

## A Successful Institution in a Struggling System: The Story of the International Institute for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development in Canada

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It is easy to assume quickly that “sustainable development” deals mainly, or even exclusively, with environmental matters. But the very concept was designed to encompass much more than the pursuit of clean air and clean water. Sustainable development and its champions strive for—and celebrate—the critical union among environmental health, economic progress, and well-being for all people.

Although the specifics of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)’s research and objectives have changed over the years, the human dimension has always been at the core of IISD’s reason for being. The Canadian-based International Institute for Sustainable Development, begun in 1990 in the wake of the Brundtland Commission, continues to pursue ideas and projects that will improve the lives of all people.

For example, IISD studies and promotes policy tools designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and ways in which economies and communities can benefit in a carbon-constrained future. But IISD is also on the leading edge of understanding adaptation to climate change. Recognizing that impacts of climate change are already upon us, IISD keeps a sharp policy focus on how small-island states, Arctic communities, drought-ravaged populations, and other vulnerable people can understand and take action to adapt their livelihoods to the impacts of climate change.

IISD’s work in trade is predicated on the belief that international trade can be a force for achieving sustainable development, that properly crafted and effectively implemented international trade policies can play a key role in achieving environmental benefits while advancing developed and developing country economies. The work also includes a focus on international investment treaties as tools for achieving sustainable development and improving the economic prospects of people in developing countries. A key element of this work lies in

helping officials from the developing world negotiate treaties that are consistent with the basic tenets of sustainable development.

The institute is also engaged in the vigorous study of natural resource management issues in its home province of Manitoba and elsewhere, with a particular focus on prairie agriculture and water availability and quality. Through its work with indicators, measurement, and assessment, IISD is actively involved in identifying quality of life indicators at a community level and using these to inform actions in the community.

As this chapter describes, IISD was an early adopter of electronic communications tools and, to this day, continues to keep international negotiations transparent through its far-reaching coverage of major meetings and conferences. And the institute is now looking at the exciting, evolving policy field of Internet governance and how the future of a secure, accessible Internet is an essential part of the infrastructure for the advancement of sustainable development.

To achieve its broad aims and to remain nimble and adaptable, IISD taps into top research talent around the world, partners with like-minded organizations, and seeks relationships with community leaders and decision makers in business, government, and civil society. In its people-centered view, IISD believes that we are all partners in the pursuit of a better world and a meaningful, prosperous, sustainable future.

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2007 marks the twentieth anniversary of one of the most pivotal reports in the history of environmental policy. This report, titled *Our Common Future*, was developed as a global agenda for change and was released in 1987 into a world hungry for guidance and action on environmental issues.

One of the strengths of *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report, named after Gro Harlem Brundtland, chair of the UN commission that produced the report, was that it presented the world with a fundamentally different way of looking at the environment. It defined sustainable development (SD) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike previous environmental paradigms, *Our Common Future* provided an integration of economic development and the environment, two notions that had been seen as mutually exclusive because of groups such as the Club of Rome, which in its *Limits to Growth* study appealed for conservationism in the face of rapidly diminishing resources. This linkage between the environment and the economy was very popular, particularly in political circles, and gained endorsement in principle from the G-7 leaders at the Toronto Summit in 1988. This definition of SD became more popular during the preparations for, and culmination of, the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992.<sup>2</sup>

*Our Common Future* provided a number of recommendations which, along with the highly popular definition of SD, led to visible institutional changes in

Canada. For instance, it is possible to identify direct linkages between the Brundtland Commission's recommendations and the establishment of one particularly successful Canadian organization, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).

In the twenty years since the release of the Brundtland Report, this institution has had the opportunity to grow, mature, and come into its own. Today, IISD is internationally recognized for its work. This chapter will examine the IISD in six sections. The first will look at the genesis of the institution through an identification of the drivers that led to its creation, including a combination of public interest, political landscape, and institutional structure that are at the foundations of the institute. Second, the major eras of IISD will be detailed, beginning with how the institute has developed and changed over time from its early days as a relatively unknown player on the international field to being a world-renowned institution. Third, the internal and external barriers and challenges that have faced the organization will be addressed. Section four will then provide an account of the opportunities and breakthroughs that have helped shape the growth of the institute, including key meetings, major turning points, and the creation of strategic opportunities. The fifth section examines organizational issues and how fundamental institutional aspects like finances, personnel, and location have shaped the orientation and growth of IISD. The final section will provide an examination of the road ahead for IISD and sustainable development in Canada. It will assess the success of IISD and comment on its meaning for Canada's engagement with sustainable development in an institutional sense.

This chapter concludes that, although IISD is a very successful institution, it is a single institution and is not representative of how SD has fared in Canada in a general sense. This juxtaposition of a successful organization within a struggling system provides a demonstration of the capacity of Canadian organizations when they are able to harness expertise and innovative thinking. IISD's experience is important because it has remained a strong and relevant organization in spite of potentially catastrophic organizational crises, risky endeavors, and tumultuous times for the government of Canada. This is a testament to IISD's strong and dedicated leadership, which has been tested on many occasions only to emerge even stronger and more determined. Thus, while little has been done to significantly change the way we do things in the twenty years since the Brundtland Commission first offered its recommendations, IISD is an illustration of the real potential of Canadian sustainable development institutions.

