

Engaging Young People in the Policy Change Process

Lessons from the *Information Society and Sustainable Development: Next Generation Policy Directions* Project

Dolma Dongtotsang, Maja Andjelkovic and Terri Willard

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International Institute for Sustainable Development

161 Portage Avenue East, 6th Floor

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Canada R3B 0Y4

Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700

Fax: +1 (204) 958-7710

E-mail: info@iisd.ca

Web site: <http://www.iisd.org/>

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1. Introduction

As an intergenerational concept, sustainable development requires present generations to nurture the world's social, economic and environmental well-being, and to enable next generations to do the same. The transfer of critical knowledge to today's young people is vital, yet its realization is threatened by crises in resource-stressed regions and by diseases threatening to obliterate whole generations.¹ At present, youth under the age of 25 comprise over 50 per cent of the world's population.² This scenario calls for significantly more attention to be paid to preparing youth for the challenges ahead. Many solutions have been proposed to bring young people to the forefront of sustainable development practices and policies, but without sufficient response from national-level policy-makers, young people can become marginalized in the political sphere, left with the impression that their input is not valued.

At the same time, information and communications technologies traverse the Earth and its inhabitants. The result for knowledge and the human community today is that we have the power to create a sustainable future, but only if our increased understanding and communications ability lead to better integration across policy domains at the national level, starting from those related to the information society and sustainable development (IS and SD). More than any other generation, today's young people are the leaders in creation, development, adoption, adaptation and use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). They are also the group most concerned about social and environmental questions and have the energy and enthusiasm required to face these issues.

Leveraging young people's vast potential to contribute to a next generation of policies toward sustainable development can only be done if they are equipped with the skills and knowledge to constructively contribute to the policy change process at the national level. Young people constitute a pool of human capital with tremendous energy and capacity to learn new skills. As the proposed 2005 *World Development Report* notes, if we properly invest in the increasing numbers of young professionals in the labour market, they will generate growth and development for their countries.³ As we increase our understanding of the intersections across different spheres of human activity, acquiring the necessary competence to direct development along a sustainable path and to understand the processes of global decision-making remains the fundamental challenge for young people. Over the past 14 years, IISD has worked with its partners on youth engagement, training and capacity building.⁴ This paper explores our most recent learnings about how to realize the potential of young people to influence decision-makers in their own countries.

¹ 2005 World Development Report.

² UNFPA, 2003.

³ 2005 World Development Report.

⁴ See Appendix for details.

2. The Next Generation Policy Directions Project Rationale

The Next Generation Policy Directions research project engaged national stakeholders in the IS and SD policy communities in seven developing countries. The project was financed by Canada's International Development Research Centre and coordinated by IISD. Eight researchers from South Africa, Kenya, the Philippines, Costa Rica, India, Egypt and Brazil were recruited to engage stakeholders in the IS and SD debate by answering the question: "What national information society policy changes would help better achieve the country's SD goals and strategies?" The researchers produced case studies on issues linking IS and SD in their countries, and the collection was published under the title, *A Developing Connection: Bridging the Policy Gap between the Information Society and Sustainable Development*.⁵

The project focused on (a) testing a particular strategy for building capacity and increasing the engagement of young people in policy processes, based on IISD's previous work with youth, and (b) connecting the sustainable development and information society policy issues and communities. As Willard *et al.* note, the two are "operationally interconnected": effective sustainable development requires ICT solutions and institutions, and a sustainable information society requires careful stock-taking of available resources and energy.⁶ The rationale for this project was that linking the two communities would be enhanced through research conducted by young people. The papers produced would, in turn, catalyze changes in policy and practice in developing countries around the convergence of the IS and SD communities.

2.1. Connecting information society and sustainable development policy

The question of how to make the best use of the technology to support sustainable development has been addressed in several studies. Many of these focus on increasing access to technology, identifying the most appropriate technologies to use and finding effective funding mechanisms. Some of the studies focus on the *content* that needs to be provided in order to meet user needs. Through an international set of local case studies, this project investigated barriers to sustainable development, and then identified the ICT tools, access and content that would help overcome those barriers. The result was a series of locally-based case studies that attempt practical answers to the question of how ICTs can help in each of those places. The balance of this paper explores the particular challenges of engaging youth in national policy processes.

2.2. Young researchers in national-level policy-making

Youth are often at the forefront of creating innovative solutions to achieve sustainable development goals, especially in the context of the information society. While many organizations recognize the value of young people whose work aims to strengthen society's

⁵ To obtain a copy, see <http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?pno=740>.

⁶ Willard, 2003.

progress toward sustainable development, harmonizing their work with wider development efforts has proven challenging. Specifically, there are gaps in young development leaders' understanding of national and international policy processes. Young people often do not have the access to the theory and practice of policy engagement of their older colleagues and they often lack formal academic training. These gaps influence the capacity and extent of youth's role in policy-making. They widen further if governments and other organizations fail to incorporate youth into decision-making. This, in turn, leads to fewer opportunities for youth to use their unique perspectives to influence policies on both the national and international level.

