IISDCOMMENTARY

ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:

An interview with Angela Cropper

The following is the record of an interview with Angela Cropper, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (retired). The interview was conducted by David Souter, senior associate, IISD and managing director of *ict* Development Associates, in June 2012.

This interview is one in a series of papers being published by IISD's Global Connectivity team to inform and stimulate discussion and debate on the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Internet and sustainability, surrounding the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 (Rio+20), the UN Internet Governance Forum in Baku in November 2012 and the International Telecommunication Union World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai in December 2012 (WCIT-12).

Angela Cropper recently retired as Deputy Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). She is also a former independent member of the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago.

I'd like to ask you first about your priorities for sustainability today—your own priorities and those of UNEP.

I would say that the first priority is to get the economic model right—to make sure that our economic model is fully integrated with the outcomes that it should yield, not indifferent to whether it delivers the desired social and environmental objectives or works within environmental parameters. I strongly believe we have to reverse the way in which economy leads while social and environmental outcomes follow, and that we should have the economy configured in a way that's better related to generating those outcomes than we have consciously attempted before.

If you recall, that was one of the things that the Brundtland Commission report proposed, but then we went about business as usual after 1992. The world as a whole didn't galvanize itself to make that kind of reversal. So we have seen the lead going in the opposite direction, an increasing divorce between the financial world and the real world of results and benefits, culminating in the experience we've had since 2009. I would say that's the first priority.

The second priority, I think, is to change the culture by which many people approach their future and the concept of development. I think that we are way off the mark if we think that we can actually deliver development as we now envisage it, for an increasing number of people on the same resources. That will require a lot of supporting work in terms of education, which I don't think we have pursued sufficiently or systematically.

The third priority, I would say, is that we should reverse some of the boundaries that we have crossed, where that is possible; and, where it is not, we should try and make sure that from here on we restrain ourselves within the boundaries that are left to us.

Obviously, all of these have to be approached in a very integrative fashion. I don't think that we can any more approach them as three pillars. We really have to do so with an integrated and multifunctional kind of approach.

Has Rio+20 moved us towards those three priorities at all?

I think there is recognition—at least rhetorical—of the need for a more integrative approach. That is a step in the right direction. As you know, the UN proceeds in very incremental steps, so it remains to be seen how it turns out, but that is one way in which it has approached the unification I described, what we call in UNEP a triple helix approach to moving towards the economic, social and environmental objective. That's one way.

The other way, I think, is the recognition of the "green economy," as a cutting edge to have a new approach to economic organization, putting more emphasis on ecological parameters, ecological security and so on. It's not a very strong decision on the green economy, because it's bounded by many of the reservations that countries associated with the concept. But I think that the fact that it has gone through—in terms of countries saying this is one tool for approaching our economic futures, though only one tool—that's another way to getting there.

I think the adoption of the sustainable consumption and production 10-year framework of programs is a third [example of progress], because we've taken 10 years since 2002 to work at that set of programs. UNEP has been at the centre of that. The failure in the CSD19 last year [2011 session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development] was a major blow, so to have that adopted is another step in the right direction, though the commitment is still a voluntary commitment. It isn't clear that it can be anything other than a voluntary commitment at this stage.

I think that the decision to encourage industry to move towards a higher bar for reporting on sustainability is a good measure because it puts pressure on them and elevates their role in achieving sustainability, even though it doesn't make it mandatory, as some of us would have liked. Nevertheless it moves it up the ladder, in the right direction.

The decision to develop the Sustainable Development Goals is another reflection of the realization that we need to treat the social, economic and environmental together, rather than looking at environmental goals vis-à-vis social goals vis-à-vis economic goals, continuing to trade these off one against the other.

Can I take you back to the Brundtland Commission report and the concept of sustainability developed around that time? Since then there have been a lot of major changes in the world: the end of communism, for example; shifts in economic power towards Asia; the growth of the women's movement and other social changes; much greater understanding of climate change; and also the "information revolution." Do you feel that any of these require rethinking of our definitions of sustainability?

