

The landscape of global-change research is in flux (see page 7). Top funders are calling on the international research programmes to refocus efforts to deliver knowledge that supports action and adaptation to regional environmental change. The International Council for Science – IGBP’s sponsor – is challenging the four global-environmental-change programmes to better integrate social-science research and provide policy-relevant knowledge in the service of global sustainability.

At the same time, other actors are beginning to explore new ways of achieving sustainability. The Global Sustainability Panel, recently set up by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, is an attempt to bring a holistic approach to bear on issues such as climate change, food and water security, and development.

Meanwhile, the four programmes and their partnership are preparing for an ambitious conference to be held in London in 2012 (see back cover). What differentiates this conference from others is the emphasis on a truly transdisciplinary approach and the desire to engage a broad community – scientists, funding agencies, policymakers, industry, non-governmental organisations and communications professionals – to find creative solutions to the most pressing global-change issues. There is a commitment to strive for 40 percent participation from the developing world.



Another distinguishing feature of the conference is the role that pre- and post-conference workshops will play. This reflects the belief that the diverse communities participating in a conference of this nature will need test beds to explore avenues for constructive collaboration. Outcomes of the workshops and the conference are

expected to feed into several processes and events. These include the 2012 Earth Summit in Rio and the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). And as Janos Pasztor (Ban Ki-moon’s Chief Climate Advisor) suggests in an interview on page 10, the preparatory process for the conference could also guide the Global Sustainability Panel’s deliberations.

Ambitions bring along several challenges too. An important one is to achieve an appropriate regional and gender balance. It is encouraging that the recently constituted scientific organising committee for the 2012 conference consists of a diverse set of women and men, representing a broad community. Another, perhaps tougher challenge, is to balance the reality of entrenched disciplinary boundaries and differing agendas with the desire for a transdisciplinary approach and a shared agenda.

The first test will be in London later this month, when the organising committee meets to decide on the preparatory process and themes to help shape the conference. There are good reasons to be optimistic about the results. ■

“What differentiates this conference from others is the emphasis on a truly transdisciplinary approach.”