In many arenas, young people are working to increase their access to international organizations and other influential spaces, but they face major difficulties, including a persisting lack of mainstream support; lack of participation in decision-making; discontinuity in their actions; and a lack of coordinated, continuous communications.⁷ In a recently published article, Emily Freeburg talks about young people building their presence inside the World Trade Organization (WTO). She notes that while more than a dozen young people from around the world attended the December 2005 WTO meeting with official accreditation, their inclusion is a new development, with the WTO having previously been exclusive to government negotiators. Freeburg acknowledges that hundreds more protested outside, while many more young people remained in their countries, unaware of the organization.⁸

Governments and development organizations find it challenging to mobilize and strengthen the role of youth in their activities. Well-intentioned initiatives have been largely unable to engage young people in the sustainable development debate, invariably leading to a gap between young people and the sustainable development community. Governments and non-profit organizations have a key role to play by providing much needed capacity building and engagement opportunities to the younger generation. Young people bring in new ideas, approaches, energy and enthusiasm to their work and have collaborative work styles, building stronger partnerships across sectors and regions.⁹ Initiatives and programs are needed for young people to enhance their capacity, equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills, and develop their ability to connect different ideas and concepts in new frameworks needed for a sustainable future.

2.3. Engagement and capacity building approaches used

This project aimed to help close some of the capacity gaps outlined above, by creating opportunities for young researchers to be engaged on both a theoretical and practical basis. With the goal of increasing youth participation and capacity building at the national level, the approach was based on three elements: participation in networks; carrying out policy research; and involvement in decision-making fora at international and national levels.

⁷ Youth Creating Digital Opportunities Action Plan 2004.

⁸ Freeburg.

⁹ Willard, 2003.

2.3.1. Youth engagement through networks

In “Hidden Assets: Young Professionals in Knowledge Networks,” networks are identified as an approach to engaging young people, for the mutual benefit of the network and the young professionals involved.¹⁰ Three key benefits are found in the support and strengthening of

- a) the substantive research for networks;
- b) the internal network processes and interactions of members; and
- c) the use of communications technologies.

The networks approach allows young professionals to build their project management, leadership, and information and communication skills, and increases their ability to access funds for research. At the same time, the network benefits from young members’ perspectives and awareness of products, trends and opportunities, and increases the experimentation flexibility of the work of other members and the network as a whole.

2.3.2. Youth as policy researchers

The involvement of youth in policy research and decision-making is vital for providing opportunities to learn and acquire skills to actively contribute to sustainable development. Providing these opportunities at the national level is essential, if youth are to realize their capacity as an indispensable building block to achieving economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Unlike that of their older counterparts, young researchers’ work is not firmly embedded in any single framework or theoretical tradition; this gives them the latitude to consider interdisciplinary connections and to think and write about these connections. In this case, avoiding the entrenchment of research in particular analytical frameworks or academic fields, allowed for adaptable approaches in bridging the IS and SD communities. Young people may also have greater access to primary information sources: policy-makers and negotiators often find speaking with youth refreshing, and youth may have the freedom to ask questions that policy-makers may not otherwise entertain.¹¹

2.3.3. Youth in decision-making and the policy process

Many studies have corroborated the fact that involving youth in political processes is important for the future, as it forms a pool of youth who embrace life-long political activities and become leaders.¹² Young people must not only be regarded as future citizen leaders; their existing capacities and the need to further build those capacities must also be recognized. Youth hold great energy and potential, yet, they are rarely involved in national, regional and international policy development. As a result, youth lack the framework, support and legitimacy required for sustained action, and policy implementation lacks buy-in from this key grassroots constituency. In order to build on youth’s existing capacity,

¹⁰ Buckler.

¹¹ Navigating International Meetings: A Pocketbook Guide to Effective Youth Participation

¹² Youniss.

decision-makers must integrate their knowledge, vision and experience, and provide opportunities for greater participation of young people in policy-making.¹³

3. Methodology

Based on the rationale described in Section 2, the Next Generation project engaged eight young researchers from seven countries to look at the emerging relationship between sustainable development and the information society. Each young author spent six months researching, compiling and producing their papers. Building on IISD's experiences with the Trade Knowledge Network,¹⁴ and previous work with young people,¹⁵ the project design included a number of different types of capacity-building and institutional support methodologies:

