



Engaging the developing world

Almost two decades after the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, global sustainability is an even greater challenge as the planet faces unprecedented pressures. Changing climate is likely to affect countries from the global "South" disproportionately: droughts in the Amazon basin and in Africa, and floods and landslides in Rio de Janeiro and Bangladesh are among a few dramatic examples of extreme climate events that have been broadcasted internationally. And climate change also has the potential to exacerbate poverty and inequality in such countries.

An important reason for the higher vulnerability of developing nations to climate change is their relatively lower adaptive capacity, which is linked to their socio-economic systems. Unfortunately, human and financial resources to cope with such changes are limited despite the potential for such change to suppress economic growth and prosperity. In most of these countries, the environmental agenda still is seen to be competing with the economic development agenda.

The concept of a green economy is an attempt to reconcile economic interests with environmental protection and social justice in order to mitigate the impact of global environmental change. But it will take effort to ensure that this new development model will catch on in the developing world. Success depends, at least in part, on a partnership between policymakers, non-governmental organisations, industry and the scientific community. And there is also a need for a dialogue between these stakeholders from the developing and developed countries.

An excellent opportunity for such a dialogue will be provided by the Planet Under Pressure conference organised by IGBP and the other global-change research programmes, to be held in March 2012 in London. The conference

aims to discuss the state of the planet and explore solutions to move societies onto a sustainable pathway. The conference is timely not only because it precedes the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development – Rio+20 – but also because it is likely to bring to the centre of the debate issues pertaining to collective action and environmental justice. Notably, the conference is aiming at 40 percent representation from the developing world, and a strategy has been put in place to achieve this goal.

The scientific organising committee of the conference has set up a working group for engaging developing country scientists; the group consists of both young and senior researchers with a range of expertise and representing the developed as well as developing countries. The working group has already contacted regional networks, national academies and other organisations from developing countries to encourage participation in the conference.

An important service being provided is mentoring to those from the developing world who would like guidance in preparing abstracts and developing presentations for the conference. Mentors will provide advice and feedback on both the process and content of abstracts for session proposals and/or presentations, and will help the mentees apply for travel funds. They will also meet the mentees that come to the conference, and introduce them to others.

IGBP and its sister programmes recently sent out a call to their scientific steering committee members to encourage them to serve as mentors. The response has been good, and the working group on engaging developing-country researchers is following up actively. Mentoring should not take much time from the individuals that agree to participate, but it may confer substantial benefits to the mentees, to the conference and to the

efforts to build truly global networks.

Many scholars from developing nations deal with financial constraints to travel abroad to attend conferences. In many cases, only those who have contacts with established researchers end up attending. The working group is aware of this, and is exploring options to minimise it. One option, for example, is to tap into the network of IGBP national committees to cast the net wider than usual. A subset of the conference organisers is also working to secure adequate funding to support the attendance of developing-country scientists.

Another strategy is to tap into the experience and information gained from relatively recent initiatives seeking to draw in scholars from the developing world. For example, the 2009 workshop in Brazil entitled "Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (IAV): Research Needs and Priorities for Developing Nations" was able to gather 89 researchers, mostly from developing nations. And the National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPA) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) could be used also as a means of engaging scientists and policymakers from developing countries – this programme focuses especially on the least developed countries.

The goal of engaging almost a thousand scientists from the developing world is ambitious to say the least. But the progress so far has been encouraging and this endeavour warrants more sustained effort.

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