#### **GENESIS: IDENTIFICATION OF DRIVERS**

In the late 1980s, public interest in the environment was running very high. This was a time of great environmental awareness both in Canada and around the world. Awareness was raised by highly publicized environmental catastrophes in the mid-1980s such as the chemical leak in Bhopal, India; the severe drought in Ethiopia; the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, Soviet Union; and the discovery of a

hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica, all of which occurred between 1984 and 1986. "These were accompanied by later, somewhat more national and continental issues, such as the PCB fire at St. Basile-le-Grand; the huge tire fire in Hagersville, Ontario; and, last but not least, the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska."<sup>3</sup> With all these events occurring within a short period of time, environmental awareness in Canada reached a fever pitch.

It was in the midst of this atmosphere that the Brundtland Commission sent twenty-two men and women from its task force to Canada for a series of eleven high-profile meetings in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. During these meetings, the commission listened to a wide variety of ideas and opinions from a range of individuals, including environment ministers, aboriginal leaders, industry leaders, environmental stakeholders, and students.<sup>4</sup>

Even before *Our Common Future* was brought forth, the message of the commission was already quite clear. It described the observable environmental trends as "appalling," and equated the slow and insidious process of environmental degradation to the spread of cancer.<sup>5</sup> So in 1986, the combination of public interest, heightened by the commission's extensive Canadian tour and the impending release of the commission's recommendations, caused governments in Canada to take action. The Canadian Council of Resource and Environment Ministers, which was the committee made up of federal and provincial ministers of environment, established the National Task Force on Environment and Economy (NTFEE) "to initiate dialogue on environment-economy integration among Canada's environment ministers, senior executive officers from Canadian industry, and representatives from environmental organizations and the academic community."<sup>6</sup>

The NTFEE supported the main conclusions of the Brundtland Commission in principle and set out to address them in the Canadian context. The final report of the task force made a series of recommendations that reflected the relevance of the Brundtland Commission to Canada. It was from the report's significant international component that the idea for the creation of an international institute for sustainable development first emerged.

The creation of the institute was solidified when, in 1988, Brian Mulroney addressed the United Nations General Assembly debate on the Brundtland Report. The Prime Minister's Office was looking for a concrete announceable to include in his speech to his international counterparts. Given the immense public appetite for environmental action and the opportunity to address an international forum, it was a perfect time for Mulroney to announce the establishment of an institution with a focus on international environmental issues. The result was the announcement on September 29, 1988, by the prime minister to the United Nations General Assembly of the establishment of "a centre which will promote internationally the concept of environmentally sustainable development. This centre will be located in Winnipeg and will work closely with the United Nations Environment Programme and other like-minded international institutions and organizations."<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, in March 1990, the Globe 90 Conference was held in Vancouver. At that time, it was one of the largest environmental conferences ever held, with over 2,000 delegates attending and more than 600 exhibitors from 50 countries.<sup>8</sup> Gro Harlem Brundtland delivered a keynote address during the week-long conference, stressing that “the [global environmental] crisis is a more real threat to the world than nuclear war, but unless the gap between rich and poor nations is bridged, it will continue to grow.”<sup>9</sup>

Globe 90 provided the perfect backdrop for the signing of the funding agreement for IISD by Gary Filmon, premier of the Province of Manitoba, where the institute would be headquartered, and federal environment minister Lucien Bouchard. The agreement provided the new institution with \$25 million over five years, funded by the government of Manitoba, and the government of Canada through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Environment Canada.<sup>10</sup>

### Politics

The political landscape at the time of the IISD’s creation was one in which environmental issues had gained significant momentum. However, environmental issues were not an immediate or natural fit for the Progressive Conservative government. The environment did not figure prominently into the government’s neoconservative agenda, which focused primarily on economic issues such as reducing the role of the state in the economy and promoting free trade.<sup>11</sup> The Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development provided the kind of connection between the environment and the economy that made environmental issues more popular with the Conservatives.

But even with the linkages made between the environment and the economy through sustainable development, the federal government was generally anxious about the recommendations that would come out of the Brundtland report. Public expectations were high, and in order to preempt the advice that would come out, or *Our Common Future*, the NTFEE was assembled in 1986, following the Brundtland Commission’s visit, in order to assess the relevance of the commission’s work for Canada.<sup>12</sup>

The environment figured prominently in the 1988 election campaign, during which Mulroney promised to deliver a strategy for the environment. Once the government was re-elected, the 1989 Speech from the Throne emphasized its commitment to the environment through the recognition of environmental issues, strong support for the recommendations of the Brundtland Commission, and the announcement of a new environmental agenda.<sup>13</sup>

Major changes at the Department of Environment reflected this new agenda. The environment portfolio experienced a rapid increase in importance thanks to the creation of the cabinet Committee on the Environment. The minister of environment was also added to the roster of key cabinet committees, including the powerful cabinet Committee on Priorities and Planning. The result was positive from the

perspective of environmental issues. Not only was the department more powerful, but this was also the first time since its creation that the department enjoyed the unequivocal support of the prime minister. However, this additional power came at a price because of concerns around the cabinet table about departmental autonomy<sup>14</sup> in the face of an increasingly influential Department of Environment. There was also anxiety surrounding the financial burden created by this department taking on large and ambitious projects during a time of fiscal restraint. This included *Canada's Green Plan for a Healthy Environment*, a CDN\$3 billion<sup>15</sup> environmental master plan that required government-wide participation.

It was in the midst of this political turmoil that IISD was created. However, because of the fact that it was designed as an independent institution, a characteristic that will be discussed in the next section, it was insulated from the internal strife that characterized the government of Canada during this period.

