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IISD REPORT

IISD Partnership Review:
Selected observations

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International Institute for Sustainable Development

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change and energy, and management of natural and social capital, as well as the enabling role of communication technologies in these areas. We report on international negotiations and disseminate knowledge gained through collaborative projects, resulting in more rigorous research, capacity building in developing countries, better networks spanning the North and the South, and better global connections among researchers, practitioners, citizens and policy-makers.

IISD's vision is better living for all—sustainably; its mission is to champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably. IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c)(3) status in the United States. IISD receives core operating support from the Government of Canada, provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations and the private sector.

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Introduction

In the year 2000, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) undertook a mapping exercise to identify its institutional partners. Looking at all the relationships in existence at the time, those involved in the review speculated that the Institute was partnering with nearly 200 organizations around the world, and that almost every activity was undertaken in partnership.

At that time, the review team and IISD's senior management agreed to apply more rigour to our definition of "partnership," and we established four criteria:

- IISD must have undertaken more than one project with the organization.
- The relationship must have been in place for more than two years.
- There must be evidence of real value exchange between the organization and IISD, such as funding, in-kind support, staff or knowledge.
- There must be documentation for the relationship, such as contracts or memoranda of understanding.

Even with that narrower definition, over 80 organizations met the criteria. Since that time, IISD has represented in our corporate materials that we have partnered in various ways with over 200 organizations around the world, reinforcing the view that IISD has an institutional culture of collaborative action.

Ten years after this initial exercise, IISD's Global Connectivity program suggested that it might be worthwhile to reexamine IISD's partnerships practice. The IISD Partnerships Review has consisted of three activities:

- Revisiting the year-2000 definition of what constitutes an IISD partner organization.
- Developing a list of IISD partner organizations.
- Discussing findings, noting changes in IISD's partnerships practice and suggesting possible ways to strengthen it.

The methodology included an email survey of all IISD program staff and associates, phone interviews with selected staff, a review of memoranda of understanding on file, and a review of project accounts to identify repeat donors, collaborators and contracted institutions.

These activities were undertaken between October and December 2010 and were presented to staff and associates for comment in May 2011.

IISD's Partnership Definition

In the business world, the term "partnership" is narrowly construed to describe a business entity in which partners contract with each other to share the profits or losses of the undertaking in which they have all invested. What is useful here are the concepts of commitment (contracts), value exchange (all partners have invested), and sharing of benefits and risks (sharing both profits and losses). These partnerships have binding legal agreements outlining how the risks and benefits will be co-managed.

In the non-profit world, however, the concepts of partners and partnerships have been handled much more loosely. Over the years, IISD has included all institutional collaborators—such as donors, project collaborators, like-minded organizations that we consider "allies," and organizations that host our interns—as its partners, whether or not we are actually working jointly on an initiative. While this provided us with an all-encompassing view of IISD's relationships, it was not particularly useful for helping us improve the management of those relationships.

Over time, it has become clear that not all collaborations are created equal, and that the emphasis is shifting from formal institutional relationships to extensive and productive personal networks of individual staff members and associates. Calling every institution we work with a partner masks important differences in how we work with organizations around the world and, at the same time, overlooks one or two central features of collaboration that we should seek to achieve in all relationships.

> Based on the audit, one of our primary suggestions is that *IISD further refine the definition of what constitutes an IISD partner*. Interviews with staff and a review of the draft list of partners suggest that the original list of characteristics (length of the relationship, variety of projects worked on, value exchange and documentation of the relationship) needs to be both simplified and refined. The concept of reciprocity should be the central defining characteristic: Does a partner think of IISD as one of *their* partners? Is there a sharing of *benefits* (a value exchange beyond providing funds) and a *sharing of risks*?

Types of IISD Collaboration

This review has made clearer that several categories of IISD collaboration might benefit from greater understanding about their value for IISD. In all cases, simple guidelines could be drafted to help corporate management and individual project managers more effectively cultivate institutional partnerships, networks of practitioners, contractors, IISD strategic collaborators ("critical friends"), donors and personal networks.

Networks versus partnerships. As the field of networks and partnerships practice evolves, it would appear that networks have a stronger role in general knowledge-sharing and framing of issues, while partnerships emerge as a key implementation strategy. Therefore, many networks have shifted toward individual-based membership strategies and have adopted community of practice models (alternatively called internal or thematic knowledge networks). Individuals come together to learn from each other, frame issues and meet others working on the issues. At IISD, our longer-standing networks (for example, the Trade Knowledge Network, the Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network and SDPLanNet Asia) are now more focused on knowledge-sharing functions comparable to community

of practice approaches; while our institutional partnerships are focused on implementation of specific projects. Many staff interviewed noted that they tend to establish partnerships with organizations that are very different from IISD, but that bring complementary skills and geographic reach/credibility to projects. Many staff have valued partners' abilities to ground our work in specific contexts to test ideas. Senior project managers and program directors noted that IISD has moved up the chain of influence on key long-term issues, now directly partnering with regional and United Nations agencies as well as with governments. Frequently, IISD is approached directly by these groups for specific advice and research. This leads to a very different partnership practice, focused on more immediate and tangible outputs and outcomes. This is in contrast to how IISD collaborates on less established issues, where our staff network with a much wider variety of organizations and experts to introduce concepts to policy dialogue.