- Initial training – early on, the young researchers were brought together for a three-day project inception workshop. This meeting included training sessions on (a) analytical frameworks for understanding policy linkages between the information society and sustainable development, and (b) developing engagement strategies and strategies related to the achievement of project outcomes.
- Learning by doing – through the project, IISD “created the space for research” which many young researchers lack. These individuals strengthened their capacities for research, writing and policy engagement through practice. Besides these activities, researchers prepared national workshops and gave presentations at international meetings, gaining experience in engaging a variety of audiences, including other researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the fields of IS and SD. Opportunities to engage key decision-makers by discussing the policy implications of their research existed at numerous events, including the workshops hosted by the researchers in their countries, a preparatory meeting to the second World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in September, and the Summit itself in November 2005,¹⁶ among other events.
- Ongoing intellectual and institutional support – the project included a number of support mechanisms to review research ideas and drafts and support. Guidance with writing was provided by
 - national advisory teams, which the young writers “recruited” themselves; and

¹³ Youth Creating Digital Opportunities Action Plan 2004.

¹⁴ For more information, see <http://www.tradeknowledgenetwork.net/>

¹⁵ See the Appendix for an overview of IISD's work with youth.

¹⁶ Many environmental and social development organizations involved in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process have indicated their desire to craft national e-strategies and information and communications technology policies, and stressed on the importance of incorporating sustainable development goals. The Summit provided a window for all stakeholders to pursue partnerships in this area, for IISD to take action in the area of ICTs and sustainable development, and for governments to incorporate sustainable development principles and practices into the institutions and policy frameworks that are shaping the information society.

- by an international advisory group of five professionals established in the fields of sustainable development or information and communications technologies.

In addition to the national and international advisory groups, support was made available by the research host organizations in various capacities, and one-on-one support was provided by IISD staff throughout the project. Finally, IISD coordinated the logistics, administrative and editorial aspects of the project while IDRC provided the financial support.

4. Experiences and Influence of Young Researchers

The capacity-building methods described above achieved varying degrees of success; the balance between each of the elements varied as each researcher's experiences and the extent of influence at the national level was unique. The young researchers found different ways to engage various stakeholders, including national decision-makers, local and international NGOs, media and their own organizations, and each of their experiences is described in some detail in this section.

4.1. Young researcher: Amira Sobeih, Egypt

The Egyptian paper, "Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in Egypt," written by Amira Sobeih, notes the recent advances in the use of Geographic Information Systems to support local development, especially natural resources management. The piece offers a GIS model that can support local development. Sobeih's efforts captured the interest of the local UNDP office, the ICT Trust Fund (a national government project) and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation. Sobeih also participated in nationally-broadcast interview programs on two radio channels. Her participation in the project has resulted in collaboration between a local NGO in India and her host organization, Sustainable Development Association in Egypt. On the national level, her paper was mentioned in a government statement, but she stopped short of connecting with the work of the Ministry of ICT. From her contacts after attending a GIS Conference in Kenya, Sobeih was able to develop a plan for founding a regional network. Based on this plan, the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation expressed interest in implementing her recommendations and she is in the process of developing a youth exchange with OneWorld between India and Egypt. She was invited by the Cairo ICT 2005 Conference to present her paper which further promoted her work.

4.2. Young researcher: Steve Vosloo, South Africa

The author of the South African paper, "Towards a Sustainable Development View of Local Content using ICTs in South Africa," focuses on the local content in the information society strategy in South Africa. Vosloo calls for a broader definition of local content to incorporate sustainable development. Because of his case study, he has been consulted by writers of the South African National ICT strategy document, providing him with the space to discuss his

ideas on the process and strategy for connecting information society policy with sustainable development goals. As a result, the link between ICTs and SD was acknowledged in the introductory chapter of the strategy document, although Vosloo points out that the remainder of the document focused solely on economic development. Nonetheless, his work helped expose ICT practitioners to the issue of SD and took a first step in the inclusion of SD into a national information strategy document. Vosloo says the process has also allowed him to realize the importance of learning about sustainable development issues and incorporating them into other policy areas before it is too late.

4.3. Young researcher: Wainaina Mungai, Kenya

Wainaina Mungai's paper, entitled "Using ICTs for Poverty Reduction and Environmental Protection in Kenya: The M-vironment Framework," discusses the possibilities of e-environment and e-agriculture initiatives. Mungai offers a model that demonstrates the beneficial use of mobile telephony in addressing poverty and environment issues. He established contacts at the Ministry of Information and Communications and his paper generated interest and support among government officials and policy-makers. His networking included academic contacts who contributed to his project with scholarly discussions. Mungai's presentation at a project side-event at the September 2005 preparatory meeting to the World Summit on the Information Society attracted all members of his (Kenya's) national delegation. This was particularly important to Mungai as he noted that access to government delegates is easier at external meetings than when back at "home." In addition, he said that such delegates tend to be less willing and candid with their opinions when approached in their home countries.