### Institutional Structure

IISD is a private, not-for-profit organization that was created under the Canada Corporations Act, Part II: Corporations Without Share Capital. The institution's incorporation letters were signed by Jim MacNeill, the former secretary general of the World Commission on Environment and Development and the primary author of *Our Common Future*; by the late J. C. Gibson, a member of the faculty of agriculture at the University of Manitoba; and by Lloyd McGinnis, a professional engineer who was awarded the prestigious Gold Medal Award as Canada's Outstanding Engineer in 1986.<sup>16</sup>

The structure of the organization was a popular model,<sup>17</sup> somewhat similar to other institutions such as the International Development Research Centre, the International Centre for Ocean Development, and the Economic Council of Canada.<sup>18</sup> These government-owned "crown corporations" were characterized by funding arrangements in which the government would provide the funding they needed to define their core businesses and establish relationships with stakeholders.<sup>19</sup>

It is likely that the decision to make IISD a private, nonprofit organization was taken because both federal and provincial governments were involved in its creation, making a crown corporation impossible.<sup>20</sup> The institution was developed as a kind of hybrid, receiving funding both from the government of Canada through CIDA and Environment Canada as well as the government of Manitoba.

The establishment of the institution as an independent organization has been lauded as an "inspired decision"<sup>21</sup> for a number of reasons. First, it has enabled IISD to take risks that would have been prohibitive for government and to produce reports that would have been difficult to create in a bureaucratic environment. Second, the government has allowed the institution to appoint its own board members without intervention, allowing IISD to establish a highly skilled and engaged board of directors, one that has been described as one of the best boards of any like institution.<sup>22</sup> Finally, it has given IISD the freedom to determine its

funding structure, giving it a great amount of flexibility to decide the ways in which its funds will be used.

Even though it is an independent institution, IISD maintains close relationships with its funders. It has entrenched this relationship in the organization's bylaws, which grant observer status to the president of CIDA, the deputy minister of Environment Canada, the chief civil servant of Manitoba, and that province's deputy minister of the environment, allowing them to participate in board meetings. IISD has found that the benefit of having major donors participate in this way is that they are able to gain an understanding of what the institution is doing and identify ways in which they are able to collaborate.<sup>23</sup>

Although Canadian-based, IISD's relevance as an international organization is exemplified by the composition of its board of directors. Roughly half the members of the board come from outside of Canada, which has led to a variety of individuals from around the world contributing to the work of the institution. This means that international perspectives are always a consideration for the board of directors, an undeniably important characteristic for an organization striving for a voice in international fora.

### MAJOR ERAS

During the first two years of its existence, IISD was relatively inactive from an external perspective, but internally the groundwork was being laid. The early days of IISD were spent debating the key internal elements of the organization such as the mission, the structure, and the programs. The founding chair, Lloyd McGinnis, recalls:

In those early days we spent as much time telling people what we were not going to do as we did outlining our plans. Responding to a question on television in the spring of 1990 in Vancouver, I stated that no, we were not going to spend our funding on bricks and mortar, and no we would not be employing lab coats. As the interview pressure mounted, I somehow blurted out that the Canadian challenge was to convert a concept into practice—and we were on our way.<sup>24</sup>

In 1991 "IISD's mandate as refined by the Board of Directors, had become clearly focused on two main areas of activity: policy research and communications."<sup>25</sup> By this time, research themes had also been identified and included the integration of environment and economics in decision making, institutions for sustainable development, and reforming public policies. Possibly the most important topic undertaken by IISD was that of trade and sustainable development within the area of public policy research. David Runnalls, who had been offered the job of president of IISD, instead joined the institute as a consultant to establish a program on trade and sustainable development. This area of research faced a considerable amount of skepticism when it was first introduced,<sup>26</sup> but it turned out to be a very timely decision: environmental issues began to be a topic for discussion in major trade agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and

Trade (GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The result was that IISD was at the forefront of research on trade and environment linkages, and had developed expertise that allowed it to address the issues faced by both the GATT and NAFTA. Since this decision to focus on trade and sustainable development, this area has consistently been one of IISD's largest programs.

Communications have always been important for IISD, as highlighted by its first mandate, and have always played an important role in its activities. One key way the institution has changed since its inception is through its use of the Internet. As early as 1991, the organization was examining how it could become more connected through information networks. The annual report from that year details communications objectives involving the "exploration of international computer networking relationships."<sup>27</sup> In 1994 IISD launched the organization's website, IISDnet, a fully electronic database "allowing fast and focused computer access to the Institute's information clearinghouse."<sup>28</sup> This early adoption of Internet technology likely made IISD the first nongovernmental organization (NGO) to have this kind of Internet presence, giving it a wide-open field in which to establish itself.

The continued growth of the Internet and electronic communications has helped IISD solidify its place as a world leader in sustainable development and as an important source of information on environmental issues. The early uptake of this new technology turned out to be one of the most important decisions made by that early board, and has led to IISD's prominence on the Internet and as a leader in electronic accessibility. By making information accessible to everyone and establishing an early presence on the Internet, IISD was able to position itself as a leader in information dissemination at a time when most organizations were still relying on traditional methods for getting their data out to their audiences.

The website is not the only way that IISD has found a way to expand and improve its commitment to communications. Launched in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)—also known as the Earth Summit—in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB)* continues to be one of IISD's most successful products. It was released daily at the conference under the name *Earth Summit Bulletin*, and consisted of a concise and comprehensive summary of the negotiations that was distributed to conference delegates. The distribution of this report on the state of the negotiations at the Earth Summit reached 10,000 copies,<sup>29</sup> both printed and via electronic bulletin boards, and highlighted the need for this kind of service. After the Earth Summit, IISD offered the *ENB* an institutional home, and since then, the service has continued to grow. It is now created and distributed at major conferences all over the world.

