

Report of the ISSC-IHDP Workshop on Social Science Perspectives on Sustainable Development

The International Social Science Council (ISSC) and the International Human Dimensions Programme for Global Environmental Change (IHDP) co-organized a meeting on the social sciences and sustainable development, 1-2 December 2003, which was hosted by the Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias (CRIM) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The meeting convened 48 social scientists from a broad range of disciplines, and representing various ISSC constituencies, including IUSSP, IHDP, the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP), the International Peace Research Association (IPRA), and the International Geographical Union (IGU). IUSSP was represented at the meeting by Alex de Sherbinin, Coordinator of the joint IUSSP-IHDP Population-Environment Research Network (PERN).

The aims of the workshop were to:

- identify major current and emerging issues on sustainable development from the perspective of the social science research.
- set up a plan for future collaboration of social scientists, especially ISSC members, within international programs on sustainable development, under the coordination of the IHDP.
- provide up-dated information on projects carried out by social scientists on sustainable development within the ISSC, and generally in social science communities.
- bring into contact social science researchers working within the IHDP with social scientists working in this field in ISSC member unions and associations, councils and academies as well as in other research centers, especially in developing countries.

The ISSC has recently reformulated its mission statement as “fostering social sciences for sustainable development.” According to their recent newsletter, the main features of ISSC activities are to be globality, transdisciplinarity, and attention to policy issues. Thus, the workshop sought to bring together a group of social scientists broadly interested in issues of global environmental change and sustainable development to forge new ties and to identify possible areas of collaboration.

This report begins with a brief summary of the main presentations, and then provides conclusions with particular focus on the relevance of the meeting to IUSSP.

Summary of Presentations

Day 1

The workshop began with a welcome message by **Anita Chavez**, CRIM’s Director and a demographer by training. **Lourdes Arizpe**, ISSC’s President, then made a presentation on ISSC’s global social agenda. ISSC wishes to create a global dialog fostering a cosmo-political perspective, and it wishes to do so by engaging its scientific programs (IHDP and CROP) and member associations. The remainder of her presentation focused on the questions: Are societies sustainable? And Can ecosystems be developed? She spoke of the linkages between cultural and bio-diversity, of the political trans-nationalization that is occurring with blurring and miscegenation of once separated identities and traditions. She went on to say that knowledge production is growing so quickly that it cannot be codified, and therefore we are living in an

“uncertainty society.” Her proposed research agenda for the social sciences includes ecological restoration working with communities; information flows on environmental risks; multi-level institutional mechanisms; gender and equity studies; climate variability and health; and migration patterns, erosion and agriculture.

Dr. Arizpe’s presentation was followed by an overview presentation by **Roberto Sanchez** of the University of California at Riverside (and coordinator of the IHDP’s new Urbanization science project) on global environmental change and sustainable development. He defined sustainable development (SD) as a search for environmentally friendly patterns of growth. He cited a more specific definition of SD from the Brundtland Commission report (page 46): “Sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are in all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.” This definition couches SD as a process rather than a goal. His main argument was that the concept of SD has evolved from its early formulation of society on the one side and nature on the other, both being impacted by global environmental change (GEC). Today, it is understood that the cultural, economic, social, political, and biophysical aspects of global environmental change and sustainable development are complex, multi-dimensional and multi-scale processes that are co-evolving.

Following this, there were a series of four presentations on the IHDP Core Science Projects. Information on each of these projects can be found on IHDP’s website (<http://www.ihdp.org>); below is a brief summary of some of the themes developed by each presenter.

- **Michael Brklcich** presented on the Global Environmental Change and Human Security (GECHS) project. A key theme of the project is vulnerability, which he defined as the incapacity of communities to anticipate, cope, change or recover from changes in their environment. He suggested that vulnerability can serve as a link between social science research and the policy community.
- **Oran Young** presented on the Institutional Dimensions of Global Environmental Change (IDGEC) project. The institutional dimensions of GEC are important, and operate at many different scales. Key research themes of IDGEC include looking at the congruence of the attributes of institutions and the scale at which ecological systems function, and whether arrangements (such as tradable permits) that work at a national scale can be scaled up to work at a global level.
- **Pier Vellinga** presented on the Industrial Transformation (IT) project. This project addresses energy, food, urbanized areas, and transportation. The project is particularly interested in sustainability transitions. Past transitions, such as the demographic transition or the green revolution, were either unmanaged or partially managed. The project is trying to determine if transitions and transformations to more sustainable paths can be managed or “steered.”
- **Eric Lambin** presented on the Land-Use and Land-Cover Change (LUCC) project. The project has focused primarily on areas of rapid deforestation and areas of rapid degradation, such as arid lands. One of the key questions he asked, with regards to SD, is what is to be sustained, and what is to be developed? Each land-cover transformation can be viewed very differently by different actors (e.g. drainage of a “swamp” for a shopping mall could be seen as “development” or as wanton destruction of a wetland and vital natural habitats).