4.4. Young researchers: Anusha Lall and Atanu Garai, India

The paper, "Capturing Grassroots Voices in the Information Society and Sustainable Development," by Anusha Lall and Atanu Garai discusses the role of grassroots organizations in the development of national environment and agriculture policy through the domain of the information society. Their case study showed that grassroots activities can influence decision-makers and provided a model of an environmental management system that would be useful and effective for communities at the grassroots level. Their organization, OneWorld South Asia, has shown a great deal of interest in their work and indicated interest in pursuing another project based on their model.

4.5. Young researcher: Diogo André de Assumpção, Brazil

Diogo André de Assumpção's paper, "Socialization of Knowledge and Reduction of Regional Inequalities in Brazil," assumes that knowledge is essential for social and economic development and calls for greater incentives to stimulate academic research and civil society activities in Brazil. The paper also calls for participation from the corporate community in maintaining sustainable efforts in business and notes that free software usage can be influential in spreading knowledge which is otherwise too costly. His case study has generated strong interest from the Brazilian government delegation at WSIS. In the evaluation consultation, de Assumpção echoed Mungai's comments, that the ability to influence national decision-makers seemed significantly greater at international instead of

national meetings. In addition to increasing his own and his colleagues' awareness of IS and SD convergence on the national level, he has personally gained from improving his research skills.

4.6. Young researcher: Margarita Salas, Costa Rica

Margarita Salas' case study entitled, "Professional Women in Information Technology in Cost Rica: Exploring the Relationship between Sustainable Development and Gender Gaps in the Information Society," identifies the need for women to be encouraged to participate in the IT sector and suggests tools to improve the sector's gender imbalance. Salas advocates for the development of policies that support women to continue training in technical institutes, and in science and technology careers. Salas conducted primary research, generating gender-disaggregated data relevant to her study, which was met with a high level of interest by other researchers in her country. As a result of her work, Salas developed relationships with a number of NGOs interested in gender and IT, and was interviewed by a national radio station and a local newspaper. At the international level, she was able to continue discussions with several organizations interested in her research, and was asked to speak at four panels at WSIS in Tunis, including one organized by Hewlett Packard. As a result of her research, her own organization, Fundación Acceso/Bellanet Costa Rica, has asked her to develop a two-year project on women and ICT-based enterprise.

4.8. Young researchers: Dolma Dongtotsang (Canada) and Robert Sagun, Philippines

Robert Sagun's research proposal focused on mobile telephony as an enabler of environmental action. The Philippines case study is an exception to the others, both in project design and research process. Early on, given the lack of an available local organization that could agree to host Sagun, IISD decided to contract the young researcher's own organization, Philippine Resources for Sustainable Development. Under the pressure of multiple consulting contracts and the organization's financial difficulties, the young researcher was unable to complete the work according to the original timeline.¹⁷ As a result, another young researcher, Dolma Dogontstag, based at IISD in Canada, assisted with the research and writing of the Philippines piece. Nevertheless, Sagun held a successful workshop in Manila and was able to present his proposed research to government, civil society and academic circles. The co-authored paper provides a concrete proposal for an SMS-based initiative in the area of water and air quality improvement in the Philippines.

4.9. Some overall observations

The young researchers were successful to various degrees in raising issues and questions with policy-makers and stakeholders. Their attempts to work within the national contexts met with different responses, with some policy-makers receptive and others indifferent. Overall, however, the project undeniably allowed participants to increase their research capacity and gain visibility and access to national decision-makers. In two cases (Kenya and South Africa),

¹⁷ Section 5.4 explores the need for intellectual and technical support through an established organization, the lack of which seemed to be the most important factor in the difficulties experienced by the young researcher from the Philippines.

researchers were able to directly influence the development of the national ICT strategy. In other cases (Costa Rica, Egypt and India), researchers and their host organizations were able to create partnerships and pursue related work opportunities as a result of the project.

At the September 2005 preparatory meeting to WSIS, Abiodun Jagun from the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) conducted interviews with three members of the research team, for an unrelated APC project examining participation of Southern researchers in WSIS. Her report on the Next Generation project illustrates how the young researchers influenced national information society policy development, while building their research skills and understanding of IS and SD policy.

“Distinct increases in ability [of the researchers] to contribute [at WSIS] were identified. The project has improved the researcher’s ability to comment on some of the issues being discussed at WSIS; the fact that the trip was sponsored by IISD was evidence of a direct benefit in terms of ability to participate. The project was also described [by the researchers] as increasing capacity to do research and was said to have increased the researcher’s visibility in the field. Further evidence was provided of the increase in visibility; [one] researcher described this by explaining his role/input in a national stakeholder conference set-up to discuss comments that had been submitted on the draft national ICT policy. The researcher ... had looked through the document for an SD perspective and had submitted his comments to both the national civil society (CS) network and the Permanent Secretary responsible for the policy. Based on [the researcher’s] feedback [...] more detailed evaluation was conducted and the output of this was adopted by the government as the contribution of the national CS network to the ICT policy process. A presentation [made] at the [national-level] stakeholders meeting was therefore based on the issues identified. [...] Through this meeting the researcher was able to meet the permanent secretary and co-opt him into helping with the (IISD) project.”