A third era in IISD's history is possibly the most substantial in terms of defining how the organization was run. In 1995 the government of Canada, headed by Prime Minister Jean Chretien, conducted a review of its funding to programs. IISD faced a "monumental slash" of its core funding<sup>30</sup> as Environment Canada's funding to the organization was reduced by 91 percent between 1996 and 1998,

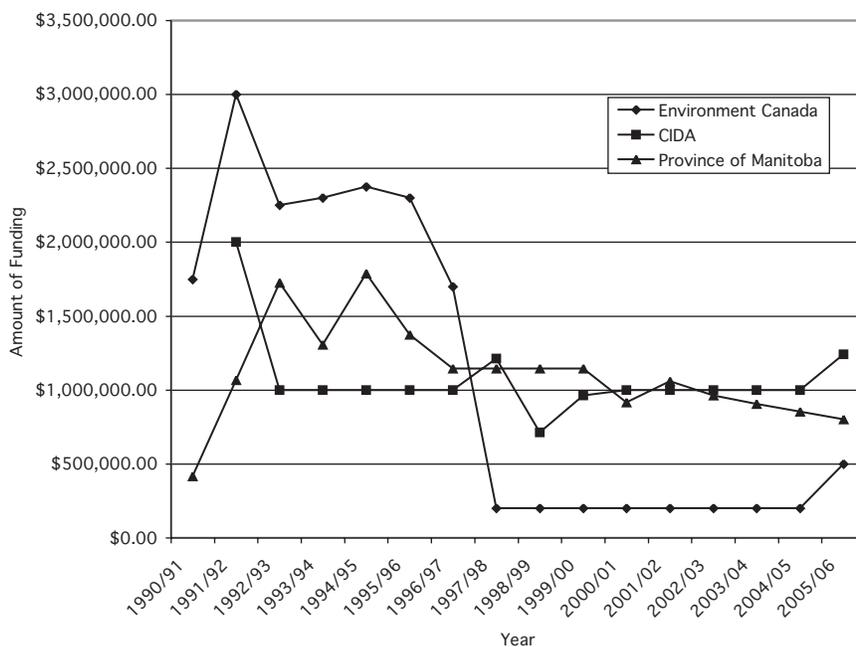


Figure 14.1 IISD core funding, 1990–2006

representing an overall decrease in total core funding of approximately 45 percent during that two-year period (see Figure 14.1).

This funding cut led to a fundamental shift in the way that the institution did business. Jim MacNeill, who was the chair of IISD during this era, had been advocating for the need to diversify funding. This funding cut gave the organization the incentive it needed to change from a spending culture to a revenue culture.<sup>31</sup> And with that,

a major effort [began] to expand the sources and levels of the Institute’s funding. This funding transition mark[ed] a significant change in institutional culture for IISD, with a very successful staff effort to find support for programs. Today, IISD’s annual budget is double the level of 1995 expenditures, even though the level of core funding has dropped.<sup>32</sup>

This change in funding sources has shaped the institution in many ways because by shifting to a revenue culture, the program directors became fundraisers. This has made them responsible for listening to their audiences, shopping their proposals around, and raising the funds required to support their projects. This fundamental shift in the orientation of the organization enabled IISD to become a significantly more entrepreneurial organization. The result is that today, the institute does not spend much time responding to requests for proposals from governments and other agencies. Instead, it develops its own research ideas and

works to engage funders and partners to support the work.<sup>33</sup> This system helps to ensure that the ideas produced by the institute are new and fresh. It also has the added benefit that any products that it produces will be taken up by an audience that has already committed to it.

With the addition of William Glanville as vice president and COO to its staff in 1998, IISD could begin to examine institutional development and begin to establish a more coherent approach to program planning.<sup>34</sup> The result was a new strategic plan that was presented to the board of directors in 1999.<sup>35</sup> This new plan had to reflect the new realities of the organization, which included substantial growth of its revenues from about \$5 million in 1993 to almost \$10 million in 2000,<sup>36</sup> as well as the growth of the institute itself, which had expanded from its single office headquartered in Winnipeg to include offices in Calgary, New York, and Ottawa.<sup>37</sup>

The plan helped define IISD's vision—“Better living for all—sustainably”<sup>38</sup>—and its mission—“To champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably”<sup>39</sup>—both of which are still used to define the institute. An internal strategic review by the board of directors and staff led to a reorganization of IISD away from a rigid program structure and toward a more dynamic configuration in order to “capture the energy of the entire staff to encourage creativity, innovative thinking and interdisciplinary research.”<sup>40</sup> This was done by redefining programs as “strategic objectives” and allowing employees to move between these objectives according to where their expertise was needed.<sup>41</sup>

The next major era for the organization will likely come when its current president, David Runnalls, retires from IISD in 2010. He is the longest-serving president in IISD's seventeen-year history, having been at the helm of the organization since 1998. A change in this kind of long-standing leadership could mean a significant change for IISD, however, the ways in which this change might manifest itself could be quite varied depending on who comes into this position.

## **BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES**

IISD's early life was marked by a “series of birthing and budgetary crises and a couple of near-death experiences.”<sup>42</sup> These were significant obstacles that the organization had to overcome, and in many cases, these have helped shape the organization into what it is today. The barriers and challenges that IISD faced during its development have been broken down into four separate “crises”: its challenging birth, the termination of similar organizations, and two separate and severe funding cuts. In addition, some barriers and challenges have presented themselves as more sustained issues, including the tension between its national and international commitments, the rise and fall in the popularity of environmental issues, and the challenge of remaining relevant. Each of these experiences has had a hand in shaping IISD into its current form.