The discussion that followed elaborated on some of the points. Vulnerability was highlighted as a useful bridge for social science research and policy making. Is there an emerging equality of vulnerability, especially with the advent of global terrorism which strikes rich and poor alike? A participant noted that we have not been able to create an interest on the part of local actors in global environmental change, at least not in such a way that would cause their behavior to change. Could vulnerability, and the risks associated with GEC, be the means to make it more of a reality to them? There was considerable discussion on the impacts of the “Washington Consensus” that promotes a neo-liberal, export-led path to development, and how this is diametrically opposed to SD. Another participant noted that multinational corporations should be studied from a social science perspective, since these are the main promoters of currently unsustainable trajectories.

Afternoon presentations were made by the workshop facilitators and a number of ISSC representatives. **Barbara Huddleston** of UN’s FAO argued that social science needs to be human-centric, and that sustainable development is largely human centric while global environmental change is environment-centric. She suggested that we might adopt the health community’s approach to the environment, which is to stave off disease, improve wellbeing, and prolong life. **Roberto Guimaraes** of UN’s ECLAC argued that the State still has a unique and necessary role, since market forces will never correctly value biodiversity. He stated that we need to *measure* progress towards sustainability through concrete metrics.

The ISSC presentations began with **Atilio Boron**, Consejo Latino-Americano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO), who stated that we live in a capitalist society, and that the driving force is markets and growth. Sustainable development in such a context is out of the question. **John-Andrew McNeish** presented the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP), which is based in Norway and is open to all poverty researchers. One of their projects addresses the demography of poverty (see <http://www.crop.org> for more information). **Ursula Oswald** of the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) said that the World Summit on Sustainable Development spread the false message that economic growth and market mechanisms would eliminate poverty. However, she feels that the free market destroys natural resources and pollutes the environment.

Hebe Vessuri of the Consortium on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development suggested that we are seeing the emergence of knowledge politics, in which knowledge is used and even fabricated to support various policies. Unlike science policy, knowledge politics instrumentalizes knowledge. He posed the question, why is social learning so difficult to achieve? **Luis Garcia Barrios** of El Colegio de la Frontera Sur made an interesting presentation on research he is undertaking in Chiapas, Mexico, on agriculture, biodiversity, and environmental sustainability. He introduced the notion of “panarchy,” in which social and natural systems self-organize, and become connected and resilient, yet this creates the conditions for their destruction and reorganization. A particular focus of his presentation was the loss of agro-biodiversity (there were once 800 varieties of cows but now just 5 are found in Mexico), and how this reduces resilience to environmental perturbations such as disease.

Kurt Pawlik of the Psychology Institut at the University of Hamburg and past President of the ISSC, described a bit psychological/behavioral contributions to GEC research. He noted that the Nigerian concept of the environment is a social concept, and is very different from the European concept, which is more utilitarian. Policies will be very risky if these details of perception are not taken into account. He urged IHDP to consider the viewpoints of behavioral science. One of the projects championed by Harold Jacobson, another former President of ISSC, was the Global

Omnibus Environmental Survey. The project was ambitious and was never implemented, but might be reconsidered at the present time.

In the final ISSC presentation, **Ali Kazancigil**, the Secretary General of the ISSC, stated that if we take the Washington Consensus as given and unchangeable, then there is little hope of moving towards SD. Although the political outlook is not good for SD, there are also those global social and trans-national movements which are making their voices heard at the national level, and may eventually have some impact on global governance. Research on GEC should take into account this context.

In the discussion which followed, **Lourdes Arizpe** raised again the question concerning why social scientists haven't been able to sensitize people to the threats from GEC? From her research in the Lacadon Rainforest, she found that locals were aware of climate change because of heavier, more intense rains over fewer months, accompanied by higher winds. They also noted a lack of pollinators for their crops. She feels it is important to investigate local perceptions of GEC. **Coleen Vogel** of IHDP suggested we might also look at the perceptions of policy makers as well, though they are often driven by special interests. **Barbara Huddleston** suggested that it may be an overstatement to say that sensitization has not worked. Transmission of knowledge is a lengthy process, but eventually awareness building takes place, institutions change, and political will develops. **Roberto Guimaraes** suggested that we need to think about the value added from GEC research for the traditional sciences. **Roberto Sanchez** added that social sciences can add value to the understanding of GEC and SD. GEC is the interface between socio-economic and political on the one side and biophysical on the other. **Oran Yong** emphasized that if research into the human dimensions of GEC fails to attract the best and the brightest from the social sciences, then we will have failed, and the endeavor will be marginalized in the social sciences.