- Abiodun Jagun, Association for Progressive Communications

During the project’s evaluation forum, researchers confirmed that they felt to have increased their research capabilities, as much as their awareness of and Internet in national-level policies in the IS and SD fields.

5. Success Factors

Five aspects of the project emerged as critical factors in determining the success or failure of various components of the project. Some of those became apparent when they were highlighted by researchers as having been among the most helpful in their work. Others became obvious only when project components failed to function properly, resulting in difficulties with the project’s progress. Namely, creating a sense of ownership of the project; learning by doing; opportunity to build on achievements; gender considerations; and adequate institutional and intellectual support seem to have been vital for effectively engaging young people in national-level policy research in this exercise. Each is explored below.

5.1. A sense of ownership

The young researchers found it important that they were able to maintain a sense of ownership of the project throughout its life. In the evaluation consultation, they reported that having opportunities to make decisions independently and collaborate in workshops, meetings and conferences was motivating and increased their learning. According to Abiodun Jagun's report, the fact that the project allowed freedom when it came to actual implementation of the project at the national level, created the space for researchers to influence policy at the national level.

The sense of ownership and responsibility to the project was heightened through participation in workshops and conferences, where the young researchers met to discuss their role and participation in the development of their case studies and the expectations of the project. The project's inception meeting, held in India over three days, was one such workshop, where the young researchers met with each other, coordinators and some of the advisors. The meeting provided a chance for team-building, and a much needed opportunity for face-to-face discussions with coordinators and advisors and among the researchers. The young participants reported it was an extremely valuable and important opportunity to participate in training on research methods and management.

5.2. Learning by doing

The participants read substantially on sustainable development issues throughout the Next Generation project. Some of the researchers had little knowledge of SD, while several others were less familiar with information society topics. The participatory nature of the process, and the online team discussion list were helpful for the researchers to identify clear project objectives and to receive input from the advisors and coordinators in the planning stages. These were also greatly beneficial in the discussion of substantive issues and finding of research materials. A few of the researchers mentioned that the project resulted in an increase in their own awareness on the lack of recognition between IS and SD issues in their own organizations and the countries' relevant ministries.

Many of the researchers directly link the development of their research skills with their involvement in the project. The learning took place during the research phase, workshop and conference attendance, the writing process and through maintaining contacts with government, local and international NGOs, project coordinators and their fellow researchers. The learning-by-doing approach was critical in contributing to capacity development, especially on policy engagement with stakeholders. The skills acquired during this process and the new knowledge gained have placed them in a position where they are able to influence debates, papers and discussions on national IS and SD policies. As Margarita Salas, the researcher from Costa Rica, pointed out, the project was able to achieve the objectives of providing the opportunity to develop the research capacities of all the young researchers, and of enhancing their negotiating and advocacy skills on national and international levels. The contact between researchers and decision-makers has a far greater value than the papers alone: by fostering knowledge-sharing and collaboration, it enabled the researchers to advance issues, ideas and partnerships. The researchers felt that their abilities in multitasking, networking and maintaining contact with and interest from stakeholders in their respective case studies were enhanced, and that the project taught them to be accountable for administrative and substantive deadlines.

5.3. Opportunity to build on achievements

The publication of their papers in the book, “*A Developing Connection: Bridging the Policy Gap between the Information Society and Sustainable Development*,” led to expanded future work plans, an improved sense of direction in the researchers’ work and a strong interest in continuing on with this, or a similar project. This is an outcome that IISD hoped to attain—a strengthening of the researchers’ capacities in policy analysis, research and writing skills, thereby creating opportunities to participate in and influence future policy processes. Some of the researchers have been able to partner with government, local and international NGOs as a result of their participation in the Next Generation project. Others found ways to build on the work by developing projects within their own organizations.

5.4. Institutional and intellectual support

Young leaders in the areas of ICTs and SD often work in groups that do not have a clear institutional context. Not only are youth organizations frequently unable to register as legally-recognized entities, they also seldom have the administrative and procedural experience and capacities of established institutions, which places their work and long-term impact in jeopardy. Besides a lack of institutional context, young people frequently do not have the same access to the theory and practice of policy engagement as their older colleagues and they often lack formal academic training. The Next Generation project design was successful in providing the researchers with access to financial, logistical, administrative and coordination support. The intellectual support provided, however, seemed to be insufficient in several ways, as discussed in section 5.4.2.