The first crisis encountered by IISD was whether or not it would happen at all. Prime Minister Mulroney announced the creation of an international institution

for sustainable development in a speech to the UN General Assembly in 1988; however, not much happened following that announcement. There was intergovernmental wrangling between the government of Canada and the government of Manitoba, and to further complicate the situation, there was significant tension between the leaders of these governments.<sup>43</sup> The opportunity to have IISD as an announceable for the Mulroney government at the Globe 90 Conference in Vancouver likely played a large role in getting the proper elements in place to solidify the funding agreement and establish the organization.

The second crisis for IISD came only a few years into its life when the Mulroney government terminated several of the institutions that had been created around the same institutional model as IISD “as part of a wider policy of expenditure reduction.”<sup>44</sup> For instance, the Economic Council of Canada and the International Centre for Ocean Development both found themselves on the chopping block,<sup>45</sup> signaling that the government was no longer interested in supporting organizations that were established according to this model. There were concerns that IISD could see its end in another round of similar cuts; however, the loyalty and support of the Province of Manitoba and the fact that it was created by Mulroney himself, likely helped secure its survival.

The third crisis came as a result of “the June 1993 (Prime Minister) Kim Campbell reorganization, in which [the Department of Environment (DOE)] suffered significant losses to its mandate, personnel, and budget.”<sup>46</sup> This decline in the capacity of the department impacted IISD as the DOE clawed back some of its funding. Although this was by no means a fatal blow for IISD, there was a real concern within the organization that it would set a precedent, resulting in Manitoba pulling back its funding, too.<sup>47</sup> Fortunately, this situation never materialized.

The fourth crisis presented itself as the Liberal Government Program Review exercise in which IISD suffered a severe cut to its core funding. There were a number of things that saved the organization from what could have been a total collapse. In addition to the continued support of Manitoba, the institute was fortunate to find itself located in the same city as the riding of Lloyd Axworthy, a prominent minister in the Liberal government, who recognized the importance of the organization to his constituents in Winnipeg. In spite of the cuts, the institute emerged from this crisis as a more entrepreneurial organization, enhancing its ability to respond to its audience’s needs and putting it in a better position to respond to the international community’s interests.

Each of these crises presented a challenge for the newly formed institution and could have meant the end of IISD before it even reached its fifth anniversary. However, instead of destroying IISD, they actually made a contribution to shaping the organization into what it has become today. “Each of these crises inspired the Board, management and staff to new heights of leadership and determination, and from each the Institute emerged stronger and more vigorous than ever.”<sup>48</sup> This is a testament to the strength of the institution and a demonstration of the ability it has to overcome even the most potentially fatal blows.

Few crises of the magnitude of those that occurred in the first five years of the institute's existence have presented themselves in recent years, but the organization continues to face ongoing challenges of another nature. From the very beginning, the institution has had to perform a balancing act between the interests of all of its stakeholders. These stakeholders are multiple and varied, from those in its home province of Manitoba, to those at the national level, to those all over the world. Angela Cropper, IISD board member and international vice chair, explains:

Finding the right balance between attending to the needs of the home country and addressing the needs of the rest of the world, in keeping with the institute's vision and mission, is a recurring dilemma around the Board table. I have often been found in the posture of holding the institute's feet to this fire. But perhaps this is the role of its International Vice-Chair! And recent recognition that IISD is the most highly ranked and researched sustainable development policy outfit, globally speaking, is a good indicator that it might be successful in managing this dilemma.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of its success, overcoming this challenge is a constant balancing act that the institute must face on a continuing basis.

In addition to the internal challenges the organization has faced, there have also been a number of external barriers, including the rise and fall of interest in environmental issues within the Canadian population. The Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development was widely accepted and captured the interest of governments, industry, and individuals; however, as the concept of SD permeated through the population, it came to mean everything to everyone, which caused people to question whether it meant anything at all. Also, while environmental issues were "top of mind" in opinion polls in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they quickly dropped off of the Canadian population's radar during the recession of 1992–93<sup>50</sup> and in the wake of highly publicized political events such as the failures of both the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords, which dealt with Canada's constitution and very character. This combination of a concept that is difficult to define and a diversion of public interest away from environmental issues created a barrier for the work that IISD was undertaking and presented a major communications challenge.

In addition to overcoming barriers to communication, IISD has had to find ways to become relevant to the audiences that it most wanted to reach. Developing brand recognition, gaining trust, and firmly establishing itself as a reliable source of SD information took a significant amount of work. Remaining relevant continues to be a challenge for IISD, but it is supported by the solid foundation that has emerged as a consequence of the obstacles and crises that marked its early years.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND BREAKTHROUGHS**

Barriers and challenges have shaped the structure of IISD, but it is the opportunities that have made the most significant contribution to IISD becoming a world-renowned institution. These opportunities and breakthroughs include the Rio Earth Summit, the adoption of innovative communications tools, and, the

pursuit of new programming areas. By seeking out opportunities that have the most potential to have an impact, IISD has positioned itself for success. This is not to say that these have been without risk, but it is within some of the risks that the institute has been able to reap substantial rewards.

