

FEBRUARY 2013

OVERVIEW

IIED Sustainable Markets Group

Project name:
Green Economy Coalition

Project leader:
Oliver Greenfield

Time frame:
2011–2012

Cost:
£250,000

Objective:

To catalyse a global conversation about what our economies need to deliver for people and planet, and to arrive at the Rio+20 summit with a coherent policy proposal to make the transition to a green and fair economy.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Green Economy Coalition has built an alliance of over 30 global organisations, North and South, who are actively engaged in moving towards a green economy. Members range from environmental NGOs to trade unions to think tanks, but despite our diversity we have forged a common vision and described what a transition model could look like as well as the kind of policies that will get us there. As a result, at the end of our second phase of work in 2011–2012 we were able to arrive at Rio with a shared set of policies for catalysing change.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The 2009 Copenhagen climate change negotiations were a very low point in the history of intergovernmental cooperation on sustainable development. Fearing for their national competitiveness, countries would not commit to reducing their carbon output. The emergence of the green economy agenda is a response to that negativity. It emphasises the opportunities offered by a different economic model – for people, for businesses and for the planet. The Green Economy Coalition has worked to define a collective vision of this alternative pathway, based on principles of equity,

Building the big picture for a green economy

The Green Economy Coalition consulted diverse partners and challenging critics to put together its message for Rio+20.

Global summits on environmental and social issues follow a pattern – and compared with meetings on economics and finance, they are as different as the climates in Rio de Janeiro and Davos, Switzerland.

At the 2012 Rio+20 summit, the agenda matched related conferences over the last 20 years: ecological crises and economic inequality. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, the agenda has mirrored international news headlines: recession and debt crises. At Rio, open registration drew 50,000 delegates and a rainbow of nations, indigenous groups and NGOs. At Davos it costs US\$20,000 to rub shoulders with the cream of economic advisors. At inclusive events like Rio, governments reaffirm their good intentions but make less and less specific commitments. At exclusive Davos, the real decisions are made.

Yet Rio's theme of 'building a green economy' points to the need to reach elite economic architects. The Green Economy Coalition, an alliance of NGOs, research institutions, UN organisations, labour unions and business convened in 2009, has been looking at the big picture that spans Rio and Davos. The coalition connects sustainable development thinkers like IIED with new partners, audiences and interrogators, including those in finance and enterprise. Members are encouraged to look beyond their top-priority problems – whether saving

endangered species or saving manufacturing jobs – to the underlying economic drivers that need to change.

What does green mean?

Having put together a diverse and enthusiastic membership, the coalition worked from 2011 to 2012 on the challenge of defining a 'green economy'. In the run-up to Rio, conservative pundits criticised the concept as a socialist, big-government programme, while those left of centre suspected it as a profit scheme for capitalists. Some NGOs complain that UN organisations are imposing their idea of a green economy from the top down, while others say there is no clear idea and the term is too hazy.

The Green Economy Coalition's role is to amplify these different perspectives, while also defining a shared vision of an economy that works – one that delivers a better quality of life for all within the limits of the planet.

In one intergovernmental conference, the timetable was put on hold while the coalition worked with fellow NGOs to agree nine principles of a green economy they could get behind. In another project, coalition members explored unfamiliar depths of the financial world, meeting with sustainability-minded banks to exchange ideas on how to promote long-term economic health. When the coalition sat down to translate much-discussed ideals into policy proposals for the Rio summit, we

poverty reduction and respecting ecological limits. By bringing together global institutions that represent different stakeholder groups, we can effect change within those institutions and through their networks as well. And by acting collectively, we also increase our influence in intergovernmental discussions.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- To help a coalition thrive, find a committed champion within each organisation. Alliance-based programmes often start with a burst of optimism, but they need champions to maintain momentum through the process of confronting differences and building trust.
- The crisis narrative has limited appeal. Before they will risk moving out of the 'brown economy', mainstream decision makers need to hear about positives, opportunities and success stories that are already happening.
- To catalyse a broader movement, we also have to speak to urgent concerns for governments and ordinary people. Whether it is rising unemployment or Occupy protests, the sustainable development community must embrace 'headline' issues and make itself relevant.

PARTNERS' VIEW

The Green Economy Coalition has filled a niche by facilitating global consensus on grassroots concerns.

George Varughese
Development Alternatives, India

IIED SUSTAINABLE MARKETS GROUP

The Sustainable Markets Group drives IIED's efforts to ensure that markets contribute to positive social, environmental and economic outcomes. The group brings together IIED's work on market governance, business models, market failure, consumption, investment and the economics of climate change.



The Green Economy Coalition has defined a collective vision for an alternative pathway, based on principles of equity, poverty reduction and respecting ecological limits.

discovered new fault lines and eventually bridged them.

To forge this dialogue over time, the Green Economy Coalition needed patience and commitment — especially the commitment of individual champions within each organisation. Champions who believed in the coalition's mission sustained its energy by linking it to their day-to-day work; they promoted the coalition to others and reshaped their own research based on what we were learning collectively. Finding these champions early on was a shortcut in building partner relationships. IIED could take the same route in current and future work with networks and alliances.

The power of positive messaging

A key lesson came when the coalition put its vision on trial, inviting representatives of Unilever, Oxfam and other high-profile outsiders to critique the recommendations for Rio. In particular, Unilever and the management consultancy Accenture agreed that our message was far too negative. Instead of fears, threats and demands, they urged an emphasis on opportunities, prizes and success.

At the Green Economy Coalition's secretariat, this led to soul-searching about whether to take messaging advice from big industry. But the exposure to our toughest critics became a turning point. The policy prescriptions were reworked in a booklet that holds out a positive future and successful case studies. Going forward, the coalition wants to keep showing where and how

green economy principles are already thriving.

But in addition to needing optimism, the global conversation on sustainable development has a relevancy problem. The Green Economy Coalition needed to connect not only with Rio's talking points, but with the gnawing worries of Davos delegates — and the anger fuelling protests and riots in recent years.

We focused on economic stagnation and growing budget deficits as part of the crisis that a green economy needs to address, and on creating jobs — good, plentiful and stable jobs — as part of the solution. When coalition members came into contact with the Occupy movement and other social movements in Rio, the activists expressed hunger for knowledge about alternatives to the economic status quo, while we learnt more about what is driving the feelings of frustration on the streets of cities around the world.

At coalition meetings, we now propose checking our agenda against hot issues in the wider world, and we think about how to tap that energy. Post-Rio, the coalition is shifting focus towards the national level, and here we will look in finer detail at the problems keeping leaders awake at night. To catalyse a broad movement for sustainable development, we have to meet those burning concerns with a relevant, realistic and hopeful way forward.

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