Real Results

How IISD achieves measurable, meaningful impacts

IISD

International Institute for Sustainable Development

“Mankind is not destined to destroy itself...

War is not inevitable.
Poverty can be alleviated.
The environment can be preserved.
Injustices can be made right.”

With these inspiring words, Brian Mulroney, Canada’s 18th Prime Minister, announced a new centre to promote the concept of “environmentally sustainable development.” His speech in front of the United Nations took place on September 29, 1988; two years later, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) was created.

For 30 years, IISD has worked to fulfill a bold commitment to the world: advancing development that balances economic, social and environmental priorities. Here are some ways we make a difference.

Photo: UN DRR (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Sink, Swim... or Fight Back

In February 2016, the Pacific island of Fiji was hit by the largest tropical cyclone ever to make landfall in the Southern Hemisphere. Cyclone Winston killed dozens of people, left thousands homeless, devastated infrastructure and caused economic losses equal to a third of the nation's GDP.

"Winston has taught us all a lesson and has had an indelible impact on the national psyche," says Frank Bainimarama, Fiji's Prime Minister. "We know that because of the stronger and more frequent storms caused by climate change, it is only a matter of time before Fiji is struck again."

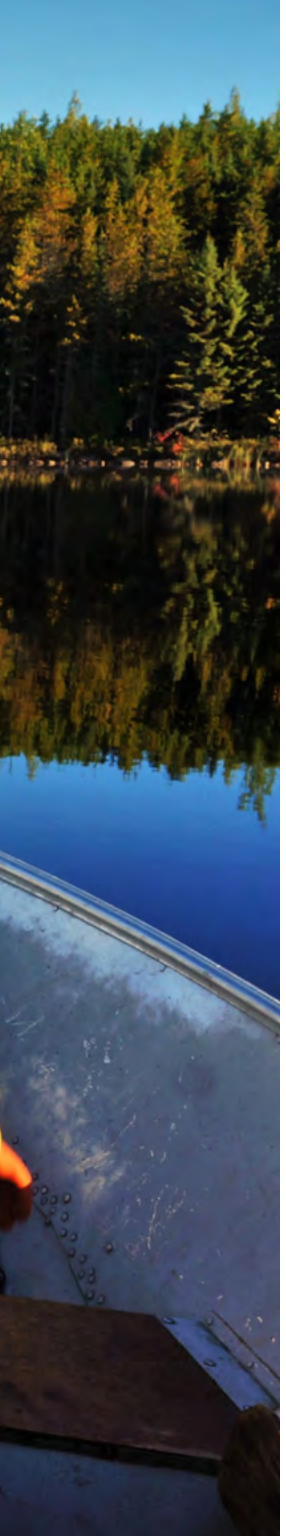
Fijians recognize that having the means to adequately adapt to extreme weather events, rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns is not just a policy objective—it's a matter of survival.

That's why Bainimarama prioritized making a plan across all levels of government. Fiji's National Adaptation Plan (NAP), which launched in December 2018, was created with technical and financial support from the NAP Global Network. With a focus on five key sectors—including health, infrastructure and food security—the plan lays out a wide range of adaptation actions that can work in cities as well as rural and maritime communities. These actions include relocating vulnerable communities threatened by rising seas and improving building codes to make infrastructure better able to withstand extreme weather events.

The plan aligns with other key strategies such as the National Climate Change Policy, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy and the Green Growth Framework. More importantly, it puts adaptation at the core of Fiji's national development planning process, highlighting just how critical reducing risk and efficiently responding to the climate threat is to the future of a small island nation like Fiji.

Other vulnerable nations around the world are following suit, reaching out to the NAP Global Network for guidance and support to develop and implement their own national adaptation strategies and build resilience to climate change impacts. These countries are, as the President of Kiribati recently noted, "not sinking, but fighting."

Is It Raining Plastic?



Plastics are everywhere. Microplastics—those tiny particles the size of a sesame seed or smaller—have been found on top of mountains; at the bottom of oceans; in rivers and lakes; and in whales, birds and fish.