One of the major and arguably most obvious breakthroughs in IISD's history was its involvement in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Rio was a significant event, attracting heads of state and NGOs from around the world. Not only was it a globally significant event, it was in many ways IISD's debut on the international stage. The institute could not help but become involved when one of its own board members, Maurice Strong, an individual who also played a significant role in the Brundtland Commission, was named the conference's secretary general. In addition to the role that Strong played in the summit, IISD "made commitments of both human and financial resources to certain projects contributing to the UNCED preparatory process,"<sup>51</sup> and used the event as an opportunity to widely release its first major report: *Business Strategy for Sustainable Development: Leadership and Accountability for the '90s*. Following the summit, Lloyd McGinnis, chair of IISD's board of directors noted:

Our presence was felt in several ways: the contributions of Nicholas Sonntag, our Communications and Partnerships Director, who worked directly with Maurice Strong; the daily publication of the *Earth Summit Bulletin*; the participation of several Board members and our President with the Canadian UNCED delegation; co-sponsorship for several events at the Global Forum and a display booth there; and financial support for developing country nationals to attend specific events.<sup>52</sup>

The publication of the *Earth Summit Bulletin* was a major breakthrough for this kind of large-scale meeting. Its daily release at the summit allowed people to become genuinely involved in the meetings and enabled everyone, including governments with small delegations, to keep up to date on outcomes of key negotiations, something that had previously been the domain of wealthy countries with large delegations. This meant that communications improved between parties as a result of the publication's use as a common knowledge base.

IISD supported the *Bulletin* at the Earth Summit and saw the extensive benefits that came from it. The Institute offered the *Earth Summit Bulletin*, renamed the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, an institutional home, and it has been part of the organization ever since, providing a vital service for UN conferences and summits. "More than fourteen years later, IISD Reporting Services has produced thousands of reports from hundreds of negotiations covering dozens of major multilateral environmental agreements."<sup>53</sup>

After taking up the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, the challenge then became finding a fast, efficient, and effective way to distribute the documents as well as other IISD publications. The launch of the World Wide Web held major potential for this kind of widespread distribution, and IISD became one of the first 1,000 users of web-based technology.<sup>54</sup> This technology has helped IISD's information to reach a wide range of users ever since.

IISD program areas also demonstrate where the institution has embraced opportunities. Every five years, the organization does an external and an internal scan in which it determines what issues are presenting themselves as environmental challenges and what it is possible for the institute to do about these within its capacity. Intentionally, IISD has tried to stay away from opportunities in crowded fields, preferring instead to look for opportunities in areas where it would be possible to create new perspectives.<sup>55</sup> This has led to its important work in fields such as trade and sustainable development, which has resulted in expertise that has become well respected by international trade organizations and institutions such as NAFTA.

IISD has experienced a number of breakthroughs since its creation, many the result of opportunities it has created for itself. These have been attributed to a strong board of directors and senior staff, who have been able to identify which opportunities to take and which risks are worthwhile. This has enabled IISD to take advantage of major meetings, new communications products, and program opportunities that foster relationships and establish credibility.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

### Finances

When the original funding agreement was signed at the Globe 90 Conference in Vancouver by Lucien Bouchard and Gary Filmon, it was a five-year, \$25 million deal in which Environment Canada would contribute \$3 million, the Canadian International Development Agency would contribute \$1 million, and the government of Manitoba would contribute \$1 million annually for five years. This was guaranteed core funding, which was meant to help IISD get started building the organization as well as establishing and maintaining relationships.

The problem with this kind of funding model however, is that because all of the organization's most important and immediate costs are covered, there is no incentive to think innovatively or seek out audiences for the work that was being done. Cuts by Environment Canada and the subsequent program review exercise resulted in serious and significant funding reductions for the organization. Rather than allowing these changes to weaken the institute, IISD adopted a new structure in order to expand the sources and level of its funding.<sup>56</sup> So, in spite of the fact that Environment Canada cut its core funding levels to IISD from a high of \$3 million to a low of \$200,000 a year, the institute's overall funding has actually almost tripled, from about \$5 million in 1993 to approximately \$14 million today. The majority of this increase has come in the form of designated grant funding, the funding that IISD seeks out itself to fund its programs. Designated grants funding started outpacing core funding in 1998 and has maintained levels well above core funding ever since (see Figure 14.2).

Recently, IISD has made another shift in its funding model. While still receiving operating grants and designated grants, it has started introducing what it calls "framework agreements," in which donors commit to providing funding for both

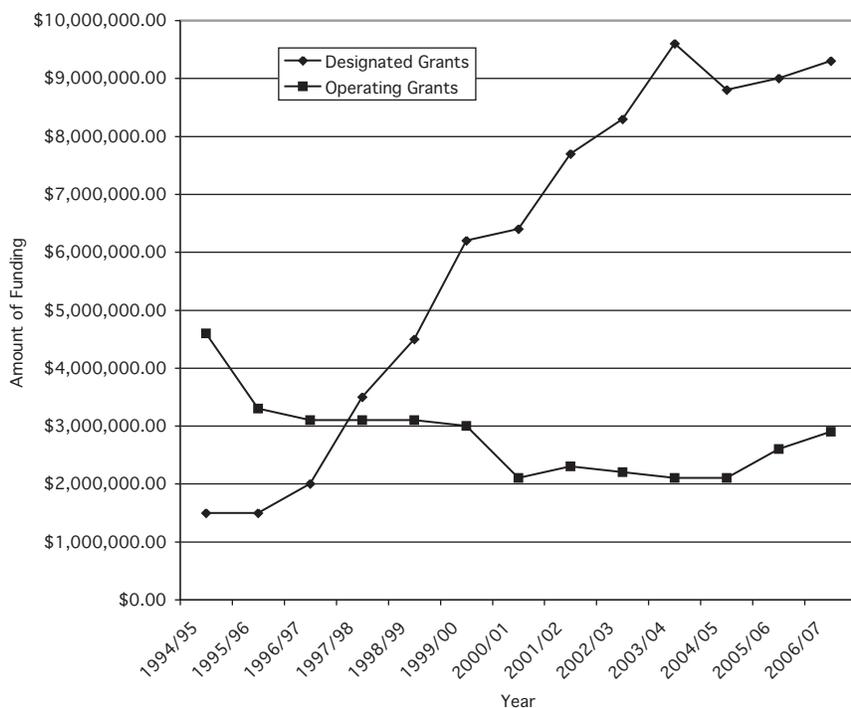


Figure 14.2 IISD designated grants and operating grants, 1994–2007

core operations and programs over multiple years. The benefit of this new kind of funding is that it is another way of diversifying funding arrangements and guarantees funding for a specific period of time. By having organizations enter into these kinds of agreements, it also helps IISD form closer strategic alliances and partnerships with its donors.<sup>57</sup>

