



Becoming a Sustainability Leader

Exploring IISD's role in shaping the next generation of sustainable development leadership

Executive Summary by:

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For 10 years, from 1997 to 2007, IISD has engaged, trained and remained connected with some of the best and brightest young Canadians in the sustainability field.

We've recognized, from the beginning, that sustainability won't be achieved within one generation and that the next generation will need to bring their fresh ideas and their own commitment to securing the future for generations to come. We have challenged ourselves to find young professionals with the potential to make a difference given the right opportunity, access to key institutions, on-the-job learning and networks of peers, experts and mentors.

BECOMING A SUSTAINABILITY LEADER



This Executive Summary, and the comprehensive report from which it is drawn, describe, in a very personal and direct way, what IISD's internship program has meant to its alumni. The study we conducted has provided us with a greater understanding of what it takes to put young professionals on track to change the world.

For IISD and the future of its work with young professionals, the report raises a number of important questions and opportunities. Clearly, we have had great success with our program so far. But is that enough? While each one of the 300 plus participants has gone on to make his or her mark on the world, we need to work with hundreds more—and not just Canadians, but with young professionals from other countries who face similar challenges in gaining entry to the fora where decisions are made, in order to learn and, ultimately, to lead.

We cannot do this on our own. And so we hope that other institutions will review this report, and work with us to engage, train and advance the best and brightest from Canada and around the world. We need to find and support the decision-makers for tomorrow, today.

Heather Creech, Director, Knowledge Communications
International Institute for Sustainable Development

This document is the Executive Summary of a comprehensive report. That full report is available at http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2007/sustainability_leader.pdf

“The world doesn’t easily break into categories anymore... Maybe a leader is someone who can see and understand trends and risks, and take chances on ideas based on that understanding and then motivate people to achieve those ideas. Sustainability has a lot to do with understanding trends based on resource flows. It’s essentially a forward-looking discipline. Decision-makers for tomorrow, today.”

– Jacob Malthouse, Regional Liaison, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), USA (Former IISD Intern, UNEP Finance Initiative, Switzerland)

New ways of thinking are required to achieve sustainable development in Canada and around the world. The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) has made a commitment to engaging new generations in sustainable development, to ensure that the work that is being done today is continued into the future, with fresh insights and new dedication. From its beginnings in 1990, IISD has engaged young people in its work, both to build their capacity and in turn learn from their contributions. Over the past decade, **IISD’s flagship program with young professionals has been its internship program.** The program gives entry to, and experience with, key sustainable development organizations around the world, providing the foundation for a career in sustainable development policy and practice, and the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to global sustainability.

A total of 311 people have benefited from IISD’s young professionals program from 1997 to 2007. IISD has placed these interns with over 90 partner institutions in 40 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and North America. **IISD still has contact with over 93% of the alumni; and 86% noted recently that they are still in touch with other former interns.** The social network created through this program is clearly robust and cohesive, fostered by IISD but with sustained engagement by the alumni.

The internship program has played a role in inspiring **78% of its alumni to continue working in the sustainability field;** of the remainder, many consider that they are making a contribution through personal, sustainable lifestyles. **The people who go through this program stay focused on sustainability work for the long haul.** Most live in Canada now, although alumni can be found in India, Switzerland, South Africa, the U.S., Kenya and Norway. One-third of the alumni now work in for-profit enterprises, with the remainder working in non-profit, government or intergovernmental agencies. Almost all interns have worked in more than one sector as their careers have evolved. **This mobility—across sectors, across borders—combined with a long-standing commitment to the goal of sustainability—is a fundamental characteristic of the new generation of SD leaders.**



We know where our alumni are working now, and we know that they are in leadership positions in all sectors. We also know that they are keen to explore further opportunities for developing their skills and knowledge base. By surveying a decade of interns and hearing about their career trajectories, it has become clear that there is a **cycle of learning that takes place from formal learning into an experiential training experience** (e.g., internship, often followed by a job) **and then—in 60% of the cases—back to a formal learning environment before re-engaging with the work force.**

From January to March 2007, IISD took the opportunity to learn from these interns as well as their host organizations. The Institute wanted to test what would truly “jump start” a sustainability career for a young professional—what is the mix of skills, values and training required? Research was carried out primarily through **in-depth surveys** with IISD’s former interns and with a second group of young professionals, writers from IISD’s Reporting Services program. **It is a measure of success of the internship program that 72% of the interns with whom we have contact responded to the surveys, indicating their personal commitment to this type of programming, and their view of the importance of leadership development for global sustainability.** The percentage of responses by gender and cohort are consistent with the overall distribution of interns by gender and cohort, suggesting that the findings are representative of the population as a whole. Over a third of Reporting Services writers responded, providing us with a valuable comparison of views in order to validate our overall findings.