Well, I always thought that the definition of the Brundtland Commission was a little too hedged-in, because it put the emphasis on intergenerational equity. Yes, it served to encapsulate the central core, the quintessence of it in that phrase, focusing on the need for us to leave something behind for future generations, but there is also a lot to do with contemporary equity that is relevant to sustainability, that we haven't emphasized enough. (Nor, let me say, have we emphasized enough the generational, except to repeat it in the definition.)

I think that there are certain implications of developments since then. One is that there is greater recognition that everybody has responsibility and should take responsibility. I think the emergence of different stakeholders—you cited women, but we could add more—is another factor that should help us to redefine sustainability away from being an intergovernmental commitment to policies and actions, and more to societal transformation. Developments in ICT can lead us to explore how a more connected world, one that is capable of better communication among these different players, can be configured to make sustainability happen in a way that perhaps 25 years ago was less achievable.

What linkages do you see between ICTs and the Internet, on the one hand, and the green economy approach, which has been important in UNEP as well as at Rio?

First of all, the ability simply to accumulate, to access and to reflect on information on the state of things—be they social, economic or environmental—is foundational. If we didn't have that, we wouldn't be clear about our condition, or the state of anything to which we are working.

The second thing is the communication that it enables among societies and groups and stakeholders—the ability to have dialogue, to consolidate and forge positions. That can only help contribute toward a more unified path towards sustainability.

The third thing would be the harmonization of approaches at the global level, and forging the commitments to that that are so necessary to having us work in the same direction.

Those are the key ways in which ICT developments would support a movement towards sustainability. I think that we are seeing it in many of the frameworks for information and communication that are there within UNEP. We can see their relevance and importance to what we are trying to do.

The ICT sector is trying to understand the relationship between positive and negative environmental impacts of information technology. On the one hand, there is significant potential to make energy production and industrial processes more efficient, and thereby reduce energy use, etc. On the other hand, information technology is one of the fastest growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions and of waste. Do you have a particular view around that—or does UNEP?

Yes. We [at UNEP] have done a survey of electronic waste. We have also been servicing the International Resource Panel of experts, which has been looking at the scarcity of materials, the need for resource efficiency, and the need to decouple economic production from some substances. We've done a report on rare earths, many of which are used in the electronics industry, to alert the world about these issues, propose early measures for conservation, recycling, reuse and so on.

We had hoped that in the Rio+20 outcome document we might have introduced the idea that there are certain metals, for example, used in the ICT industry, where we need to examine how we can make them available to the most imperative things for the global community and ensure that they don't just go to the highest bidder. But that idea didn't get very far, because it is hugely political and runs into the whole issue of national sovereignty over resources. So we thought it was a little premature to actually bring it to the table, but it is an area on which we and the International Resource Panel will continue to work.

I want to ask about dialogue between the sustainable development world and the ICT sector. Is it your impression that people in the ICT sector have much understanding of sustainability issues? Do people in the sustainable development community pay enough attention to the changes that are due to information technologies?

With the former question, I don't know. I'm not close enough to that community to know how well they are connected or reach out, but I would suspect that there is room for improvement there.

I think that the sustainable development community has been looking with interest at how the ICT community can be supportive of its agenda, rather than the other way around. I don't know that I can see immediately how the ICT community would want to have recourse to the sustainability community for its own interests, except concerning scarce resources and so on for its products. But I would say that the sustainable development constituency is very excited about how the ICT potential of today can contribute to sustainability.

What about within the UN system? How much dialogue is there between UNEP and, say, ITU [International Telecommunication Union] and other agencies that are more concerned with the ICT sector?