It isn't too difficult to imagine how all that plastic ends up in our atmosphere. Research has shown as much as 75% of it comes from the disintegration of larger consumer products made of plastic—bottles, bags and fishing gear, for example. Synthetic clothing such as fleece is another culprit, as are the microbeads found in some health and beauty products (recently banned by the United States and Canada).

But even though we know there is too much plastic where it doesn't belong, there is a lot we still don't know. For example, what impacts do these plastics have on living organisms? Are plastic particles vectors for other contaminants? Do plastics build up in ecosystems? Can they travel through the air? More research, including on real ecosystems, is essential to understanding how big a problem microplastics really are—and how we can fix them.

Scientists at the IISD Experimental Lakes Area in Canada's pristine boreal forest are working to find answers. The 58 lakes that make up the outdoor laboratory are at the top of the watershed and are not fed by any significant upstream sources. This means researchers can monitor the air and water in and around the lakes to determine how much plastic pollution already exists in remote lakes. More than 50 years of existing data about the chemistry, biology and weather patterns at the site will help them understand what they discover.

The results of the research will inform governments and industry as they develop policies and procedures to regulate plastic pollution and ensure that microplastics do not reach our environment.

Photo: Zach Melanson/Community Forests International

Ending hunger means ending unnecessary human suffering, enabling people to escape the vicious trap of poverty and lead healthier and more productive lives.

But although the world produces enough to feed everyone, hundreds of millions still go to bed hungry. The reasons for this are complex. There are tensions between large- and small-scale agriculture, between industrial and ecological systems of production, and between food availability and food waste. War and weather make matters worse. Climate change is causing global hunger levels to rise, while at the same time, many agricultural practices accelerate climate change.

Feeding the Planet Without Destroying It

So, the question is, how do we ensure everyone has enough to eat without destroying the planet? What are the best methods of lifting people out of hunger and poverty, and what will it cost?

IISD has been grappling with these questions for years, working with partners like the International Food Policy Research Institute and Cornell University. Together we are creating a model to guide international donors on how much additional investment it would take to end hunger in the next decade and which interventions would deliver the greatest return on investment.

This work is a natural extension of IISD's overall goal: to help people and the planet thrive today without diminishing potential for tomorrow. By evaluating and advising on how to end hunger sustainably, we aim to transform the lives and incomes of the world's poorest farmers while preserving our precious environment.

Photo: Julien Harneis (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Clean Power with a Clean Conscience

Transitioning to a low-carbon economy is necessary for a cleaner, safer, healthier future. Any actions to reduce our carbon footprint must be carefully managed, however, to ensure they promote peace and sustainable development and do not exacerbate conflict and violence.

High-tech devices like solar panels, electric cars and wind turbines require a complex cocktail of minerals and metals to build and run. Some of the largest mineral reserves are found in countries with weak regulations and a history of instability and conflict.

To illustrate, consider the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The country has the largest global reserves of cobalt—essential for battery technology—alongside some of the lowest rankings for human development. Mining is the country's primary source of export income, so the anticipated spike in demand for cobalt as clean energy technologies take off could have positive economic benefits. But the DRC also has a history of violent conflict, corruption and weak governance. International organizations have witnessed child labour, dangerous conditions and human rights abuses at existing cobalt mining sites.

Being a conscious consumer means knowing the impacts of our purchase decisions and demanding responsible and accountable supply chains. This must include ensuring the resources required for clean energy are extracted and traded in a conflict-free way.

Recently, IISD overlaid fragility indicators with global reserves of 23 key minerals to map potential hotspots—places where increased demand could lead to grievances, tensions and conflicts. The study was the first of its kind to shed light on an important and often under-reported aspect of the clean energy conversation.

A number of initiatives, guidelines and laws are already in place or under development to prevent the flow of so-called conflict minerals (specifically tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold). IISD continues to advocate for these mechanisms to expand to the 23 "green conflict minerals" as well. That way, a lower carbon footprint will not come at the expense of people in the world's most vulnerable places.

