

Conversations Exploring ‘Sustainable Development’ and the Role of Media

Visioning Rio +20: December 16, 2011, New York City. Conversation Overview

“What can media contribute to sustainable development? What might be developed, including through social media and other new media, to engage and empower broader civil society involvement?”

These were among the questions in a pilot for a series of facilitated conversations considering collaborative intersections of media and sustainable development. The conversations intend to bring together diverse stakeholders, including NGOs, the UN, Government, Science, Media and Communications, Arts & Culture, Design, Academia, and Private sectors, and provide an alternate space for people to exchange ideas and think outside the boundaries of their respective organizations.

In light of Rio +20, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012, “Visioning Rio” was convened in December 2011, to enable the participation of people in NYC for intersessional meetings leading up to the Rio Summit. 22 individuals participated, hailing from Albania; Belgium; Brazil; Dubai; Guyana; Israel; Jordan; Mexico; Sweden; United Kingdom; United States.

Pragati Pascale, Chief of the Development Section of the UN Department of Public Information, briefed the gathering on the UN’s new social media campaign, “The Future We Want” <http://www.futurewewant.org/>, designed to engage civil society in envisioning a sustainable future. She noted, “We haven’t done a good job conveying sustainable development issues to a broad audience because of the complexity and the lack of a unified story.” She raised the question, how do you get media interested? Her suggestion: “Keep the focus on real issues and deliverables that people can relate to.” Keeping it simple is key. She emphasized, “Public support is critical to enable leaders to make tough decisions that will advance the sustainable development agenda.”

Felix Dodds, Executive Director of Stakeholder Forum www.stakeholderforum.org, an international organization working to advance sustainable development and promote democracy at a global level, agreed this more positive approach was a good way to engage people. He observed that in the 20 years since the 1992 Rio Summit on Sustainable Development, “Backtracking on financial commitments resulted in lost years and generated new challenges that could have been averted.” He anticipated that the upcoming Summit’s focus on “green economy” will have traction, inspiring conversations about transforming economies and job creation. He also stressed the importance of engaging the broader public, emphasizing that you don’t have to be in Rio to be involved.

Participants were then invited to break into pairs and *reflect on a moment in the past year when you moved the “needle forward” on an issue related to sustainable development; consider what made it a powerful experience.*

Highlights shared with the group included:

- Strategies effectively applied in Dubai to introduce a ‘green mindset’ to consumers, providing incentives for environment friendly choices (from solar energy to atmospheric water generation) over other alternatives. Key factors for success were government support, and the involvement of engineers and technical experts.
- Dialogues with young people in Sweden, who voiced their desire to be part of “today”; to be involved in actions that advance sustainable development, and break away from the cliché of “youth being the future.” To connect with them, the message needs to be meaningful, exciting, and show how sustainable development affects their lives NOW.
- *BaseTrack* <http://base-track.org>, a social network enabling soldiers to share their experiences with friends and families, developed by photojournalist Teru Kuwayama. Teru embedded with the 1/8, 1st Battalion, 8th Marines in southern Afghanistan during their 2010-2011 deployment. Initially,

family members simply responded to soldiers' reports. They gradually grew more confident sharing feelings and concerns with one another, talking openly about their stress, how they cope. Driven in large part by the mothers, fueled by a strong desire for both information and community, it has become a dynamic community, demonstrating the power of media to connect and engage. Teru and his team are now developing a next generation open source platform that can serve as a system and model to support other projects, including tracking water related issues.

Participants were then invited to *imagine the future after a productive Rio +20, one in which people are engaged implementing sustainable development goals; describe the changes and what ignited them.*

Highlights shared with the group included:

- Bold political leadership combined with an engaged public has been the turning point.
- "Green" moved from niche to mainstream: "Green" terms make sustainability appear "different" – not normal. On the premise that the mainstream doesn't want to be different, new, more accessible language and messages have been created that people relate to; environmentally friendly solutions have become the norm, not the exception.
- Consensus has been reached on the meaning and principles underlying "green economy," paving the way for implementing practices. (At present, there are multiple, conflicting understandings of what this means. Negotiations on principles should precede negotiations on practices.)
- Scientists and policy-makers no longer "own the issue;" ways have been found to excite and engage the broader public.
- Emphasis on long-term strategies is complemented by immediate actions that address urgent sustainable development related issues.
- Children strongly influence their parents' thinking on sustainable development issues.

Concluding comments by participants expressed the value of bringing together people from diverse sectors in conversation; creating a sense of community, from which action points can emerge.

"Visioning Rio +20" was co-produced and facilitated by Wendy Bromley Bodden and Shamina de Gonzaga, with convening partner organizations: World Council of Peoples for the United Nations (www.wcpun.org); what moves you? (www.whatmovesyou.net); Images and Voices of Hope (www.ivoh.org).

Looking Forward:

How do we reach and engage the public? This is perhaps the biggest question. Working with traditional media and new media to create innovative approaches; clearly articulate concrete issues; and connect the issues to people's lives, is critical. Terminology, messages, and their underlying principles, need to be accessible and consistent. Today, everyone is a media-maker in some capacity, as well as a media consumer. Young people's interest and involvement can be further tapped into, as can communication among family members and close social networks, generating new sources of information from the grassroots and raising awareness about issues.

Next steps include:

- International business students at ESGCI in Paris (Ecole Supérieure de Gestion et Commerce International) will be assigned to develop new media strategies around sustainable development.
- Similar conversations in other parts of the world are being convened by local stakeholders to generate further interest, dialogue and opportunities for collaboration across sectors around locally relevant sustainable development issues.

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