It is funding that also demonstrates the positive reputation that IISD has in the international community. Since 2002, IISD has consistently had more designated grants coming from governments outside of Canada than inside (see Figure 14.3). This reflects the value that is placed on its work by governments around the world. In terms of specific country contributions, Canada remains a top donor, with the government of Canada contributing approximately \$1.54 million in designated grants in the 2006–07 fiscal year. However, the government of Switzerland is not far behind, contributing a total of approximately \$1.33 million in designated funding in that same period.

### Personnel

The first board of directors was appointed by the government of Canada, but after that, the government has had no part to play in appointments to IISD’s

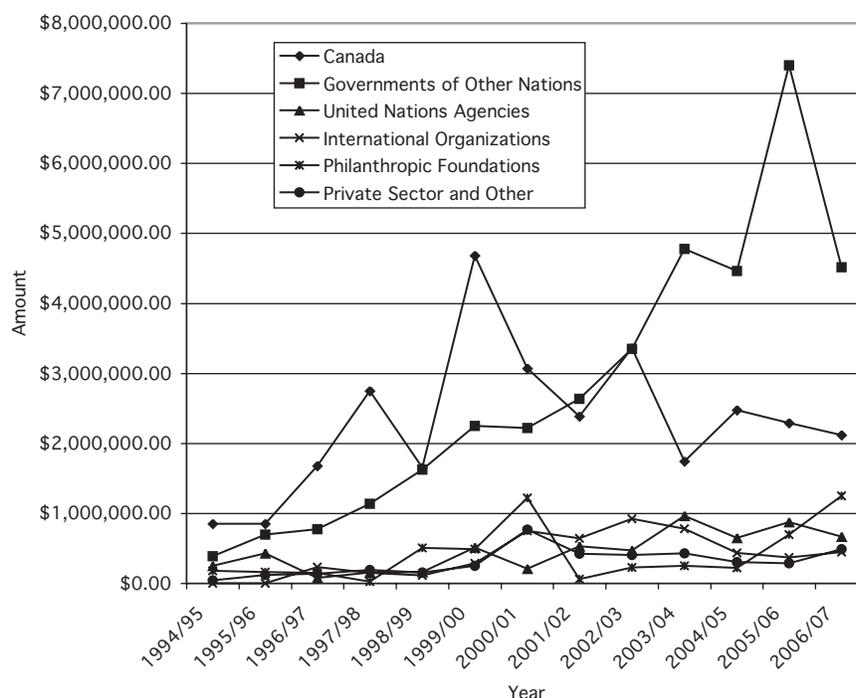


Figure 14.3 IISD designated grants, 1994–2007

board or staff. To have this institution run independently of government has been described as an “inspired decision,”<sup>58</sup> and has resulted in the freedom of IISD to appoint its own board members, leading to a board of directors that some have ventured to claim is the best board of any like institute, largely for this reason.<sup>59</sup>

Institute staffing has evolved into a very flexible and adaptable system. When it was first established, IISD was housed solely in Winnipeg. However, the institute has since established offices in New York, Ottawa, and Geneva. In addition to these four physical offices, which house permanent staff, IISD has also established what are known as “associate” positions. This model was initially introduced in order to attract highly qualified individuals in a crowded international marketplace, recognizing that it may be impossible to have these individuals as full-time staff. IISD has developed an open-ended but formalized contracting procedure to accommodate these individuals.<sup>60</sup> This is an innovative staffing tool that provides the flexibility of time and location to its associates while maintaining certain bureaucratic elements that are necessary for this kind of employment arrangement. The result is that IISD has been able to expand its workforce beyond its regular employee base and attract the expertise of subject experts from all over the world.

Having access to this kind of capacity is extremely important for an institution that is continuously striving to keep itself relevant. It enables IISD to reach beyond its organizational boundaries and form additional networks through

these individuals, who are located all around the world. This structure helps create a nimble and adaptable institution that is able to thrive in a competitive international environment.

### Location

An interesting feature of IISD is the fact that it is based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, as opposed to the nation's capital in Ottawa or another larger city. To understand one of the key reasons that Winnipeg was selected as the home of this organization, it is necessary to look back to some of the events that occurred surrounding the Canadian aerospace industry in the mid-1980s.<sup>61</sup> At that time, the government of Canada was offering a \$1.4 billion contract for maintenance of CF-18 fighter jets; Bristol Aerospace Limited of Winnipeg was the top choice following bidding and review of proposals by the Department of National Defence. However, the company was passed over in favor of Montreal-based Canadair, stirring up considerable anger and frustration in Western Canada. In response to the announcement, Winnipeg member of parliament Lloyd Axworthy, then a member of the opposition, stated: "It's a clear message to Western Canadians that we should be hewers of wood and drawers of water. . . . We're not capable of undertaking major activities in technology development. It's an unfair and tragic message—one that has to be fought against."<sup>62</sup>

Shortly after, when the government of Canada's intent to create an international institute for sustainable development came to light, the Province of Manitoba was quick to express its interest. An initial proposal that the institute be located in Winnipeg<sup>63</sup> was followed by intensive lobbying of Environment Canada and the Prime Minister's Office by the government of Manitoba.<sup>64</sup> The lobbying exercise was successful and led to the subsequent funding agreement that created IISD.