5.4.1. Institutional support: IDRC, IISD and host organizations

Financial, logistical, administrative and coordination support was provided by IDRC, IISD and the researchers’ host organizations. In one case, the Philippines, the organization hosting the young researcher was founded and managed by the researcher himself; in other words, no other established local organization was available to provide immediate support and ensure the research remained on track. The Philippines case study took a very long time to complete, resulting in a two-month extension of the overall project’s timeline. Due to the time constraints of the original researcher, a young professional based at IISD in Winnipeg co-authored the paper, after having travelled to the Philippines to connect with the original researcher and to collect additional information. It is reasonable to assume that not having the support of an established organization which could provide local-level guidance had an adverse effect on this researcher’s motivation and ability to deliver results. In her assessment of the Philippines component of the project, Dolma Dongtotsang, the Winnipeg-based researcher, suggests that the distance between the young researcher in the Philippines and the IISD team could have exacerbated the situation. She concludes that, “therefore, a local NGO which could hold [the young researcher] accountable and guide him directly would have benefited the project.”

All of the young researchers agreed that without the combined institutional support (at the international and national levels), they would not have been able to complete their case studies, be as confident and efficient, nor see the completion of their components of the

project. With many factors coming into play during the project's activities and processes, it is apparent that the institutional support in the coordination, administration and logistical aspects of the project was vital for success. This includes the support provided by IISD and IDRC, but also of the organizations hosting researchers in their own countries: OneWorld International (Kenya); OneWorld India (India); Empowerment for African Sustainable Development (South Africa); Fundación Acceso/Bellanet (Costa Rica); Sustainable Development Association (Egypt); and Grupo Interagir (Brazil).

5.4.2. Intellectual support: National and international advisory committees, IISD and host organizations

Anticipating that young researchers would need a carefully chosen and committed team of advisors, IISD and IDRC had incorporated national and international advisory committees into the project's design. The potential value of this component of the exercise was the most difficult to realize. At least two young researchers reported that the recruitment of national advisors had been a frustrating, long and stressful process. The researchers said that it was difficult to recruit well-established practitioners and academics to the national advisory committees because they were not able to volunteer the time required to contribute to the project in a meaningful way. Those who had positive experiences with their national advisory committees seemed to have known or worked with the advisors prior to this project. In contrast to the volunteer advisors at the national level, the international advisory committee, recruited by IISD, was paid. The levels of international advisors' input on research drafts were below initial expectation, due to unforeseeable circumstances: in two cases, the advisors' other work responsibilities increased drastically, while a third advisor experienced health problems. As a result, in four out of five instances, the advisors seemed largely unavailable to contribute to online group discussions or otherwise participate in the research and evaluation processes. Finally, a few major team transitions occurred at IISD during the project. The project's creator and original manager, Terri Willard, and the project consultant who assisted with organizing the inception workshop and early activities, Kelly Moore, departed from the team during the early research phase. Their responsibilities were taken over by Maja Andjelkovic and Dolma Dongtotsang. While the transition went smoothly, and the researchers reported they never felt that the project was "left hanging," the situation inevitably affected the consistency of support and mentoring. Overall, the international advisory committee and the IISD team found that the time necessary to review and revise research paper turned out to be significantly greater than expected in the original planning and budgeting process.

5.5. Gender considerations

IISD appreciates the importance of integrating gender considerations into all phases of the research process. The Next Generation project design recognized the existence of barriers that can often prevent or discourage the active participation of women in research. These barriers may have been especially significant in a project utilizing information technology for communication with an international team of researchers. In order to address them, and to mainstream gender in our research, the project aimed to do the following:

- 1) include at least one chapter in our final publication utilizing gender analysis (through the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data) in the IS and SD policy spheres;

- 2) ensure that at least half the research team was made up of young women;
- 3) involve women in all national and international advisory committees;
- 4) seek out primary sources produced by women in our research;
- 5) have gender recognized by all team members as a cross-cutting theme;
- 6) implement gender impact analysis of recommendations and activities;
- 7) explicitly integrate economic interests of women into recommended strategies;
- 8) organize specific activities related to integrating women in the mainstream of IS and SD processes and activities; and
- 9) develop a framework for the integration of young women in IS and SD policy.

The first, third and fourth goals were met successfully; Margarita Salas collected sex-disaggregated data and used them to write a convincing piece on women in IT professions in Costa Rica. The data she gathered have been used by other researchers and she has been invited to present these data and her research at a number of national and regional meetings and workshops. In addition, two out of the five international advisory committee members were women, and each of the national committees included women. Each young researcher used sources authored by women in their work.

