

Ensuring Environmental sustainability



A family struggles to survive in India

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can play a significant role in addressing some of the key challenges, including sharing of knowledge and expertise, some of which are covered in this special issue on ICTs and Environment. This issue of i4d focuses on how a more connected world is learning from each other, sharing valuable data and information, forming alliances and advocating for the issues relating to environmental sustainability.



The scene reverberates in many poor countries

Rio Earth Summit took place in 1992. The World Summit on Sustainable Development was held a decade later. 2005 will be a stocktaking year for the Global Summit, which is a five year review of the eight goals set out as Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations in 2000.

The commitments made during various global meetings and summits have to be backed by national goals and programmes and supported by critical financial resources and expertise. It is evident that more collaborative efforts are needed to address the economic and environmental marginalisation that afflicts millions of people, especially in the poorer countries.

According to Christopher Flavin, the Worldwatch President, whose organisation produce the State of the World report each year, "Pressures on the world's natural systems, from global warming to the depletion and degradation of resources such as fisheries and fresh water, have further destabilized societies." The United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan is more optimistic and notes, "all of us should understand that not only that we face common threats, but also that there are common opportunities to be seized if we respond to this challenge as a single human community."

Progress has been slow due to three critical factors:

- Most international treaties on environment suffer setbacks due to weak commitments and inadequate funding, while military expenditures are running as high as US\$ 2 billion a day.
- Despite massive economic outputs, especially due to globalisation and market driven economies, international aid for development has actually declined globally.
- Third world debt crisis is worsening. The total debt burden in developing and transition countries has reached a whopping 2.5 trillion in 2000

What is encouraging is that more multi-stakeholder partnerships have emerged; more agencies from civil society are

complementing the work of governments and finding innovative solutions that can be implemented at much lower costs.

The three specific targets

Target 9: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources. This includes forest cover, areas designated for conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, focus on energy efficiency, reduce emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and consumption of greenhouse gases, and reduce the dependency on biomass/solid fuel use.

Target 10: Have, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. This includes addressing the water access issues, and to improve access to basic sanitation. Countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia and Namibia have set time-bound and measurable targets for both urban and rural areas.

The world is on target except in the sub-Saharan African region, where the condition is severe.

Target 11: By 2020, to have achieved significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers. Apart from rolling back the growing slums, targets include providing secure tenure, and improve housing and service sector investments.

The datasets to monitor the progress and follow up on the indicators are held with several of the lead UN agencies.

Few environmental issues like sewage and wastewater treatment, solid waste management, etc. are some key environmental priorities that go beyond the global framework, but are critical to achieve these targets.

Some of the key challenges to ensuring environmental sustainability are rapid population growth, rapid urbanization, governance and management limitations, lack of knowledge expertise, weak technological and institutional capacities and lack of financial and technical capacity. ■