Donor relationships. Our relationships with some donors can be considered partnerships, but with other donors the relationship may be focused primarily on knowledge exchange. Many IISD staff have played substantive and integral roles with United Nations agencies and government institutions through fee-for-service contracts and repeated, small funding agreements. IISD staff essentially can be seen to be *assisting the donor agency in the delivery and implementation of the donor's strategic objectives* (for example, the United Nations Environment Programme, the Government of Switzerland and the Province of Manitoba). This goes far beyond a simple knowledge-exchange function. It affords IISD an unparallelled level of influence and opens all parties to high levels of risk. Similarly, IISD Reporting Services maintains important partnerships with United Nations Convention Secretariats, conducting their duties in a professional manner that has led the Secretariats to allow Reporting Services staff to be accredited as Secretariat staff, with open access to all aspects of meetings. Other donors (such as the International Development Research Centre and the Canadian International Development Agency) are seen as partners to the degree that they are open to collective learning about the ongoing evolution of issue areas and processes in which IISD and the donors participate, but these relationships likely do not meet shared-risk or joint-implementation criteria. The fostering of value exchange in these relationships requires further thought.

Contractual relationships. Not all project collaborators should be considered partners. Sometimes they are simply donors or subcontractors. We may work with these organizations once or even multiple times, but value exchange between IISD and the other organization is largely limited to contractual deliverables. These organizations tend to open themselves to minimal risk through working with us, other than the risks associated with non-performance of duties and the termination of the contract. These organizations are an important part of the overall IISD value chain, but the relationship is not one in which there is a *sense of overall reciprocity and sharing*. Many organizations we work with begin in this category, however, and may return to it at different points in the relationship as interests and staffing converge and diverge.

Strategic collaborators. Strategic collaborators or "critical friends" are like-minded organizations with which IISD has maintained a relationship over the years. These relationships tend to focus on either the practice of being a sustainable development institution or on the ongoing evolution of a thematic area of interest to IISD. Some of these relationships have traditionally been maintained through the office of the IISD president/vice-president (these include the International Institute for Environment and Development, World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and the Centre for Environment and Development in the Arab Region and Europe), while others have been established at a program level (such as IISD's Natural and Social Capital Program's relationship with Ducks Unlimited). *Many general relationships with "strategic collaborators" lack documentation or a collaborative project basis.* These relationships are important, but they are different from partnerships in nature and tone. These relationships should be cultivated to the degree that they help to inform our practice of being a sustainable development institution, to explore trends and opportunities, and to keep sustainable development as an issue on the political and public radar.

Individual relationships. People are at the heart of every successful institutional partnership. IISD staff and associates are adept at finding and establishing relationships with like-minded, highly skilled individuals around the world. Each project officer has found their own niche, and each has found people with knowledge or capacity that can be useful for the project officer and their needs. These relationships form the core of many projects and of repeated collaboration over time. They are also essential to the continuation of communications and shared learning at times when no funded project may be active.

While relationships with extended networks of individuals now appear to constitute the basis for much of IISD's insight and effectiveness, it is not possible to know the extent of this network, short of undertaking a full social network analysis mapping exercise. While there may be circumstances where such an exercise would be extremely helpful in mapping patterns of communication and influence, social network analyses are costly, and they are limited in terms of management decision-making. At a minimum, we suggest that each IISD staff and associate remain aware of the characteristics of their own personal networks. Some questions to consider include:

- Do my contacts reflect the diversity of individuals working in my issue areas (e.g. geographic region, gender)?
- Do my contacts include both established experts and new voices on the issues?
- Do my contacts reflect the diversity of skills needed to move the issue forward (e.g. research/analysis, policy, communications, donors)?
- In which relationships am I investing the most time, resources and trust? From which am I receiving the most? Is this balanced?
- Do I need to reach out to any particular contacts to ensure the maintenance of our relationships?

Response by IISD

The full internal report was filed with the office of IISD vice-president in 2011. As a first step in strengthening IISD's partnership practice, a commitment was made to focus initially on IISD's "critical friends." The communications vehicle *IISD News* will be revitalized, and we will implement a new emailing strategy, developed to ensure that the main contact points within our community of friends are more consistently informed of IISD's work and progress.

Within the Global Connectivity program, more research will be carried out into further distinguishing these collaboration modalities: partnerships, networks, communities of practice and individual social networks, with a view to providing ongoing guidance to the sustainability community at large on understanding what constitutes good performance in establishing and fostering these relationships.

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