The fifth and eighth goals were met with relative success. While all team members did recognize gender as a cross-cutting theme in their work, many of the young researchers struggled to find relevant, gender-specific data to use in their pieces. Activities related to integrating women in the mainstream of IS and SD processes and activities amounted to training workshops and mentorship sessions within the project team. A workshop on gender implications was held during the project inception meeting, and an hour-long panel discussion on gender-related topics was led during the launch of the final publication in November 2005 by one of the international advisors (Natasha Primo of Women's Net in South Africa). Angela M. Kuga Thas provided ongoing mentorship on gender issues throughout the project. In two presentations to external audiences during the WSIS preparatory meeting in Geneva, researchers mentioned the lack of gender-disaggregated data available as a barrier to understanding gender implications of IS and SD policy. Although these discussions, training opportunities and presentations were very useful, it seemed that the researchers, as well as other members of the team, were unsure what specific steps could be taken to better integrate gender considerations at each stage of the project. This had a massive impact on realizing the sixth and seventh goals: conducting gender impact analysis of the recommendations and activities and explicitly integrating economic interests of women into recommended strategies. While all researchers mentioned gender concerns and the potential effects of their recommendations on women's economic interests, these mentions are somewhat general and, for the most part, brief.

Meeting the second goal—ensuring a gender-balanced team of young researchers—was equally challenging. It was difficult to recruit young women to the project: IISD tried to have a young woman nominated by each country represented in the project. Most respondents were unable to find young women to recommend, and, as a result, the young women selected for the project came from a smaller pool of potential candidates. In the case of India, the authorship of the research was shared between a young man and a young woman. This improved the gender ratio, but posed more questions about the availability of young women to participate in this type of research than it answered. In the case of Fiji, which had been one of the countries initially selected for the project, the young woman researcher

withdrew from the project to care for her critically ill mother. As a result, and due to the timing of her departure, the Fiji component of the study had to be abandoned.

Based on the above experiences, it is clear that successful integration of young women in IS and SD policy requires special attention, effort and resources. Which specific strategies will provide success, however, depends on a complex system of factors which reflects the equally complex realities facing young women, especially those in transition from school to work. A Canadian study¹⁸ indicates that when data on young women's lives are collected and analyzed using traditional models (designed to explain men's lives), the phased regularity observed does *not* reflect reality. In the context of the Next Generation project, this means that recognized strategies for engaging young people in policy analysis may completely fail to account for the needs of potential young women policy researchers, and as a result, to effectively engage them in the policy process. While the development of a complete framework for integration of young women in IS and SD policy requires much further exploration, some lessons from the Next Generation Policy Directions project can be drawn:

- 1) **Recruitment** of young women for policy research may require markedly different techniques than recruitment of young men. Individuals who are aware of gender issues in policy research and analysis, and who have experience in working with young women in a particular country, should be asked to nominate candidates. The difficulties experienced by the Next Generation project team in recruiting young women researchers indicate that the forming a gender-balanced research team may take longer, and that the young women, once recruited, may face an entirely different set of constraints and needs in completing their research than their male counterparts. The ability and willingness to adjust the project design to meet these needs should be communicated clearly to potential candidates.
- 2) **Training** on gender-related aspects of policy analysis and research should be provided within the project team. The need for training on other substantive or technical issues may vary according to gender, and these differences should be assessed at the recruitment and inception stages. Ideally, the training would provide young researchers the tools to educate wider audiences about the need to mainstream gender into policy-making.
- 3) **Gender-disaggregated data** are vital for providing evidence of gender-specific policy problems, and for finding effective solutions. Special attention should be paid to providing young researchers with the tools to obtain existing, or collect gender-disaggregated data through primary research. Training in interpreting the data, especially their relevance in economic terms, should be provided.
- 4) One-on-one **mentorship** should be provided to young researchers, especially with formulation of gender impact analysis of their recommendations and activities. It may also be helpful for members of the **international advisory committee** to be recruited after the research team has been assembled and the research topics identified. This may create more accurate expectations on the amount of research supervision and advice required by the young researchers.
- 5) Where possible, **project design** should be flexible enough to allow for amending project components to accommodate for any unforeseen gender-related factors. Although

¹⁸ Andres.

designing specific contingency plans does help, leaving open the possibility to entirely revisit the project's design after the commencement of research would be beneficial.

Finally, as Margarita Salas, the young researcher from Costa Rica, pointed out during the evaluation e-forum, it is important to recognize that making the important issue of gender visible is not a widely-accepted priority. Encouraging policy-makers *and* researchers to consider the issue by putting it on their agenda must be done through explicit linkage of gender issues with sustainable development and economic growth.

6. By Way of Conclusion

Many of the lessons of the Next Generation Policy Directions project may be characteristic of distributed research efforts, especially those related to team communications and remote coordination of work. Two factors seem to be especially important when it comes to working with young people: providing effective intellectual and institutional support to the young researchers, and ensuring that gender aspects are integrated effectively into all components of the project. Young researchers, especially those not affiliated with academic institutions, enjoy “learning by doing” but require a reliable and available team of advisors and mentors who can support their research and writing from beginning to end. Training on understanding and mainstreaming gender into the policy analysis process, while important regardless of the age of the researchers, may be especially effective if it is implemented at a time when the researcher's theoretical approaches and analytical methods are being formed.