Based on a literature review, the research team identified 21 skill sets and 19 value sets that help “define” a sustainability leader (these are described in

the full report). In addition, the team prepared questions that would help interns explore how they acquired these attributes, through formal and informal settings. The first half of the paper provides ideas from this research about the qualities of a sustainability leader. The second half of the paper explores the role IISD can, and does, play in fostering this leadership.

The research demonstrates the clear need for training of young professionals that integrates on-the-job experience. Although IISD has been open to a shift in direction for the internship program, the research results strongly recommend maintaining a similar structure into the future.

In terms of the **qualities of a sustainability leader**, the study highlights the knowledge, skills, values and attributes needed to work effectively on sustainability issues. The study found that individual training is still a cornerstone of leadership development; however, there is a noted shift across the survey group to thinking about **leadership as a team endeavour**, rather than an individual pursuit. Furthermore, **values were identified as the distinguishing factor in sustainability leadership**: “If you share the values [described in this survey]...and communicate your ideas to others or work towards them in your own way, you don’t need a job title to confirm it,” noted one respondent. Indeed, when asked who they considered to be leaders, alumni more often mentioned those with whom they had a more personal connection, as team members and mentors, rather than “marquee” leaders such as Al Gore or David Suzuki.

“The research demonstrates the clear need for training of young professionals that integrates on-the-job experience.”

The values, beliefs and aptitudes that were ranked most highly include a capacity for innovation and a global mindset.

The personal commitment to a sustainable lifestyle was also pointed out as resonant across the whole field. Peer networking and experiential learning play key roles in fostering these values in young professionals. **Of the skills required, communications was at the top of the list.** Understanding how to engage people was key—the ability to work across sectors, personality types and cultures for a better future.

With respect to **IISD's role in fostering sustainability leadership**, the research demonstrates the clear need for training of young professionals that integrates on-the-job experience. The study found that a six-month experiential learning program—the model for IISD's internship program—is long enough to teach young people important and transferable skills including communications, team work and project management. This study has found that the key skills for sustainability professionals are learned on the job, in concert with course work and peer learning. With this in mind, the **focus on entry-level professionals** should be maintained for the IISD internship program. It exposes young people to both overseas and sustainability work at a time when they are actively shaping their career path and views on the world. The learning process is accelerated at entry-level with new skills to acquire on everything from project management to stakeholder engagement. Host organizations express particular satisfaction in mentoring young professionals at this dynamic stage in their careers, as well as appreciating young people's

fresh outlook and passion. The demand for interns from host organizations is based on the fact that IISD's internship program is competitive and **the resulting pool of interns is outstanding.** Hosts confirm that their **interns contribute substantively to the organizations with which they are placed** while benefiting personally from the learning experience. The vast majority of interns hit the ground running, making very real contributions to the teams with which they work, whether organizing conferences, writing reports or facilitating on-the-ground change. The program is a fantastic learning experience and inspiring for most of the interns.

Interns are placed with a variety of organizations—NGOs, IGOs, business associations and academic research institutes—and this is a hallmark of the program. During the six months, the interns benefit from peer learning across this diversity of placements. In general, though, the placements are concentrated on NGO and intergovernmental organizations; interns often have more opportunity to delve into a variety of tasks and be involved in strategic discussions in these types of placements. But the research suggests that **skills that interns acquire are definitely transferable across sectors, including from the not-for-profit to private sector positions** later in their careers.

In addition, the research results emphasize the **benefit of the overseas component** of the program, across multiple dimensions. Alumni noted how their international exposure has been critical for developing their geo-political awareness and a global mindset, key to understanding dynamics across the North and South, the political environment that underpins sound decision-making, and the interconnectivity of the planet's consumption and production patterns. This is true for placements in developed countries as well as those in the South. **Stepping outside one's own context seems to enhance young professionals' ability to span disciplines and cultures, which spurs their capacity for innovation. As there are few blueprints in sustainability work, this is a critical aptitude.** Also, when alumni return to Canada (as the majority do), they bring this global perspective into the Canadian workforce, informing national work on sustainability and other issues.



