidence. We aimed to set an engaging agenda, attuned to key changes happening now but also taking in sustainability as a whole. To develop this big picture, experts across IIED's four research groups met for detailed, in-depth discussions — a rare opportunity in our ordinary grant and project cycles.

A similar breadth of vision will be needed for IIED's work on the SDGs. The cross-disciplinary collaboration around Fair ideas thus may help IIED become more visible and influential in international debates about a sustainable future.

The International Institute for Environment and Development's Reflect & act series showcases innovation and lessons learnt in selected projects from across the institute. See www.iied.org for more.