Besides, this lack of formed theoretical frameworks or entrenchment in specific academic fields allows young researchers to build bridges across policy communities with relative ease. The Next Generation Policy Directions project has demonstrated not only the ability of the young researchers to link the fields of information society and sustainable development conceptually, but also to access policy circles, obtain critical information and even directly influence the development of national ICT strategies in a short timeframe. Most important, young people involved in this exercise have expressed a long-term interest in exploring the links between information society and sustainable development. They are perhaps the group best positioned to take on the formulation of a next generation of policies that reflect these complex connections.

Appendix: IISD and Youth

For the past 14 years, IISD and its partners¹⁹ have worked with young leaders, especially in the field of information and communications technologies. Traditionally considered among the most socially-conscious and active segments of the population, young people are concerned about environmental issues; the spread of HIV and other diseases; the lack of employment opportunities; economic inequality; and human rights. As students and young professionals, many seek to understand these issues and how their choices and actions impact others in their community and around the world. Given their lack of access to many formal institutions in society, however, there is a need to support the role of young people in building a sustainable future.

One of IISD's main strategic objectives is to support the role of young people in this effort. Over the years, IISD has managed a number of youth capacity-building initiatives. In 1992, IISD was joined by a young woman originally from El Salvador, Zonny Woods, who brought together an international youth steering committee to develop and produce the *Youth Sourcebook on Sustainable Development* in support of the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992. The book aimed "to reach out to youth globally in order to continue the process of involving youth in sustainable development issues."²⁰ It was a guide to the publications and media resources in sustainable development, providing a directory of organizations in the sustainable development community, as well as an incorporating youth perspectives on sustainable development issues. This process was a learning experience for everyone involved. By coming together to generate vital information for youth on sustainable development, the young people in this project were able to realize the importance of their work while learning different skills such as making decisions on content, partners and collaborating with IISD.

Since the publication of the Youth Sourcebook, IISD has coordinated various youth programs, such as the Young Canadian Leaders for a Sustainable Future, Emerging Leaders for Governance and Communication and the Circumpolar Young Leaders Program internships. These programs aim to provide young professionals with the substantive knowledge, communications skills, resources and practical experience necessary to develop international sustainable development policies and to become effective agents of change.²¹ Developed to engage young people in sustainable development efforts, debates and policies, these programs offer young Canadian leaders the skills and opportunities to shape their world, while enhancing their knowledge and understanding of sustainable development work. Since 1997, nearly interns have been placed in research and communications positions with organizations around the world.²² These participants have gone on to careers within government, international organizations and the private sector.

In partnership with the Global Knowledge Partnership, IISD brought together opinions and ideas of youth from around the world in the debate on bridging the digital divide. This input

¹⁹ Including, for example, TakingITGlobal and the Global Knowledge Partnership.

²⁰ Youth Sourcebook on Sustainable Development.

²¹ See <http://www.iisd.org/interns/>

²² See <http://www.iisd.org/networks/youth.asp>

was provided for both the Global Knowledge Action Plan in 2000 and to the G-8 Digital Opportunities Taskforce. In 2001, IISD compiled a paper on their experiences entitled, “Hidden Assets: Young Professionals in Knowledge Networks.”²³

IISD’s Arctic Program takes a more integrated approach by aiming to provide a communications platform for young people in the North and to understand youth communication channels across the circumpolar region. The Web site, <http://www.ookpik.org>, was created as part of the networking component of the Future of Children and Youth in the Arctic initiative of the Sustainable Development Working Group of the Arctic Council (SDWG). This Web site was designed specifically for youth to exchange ideas and as a wealth of information for students and teachers.²⁴

As a founding member of the Youth Creating Digital Opportunities (YCDO) Coalition, IISD served as the facilitator for youth involvement in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). It engaged young people in national-level practice and policy research, linking the tools of the information society to the goals of sustainable development.

This experience led directly to the creation of the Next Generation Policy Directions research project, supported by the International Development Research Centre, and in collaboration with seven organizations in Kenya, South Africa, Costa Rica, Egypt, Brazil, the Philippines and India. IISD’s experience in recruiting young people, supporting their work, promoting collaboration among researchers and organizations, and engaging decision-makers served as the project’s foundation. Through the project, young researchers from developing countries produced six case studies published together in “*A Developing Connection: Bridging the Policy Gap between the Information Society and Sustainable Development*,” available at <http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?pno=740>.

²³ See <http://www.iisd.org/networks/youth.asp>

²⁴ See <http://www.sdwg.org/>

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