Some have criticized IISD for its location, claiming that its growth is inhibited because it is so far away from the major urban and economic centers of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, as well as from Canada's center of government in Ottawa.<sup>65</sup> However, like many of the challenges that IISD has faced in the past, the institution has turned this into an opportunity and touts what it refers to as "the Winnipeg Advantage" because "it was felt that being in Winnipeg afforded IISD greater access to local decision makers and allowed its messages to be heard locally and provincially, not drowned out by the background noise of national headlines in larger centres."<sup>66</sup> Being in Winnipeg also has conferred a number of additional benefits, including creating incentives for enhanced communication and securing the support of the city of Winnipeg and the Province of Manitoba, things that would not have come as easily in large urban centers.

Winnipeg is not a major urban center, and it is not likely the first place people consider when selecting potential locations for a world-class institution; however, it has had a large part to play in building and shaping this organization. "Being located in Winnipeg offered an advantage . . . because it forced IISD to develop in a way that allowed it to connect to and exert influence on the outside world."<sup>67</sup>

This ability, and necessity, to make connections and build networks contributes to the strength of the organization.

### THE ROAD AHEAD

IISD has been a very successful institution. As of March 31, 2007, it had more than seventy donor organizations, including federal departments and provincial governments in Canada, governments of other nations, United Nations agencies, international organizations, philanthropic foundations, and private-sector institutions. Although much support has come to the organization in the form of grants, it has also come in the form of accolades. In 2004 IISD was declared the Most Effective SD Research Organization in a GlobeScan survey. The survey asked “experts who have either had a direct role in SD research organizations, had dealings with them, or studied them . . . to name a maximum of four specific SD research organizations that they consider to be particularly effective.”<sup>68</sup> IISD was ranked by experts to be more effective than other well known SD institutions such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the World Resources Institute, and the United Nations. Although comparing these institutions against one another is difficult because of their vastly different mandates and activities, it speaks volumes about the effectiveness of IISD, a small organization in the midst of these large establishments.

In many ways, IISD has exceeded expectations by becoming a world leader in SD information and ideas. However, this does not mean that it can become complacent. If the organization is to remain successful, it must continue to build on its strengths<sup>69</sup> while maintaining the flexibility and entrepreneurial spirit that it has been so successful at applying to its work.

In spite of the successes of IISD as a sustainable development institution in Canada, the organization is an exception rather than a rule. Sustainable development as an idea is alive and well in Canada; however, as an agenda for action and change, SD has not made much progress. In a report released in 2005 titled *It's Time to Walk the Talk*, the Standing Committee on Energy, Environment, and Natural Resources noted that governments and corporations in Canada talk a lot about sustainable development but hesitate to take any real, meaningful action on this concept.<sup>70</sup> This means that while the notion of sustainable development has permeated throughout Canadian government and industry, it is still just lip service, failing to constitute real, concrete action for the majority of these institutions.

This has not gone without notice, and Canada has faced criticism from inside and outside of the country. For instance, the Conference Board of Canada has described Canada as a “middle-of-the-road” performer, lagging behind top OECD countries in a number of environmental indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions and hazardous waste production.<sup>71</sup> The Pembina Institute has criticized Canada's attempts to integrate SD principles into legislation, calling them “limited and almost entirely symbolic.”<sup>72</sup> Both the World Economic Forum and the OECD have also been critical pointing out that in

Canada, very little progress has been made in advancing the principles of sustainable development.<sup>73</sup>

Canada used to be a world leader on the international environmental stage, but its reputation has been steadily slipping within and outside the country because of its failure to actually integrate SD into policy and day-to-day operations, and because its overall engagement with SD has been underwhelming. The country has created a world-class institution that is producing relevant information on SD; nevertheless, aside from IISD's work, there has been a serious lack of science/policy engagement.<sup>74</sup> In spite of having strong institutions within the country such as IISD, it seems that there has been very little movement on environmental issues and very little uptake of sustainable development. This comes in the face of the dire warnings issued by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment<sup>75</sup> in 2005, the shocking predictions of the Stern Report<sup>76</sup> in 2006, and the seemingly daily reports of natural disasters and evidence of accelerating climate change. There is a serious lack of urgency in what Canada has done to date, with actions more akin to fiddling at the edges of the issues rather than striving for real and significant solutions.

We can be very proud of the work IISD has done in spite of this environment, and we can hold it up as evidence that an institution that suffered so many "near death experiences" has the potential to become larger and more successful than anyone could have anticipated. But one institution is not enough. SD needs to become part of the policy paradigm in all institutions, and it is only then that we will begin to see the implementation of a real agenda for change.

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### ORGANIZATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Organization: International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

Founding Board of Directors: Lloyd McGinnis (chair), Peter M. Kilburn (president and CEO), Dian Cohen, Dr. J.C. Gilson, Prof. José Goldemberg, Dr. Arthur J. Hanson, Dr. C. S. Holling, Dr. Pierre Marc Johnson, Hon. Gloria Knight, Dr. Jim MacNeill, Dr. Shimwaayi Muntemba, H. E. Mohamed Sahnoun, Dr. Emil Salim, Dr. David W. Strangway, Lynn Zwicky

Chair, Board of Directors: Daniel Gagnier

President and CEO: David Runnalls

Mission/Description: Founded in 1990, 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.

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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