The study found that the **internship opens doors to Canadian and international opportunities to advance sustainable development throughout their careers—**

opportunities that are otherwise hard to find at entry-level. Alumni go on to work in a variety of jobs across skill bases and issue areas around the world. After the internship, this 300-strong alumni network continues to expose young professionals to a wide range of career opportunities and perspectives in sustainable development. As former intern Alexandra Baillie wrote: *“It is very difficult for someone without experience to find entry-level opportunities. The internship really got my career going.”*

The research study provides IISD and the sustainability community with insights into the sustainability career path and how an overseas internship can support young professionals in developing their leadership capacity and, in turn, furthering progress towards sustainable development.

The study concludes by noting several key issues worth further investigation:

- Given the shift to thinking about leadership as a team effort, how can training for team work and team management in the sustainable development field be reinforced? Does the concept of leadership become more fluid, attaching itself to different combinations of individuals and actions as circumstances require? **IISD should investigate further the leadership-by-team modality, and build this into its efforts to develop the next generation of SD leadership teams.**
- Corporate trends suggest that employees are more loyal to a profession than an organization.¹ Given the demonstrated mobility of interns across countries and sectors, and their transitions in and out of formal education, what are the implications for hiring practices and indeed for new organizational models that would support sustainability leadership progression as distinct from career progression within an institution? **IISD should work more closely with the HR and organizational management communities to understand how to use career mobility as an asset to furthering sustainable development.**
- Many of the alumni expressed an interest in receiving further training through IISD, in particular in the issues on which IISD works. How can the life-long learning cycle best be supported for emerging sustainability leaders? **IISD should review how to support relationships and learning for the cohort of leaders it has already begun to foster through the internship program.**

BECOMING A SUSTAINABILITY LEADER

¹ Dr. Kimiz Dalkir, Netcorps Knowledge Management Seminar, Montreal 2007



“IISD wants to guide the new generation of professionals into channelling their values, their passion and commitment...”

- Respondents identified values and aptitudes, such as a capacity for innovation and a personal commitment to a sustainable lifestyle, as distinguishing features for leadership in sustainable development. But for those young professionals that have not [yet] demonstrated these aptitudes or values, how does one foster them? At what point in a young person’s education and learning can one begin to introduce these capacities and commitments? **IISD should look to its partners in the formal education sector to explore how to foster values and aptitudes as part of sustainability education.**
- IISD’s program has, for a decade, concentrated on young Canadians. Equally important is the need to provide a similar experience to young professionals from other countries, and especially those from developing and transitional countries. Are the skills for sustainability leadership universal? Is IISD’s model for transferring and enhancing those skills appropriate for young professionals from other countries? **IISD should conduct an extensive feasibility study and map potential international partners to lay the foundation for an expansion of our work:**
 - to bring young professionals from other countries into IISD’s program; and
 - to establish a consortium of leading international sustainability organizations to coordinate next generation leadership training as a larger global initiative.

“The internship really got my career going.”

We have learned from this study that sustainable development leadership is leadership by values and leadership by teams and networks of committed individuals. IISD wants to guide the new generation of professionals into channelling their values, their passion and commitment into working together for a sustainable future. We want to ensure that the sustainable development work being done today is continued into the future, with their fresh insights and new dedication.

Our vision is to help every young professional in the world who is passionate about securing the future to become:

- knowledgeable about sustainable development policy, planning and implementation in their countries and sectors of work;
- connected to leading experts and institutions throughout the world;
- networked with each other, across country, culture and sector boundaries;
- skilled in using the essential tools for influence and impact on decision-making, locally, nationally and internationally; and
- able and committed to working together for the future.

The world’s youth are seeking passion. Passion for their futures, passion for what they can do to protect their environment and passion for their work. These passionate professionals are sustainability’s future.



The International Institute for Sustainable Development contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change, measurement and assessment, and natural resources management. Through the Internet, we report on international negotiations and share knowledge gained through collaborative projects with global partners, resulting in more rigorous research, capacity building in developing countries and better dialogue between North and South.

OUR VISION AND MISSION

IISD's vision is better living for all—sustainably; its mission is to champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably. 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 Government of Canada, provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Environment Canada; and from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations and the private sector.

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