Alex de Sherbinin suggested that although understanding people's perceptions of the environment is valid, there is a fundamental disconnect between what people say and how they act with regards to the environment. We need to grapple with this issue if we wish to understand the micro-perspective of individual actors and their affect on, and vulnerability to, GEC. **V.R. Panchamukhi** of the Indian Council of Social Science Research stated that globalization of markets is just one form of globalization; there should also be a globalization of minds that agree on common goals. The current global system involves the sacrifice of the many for the benefit of the few; it should be the other way around. The general trend is towards privatization of services, yet things like drinking water are a public good and should be the responsibility of the state.

Day 2

The morning of second day focused on what realistically could be achieved by the workshop, and included some frank discussion on expectations. It was determined that it would not be useful to use the planned breakout groups to develop a laundry list of research questions related to GEC or SD. Rather, it was determined that the breakout groups should focus on areas of mutual interest, and on integrative frameworks for GEC research. Questions arose again about ISSC, and what it is. During a brief presentation on the structure of ISSC, **Lourdes Arizpe** and **Ali Kazancigil** emphasized that ISSC has one function: to represent the social science profession as a whole. ISSC wishes to create a sense of real community. Rather than focus on structures, they emphasized that ISSC is in the process of reinventing itself.

The breakout group on integrative frameworks addressed a number of issues which are presented here in bullet form:

- We need a proactive, even normative view of science. Not simply business as usual. We need to create a space for social sciences and policy. One approach to being proactive is scenarios development. Researchers could develop scenarios based on the world view of different actors. The scenarios sketch out what are the likely consequences of current trends and prevailing world views as opposed to alternative world views.
- Someone suggested that we need an ontology of science, one that includes ethical and moral considerations. The building blocks of a social science agenda related to SD and GEC would look at who controls power, and the underlying morals and values.
- Perceptions research was identified as a priority. Someone recommended bringing stakeholders together to say what kind of future they would like. We need to understand the dynamics of changing views.
- Sustainability science was mentioned as one form of normative science, with its emphasis on place-based research and consciously seeking sustainability through scientific and technological advances.
- It was mentioned that social scientists need to address the role of actors other than the state and the private sector, such as NGOs, civil society, and social movements.
- New frameworks for integrative research with the natural sciences are also needed that move well beyond the traditional approach in which biophysical scientists call upon social scientists to fill in gaps in their models. It was suggested that instead of speaking of the “human” component of human-environment systems, it should really be the “social” component of social-environment systems. Humans are more than just numbers or cumulated consumption demands. Humans collectively are involved in complex social processes. They are a key *variable* in the model in more ways than one. Instead of talking about *integration* of social and natural sciences, we need to talk about *interaction*.
- Multidisciplinary work involves not just putting each discipline together, but the restructuring of each discipline. The best way to do multidisciplinary work is to pose a concrete problem and have everyone work on it. It quickly uncovers the underlying assumptions, and causes the disciplines to grapple with tough questions. An example is the Global Carbon Project.

Conclusions

The meeting stimulated active debate and many interesting observations. Although the results were not conclusive, it represented a first step of more active dialog and engagement between ISSC and the IHDP constituencies. It was suggested that ISSC might focus on emerging issues and problem-oriented projects such as international public health; the information society and governance; disasters and risk; and minorities, ethnicity and globalization. It was further suggested that ISSC might spawn a new program looking at global social change, or the Social Dimensions of Globalization, as a counterpart to the IHDP.

The joint IUSSP-IHDP Population-Environment Research Network (PERN) was presented as one model that could help foster collaboration and networking among different branches of ISSC. It would appear that there the door is open for IUSSP to play a leading role in helping ISSC to conceptualize its new agenda, and to ensure that the demographic dimension is not overlooked. Demographers have insights to contribute that range from understanding the dynamics of the demographic transition (as an example of a sustainability transition); the role of personal knowledge, attitudes and perceptions as they relate to contraceptive practice (which can be seen as analogous to environmentally-relevant behaviors); and the role of population dynamics in environmental change. They can also contribute methodologically in SD and GEC research through expertise in survey research, household research, statistics, and mathematical modeling.