Photo: DFID (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Solar Power Is Just a Switch Away

Kerosene is not an ideal fuel: it is dirty, dangerous, unhealthy and offers poor light. But millions of households in India still rely on subsidized kerosene because it is affordable and accessible, especially if the electricity grid has not yet reached their community or when electricity blackouts make kerosene lamps the only available option.

Kerosene subsidies cost the government of India over USD 1 billion in the 2015–16 fiscal year alone and represent over 40% of all fuel subsidies in the country. While fossil fuel subsidies can sometimes be important for energy access, poverty reduction and health interventions, they also make little sense in a world shifting to low-carbon sources of energy to tackle climate change.

Recently, IISD and its partner, The Energy and Resources Institute, proposed switching kerosene subsidies in India to off-grid solar products for households that still rely on kerosene.

It's known as a "subsidy swap"—reallocating some of the savings from reforming fossil fuel subsidies to fund a shift to clean energy solutions. Solar options are often cheaper over their lifetime, offer better lighting, and can even come with the ability to plug in and charge devices like mobile phones.

Such approaches could prove to be very popular: a survey of 9,000 rural households in India found that 84% were in favour of foregoing their kerosene subsidies in exchange for access to distributed renewable energy.

Thanks to IISD's advocacy and awareness efforts, the subsidy swap idea is catching on. In April of 2019, India's Ministry of New and Renewable Energy requested that the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas divert part of the cooking gas and kerosene subsidy to solar options.

As renewable energy becomes cheaper, swapping subsidies from fossil fuels to clean options can tip the balance and turn it into the most viable alternative. "It goes from being marginal to an absolute no-brainer," IISD's Richard Bridle recently told *The Guardian*.

The Double-Edged Sword of Investment

Photo: Ed Wray for IISD

Economies need investment to grow, expand public services, develop infrastructure and prepare for the impacts of climate change. With only a short time remaining to meet significant global commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, every penny is crucial.

But investment can be a double-edged sword. Just a few words in a treaty or agreement can cost governments millions—or even billions—of dollars.

Foreign investors often have access to a powerful mechanism known as investor–state dispute settlement, which allows them to sue if host governments enact policies that could harm profits. Investors bypass local courts and bring claims directly to an international tribunal that has the final say over whether policies in the public interest violate the vague terms of investment treaties. Countries cannot sue foreign investors.

Picture this: a country implements measures to curb tobacco use or ban deadly chemicals. As those measures could lead to a loss of profits, the investor files a dispute.

Over 900 such cases have been brought forward in recent decades. Losing a case can be crushing: the average award is over USD 500 million, and some cases have exceeded USD 1 billion, according to United Nations statistics. Decisions often go in favour of the investor.

The mere threat of a costly dispute has made many governments think twice before enacting policies that would enable sustainable development. This regulatory chill hurts real people and limits governments' policy space.

For several years, IISD has worked to shift the global narrative on investment away from a system that prioritizes investor protection to one that emphasizes the right of countries to achieve national and global development goals.

Our team has advised dozens of countries and regional groups and created the only global platform for government officials exclusively from developing and emerging economies to strategize collectively, exchange best practices and raise questions in a supportive environment. Additionally, IISD actively pursues systemic reform at the global level and produces tools to track trends, identify potential negotiating pitfalls and foster global dialogue.

With the stakes so high, IISD is committed to ensuring developing countries can attract responsible investment that advances sustainable development.

Cover photo: CIAT (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

ABOUT IISD

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) is an independent think tank championing sustainable solutions to 21st–century problems. Our mission is to promote human development and environmental sustainability. We do this through research, analysis and knowledge products that support sound policy-making. Our big-picture view allows us to address the root causes of some of the greatest challenges facing our planet today: ecological destruction, social exclusion, unfair laws and economic rules, a changing climate. IISD's staff of over 120 people, plus over 50 associates and 100 consultants, come from across the globe and from many disciplines. Our work affects lives in nearly 100 countries. Part scientist, part strategist—IISD delivers the knowledge to act.

IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c)(3) status in the United States. IISD receives core operating support from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations, the private sector and individuals.

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