You know, I don't think there is a lot. I hope there will be more, especially after Rio, which has put more of a spotlight on the science policy interface. I don't think that from UNEP we have a lot of communication with ITU or with WIPO [World Intellectual Property Organization]. We do have more with UNESCO as a natural partner for us in the science world. But it's still not anywhere where I think it should be.

I want to take the opportunity to ask you about the region you are from, the Caribbean. Are the challenges of sustainability any different for small island countries, such as those in the Caribbean, than they are elsewhere?

Well, I think at the core the issues are the same: how we are going to sustain ourselves into the future. But I think there are some issues, in addition to the core ones, that warrant attention.

The first is the limited options that result from small size. You don't have anywhere to retreat, you don't have many options, your land space is limited, your population size is limited—so your options are limited. Whether it is fielding a cricket team or trying to carve out some new kind of activity that might be viable on the scale of small populations, it's the same. Those are structural limitations that have to be considered.

The second set of issues would be those arising from climate change, which has rendered such countries much more vulnerable. And, given the first point I have made, the resources and options and people to depend upon to find solutions are not necessarily there.

The third thing is that investments at any moment in time are very small, disproportionately small in terms of what is required.

Do you see globalization—and I am thinking of both economic and cultural globalization— working to the benefit of small island societies, or to their disbenefit?

I think it's mixed. On the one hand, a more globalized society can bring about more of a unified pathway towards sustainability. But at the same time, cultural diversity is also important. Having the space for cultures that are distinguishable has a value in itself.

Let me say, I think these small populations are already globalized, certainly in the Caribbean. We are hugely connected with the rest of the world, not only historically, but also now in terms of the shared communication that we can make with the rest of the world. I think that that is a benefit. If we were isolated from or unable to participate in that, it would be a disbenefit because we would not be moving along with the rest of the world.

If you look back over 20 years or so at the way the ICT sector has changed in the region, how big a difference has that made to the way people live in the Caribbean or to how government works there?

I don't really think it makes a difference to how governments work. I think what is required to make a difference in how governments work concerns the need to involve and educate their society and so on, and in the Caribbean that is still not the way in which governments work. They feel that their function is something that is up to them alone. Of course, this is a generalization. We haven't done much and advanced much in terms of participation and participatory democracy of the kind that the ICT revolution would permit and would enhance. I think there is huge room for the ICT infrastructure to assist in developing the way in which our governments work, in terms of their responsibility for leadership in the society, for communication in the society, for education of the society and so on.

In his interview for this project, Jim MacNeill talked about two things on which I would like to ask you to comment. The first is that he said that intergenerational equity had been taken much more seriously than issues such as planetary boundaries since the Brundtland Report was published, which was unfortunate. The second was that there had been a failure of global leadership, that governments had not taken seriously the commitments they'd made in Rio 20 years ago. Do you think there is a failure of governance here and, if there is, what would you like to see happen?

If you recall my earlier comment on intergenerational equity and definition, the way in which it was carried forward rhetorically whenever we spoke about sustainability, I suggested then that it was an insufficient definition of sustainability because, although it implied it, it did not emphasize the ecological dimension to equity and to sustainability. So I would agree with him there. And we have proceeded since then on neither intergenerational equity nor ecological sustainability in the way we should have done.

I would agree with him on the second point also: there was a failure of leadership. We came to Rio+20, 20 years later, and realized that what we needed to do here and now was to pick up the pieces from Rio 1992. We had lost two decades because we didn't have a focus, because we didn't have a clear sense of purpose. So I think the political leadership there was very lacking—and I would say not only political leadership, I would say institutional leadership as well. There are things that UNEP might have done in a different way, and many other UN entities as well. We allowed those 20 years to drift, and the challenge here and now is, having recognized that, to ensure that it does not continue into the future. The challenge is how to get hold of this supposedly new political commitment and endorsement of the Rio agenda, the Rio principles, the Rio objectives and so on, and move forward with some sense of urgency. Because the urgency we need is not the urgency we manifested in the last 20 years.

Thank you very much.

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