Questions of Survival

A questioning approach to understanding sustainable and equitable development

Eric Dudley and Alejandro Imbach

May 1997

IUCN
The World Conservation Union

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About the Series

This series of eight volumes has been developed by a cross-disciplinary team for people interested in assessing progress toward sustainability. Despite differences in emphasis, the materials share a common framework and key principles. We suggest that there are four basic linked steps to understanding sustainable and equitable development:

1. Wholeness. People are an inextricable part of the ecosystem: people and the environment need to be treated together as equally important. Interactions among people and between people and the environment are complex and poorly understood. Thus we need start by...

2. Asking questions. We must recognize our ignorance, and ask questions. We cannot assess anything unless we know which questions to ask. To be useful — to help make progress — questions need a context. Therefore we need...

3. Reflective institutions. The context for the questioning approach is institutional: groups of people coming together to question and to learn collectively. The process of reflection will, we suggest, lead inevitably to an approach that is...

4. People-focused. People are both the problem and the solution. Our principal arena for action lies in influencing the motivation for human behaviour.

The series starts with the summary document, *Overview of Methods, Tools and Field Experiences: Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability.* The other seven volumes fall into three sets:

Methods of system assessment (people and the ecosystem)
- Participatory and Reflective Analytical Mapping (PRAM)
- Assessing Rural Sustainability
- Planning Action for Rural Sustainability

Methods of self assessment (for organisations and communities to examine their own attitudes, capacities and experiences)
- Reflective Institutions

Tools (for use in conjunction with any of the methods or with other methods)
- Barometer of Sustainability
- Community-based Indicators
- Questions of Survival

Assessing Rural Sustainability and *Planning Action for Rural Sustainability* are designed to be used together. They can also be used with *Participatory and Reflective Analytical Mapping (PRAM)*, although this is conceived as a separate method. *Barometer of Sustainability* and *Community-based Indicators* may be used with any method of system assessment. *Questions of Survival* may be used with any method of system assessment or self assessment.

Methods and tools may need to be adapted to local circumstances, and some may not be relevant. Solutions must be people-focused to be sustained. We urge the user, when using these documents, to keep in mind the underlying approach:
- recognize the wholeness of people and the ecosystem together;
- decide which questions to ask before searching for indicators; and
- create opportunities for groups to reflect and learn as institutions.

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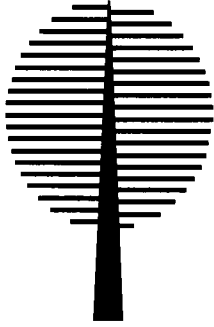
How to Use *Questions of Survival*

Using questions to promote reflection

The simple answer to "How can I use *Questions of Survival?*" is "In any way that seems useful to you in your circumstances". The questions are simply starting points for reflection. The booklet can be read on its own as a way of prompting thought or used in a workshop to help structure a discussion.

Each question is followed by text which expands on the idea behind the question, with examples of where it may be particularly relevant. In some cases the question is expanded into a set of secondary questions. But the intent is not to come up with a definitive list of answers. The important result is the thought and discussion provoked by thinking of ways to try and answer the questions. Often the most valuable outcome is in recognising how much more we need to know before we can even begin to answer these questions.

The booklet may be used to guide debate in a community meeting or a small workshop of field workers. But we urge people in large institutions not to dismiss it as just another example of community-based educational material. It is also a challenge to policy-makers and donors to re-examine their programmes and ask whether the underlying assumptions are based on a clear understanding of the issues explored by these seven questions — and if not, why not. In at least one case where a development institution took these questions seriously, the debate it opened led to a fundamental restructuring. Members realised that unless they could respond to these questions their "development" work had no meaning. The only way in which they could respond was by developing institutional procedures and structures which fostered reflection as well as action (see *Reflective Institutions*).

The questions and text should be modified to your own needs. The precise way in which the basic questions are expressed in terms of secondary more detailed questions will depend on your audience. The words used for asking questions of international donors and politicians will be different than those used for schoolchildren or farmers. However, the underlying questions are fundamentally the same at all levels of power and in all arenas of debate.
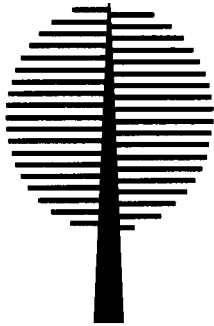
Questions of Survival

Developing a sense of tomorrow and a broader sense of community

We are all aware that life on earth is threatened. The damage inflicted on the environment by human activity is creating circumstances in which people's lives are at risk and, for many more people, important aspects of the quality of life are deteriorating. Each year more animals, plants and natural environments are permanently disappearing. The scale and diversity of the problems are so great that we hardly know where to begin.

Though the environmental choices being made by the government of a large industrialised nation or a multinational corporation are clearly different to those of the people of an impoverished Third World village or shanty town, the underlying questions which they each need to ask are fundamentally the same. In this booklet we identify seven questions which any community (whether neighbourhood, school, place of work, or a group of nations) will need to ask if it is to identify practical steps which could lead to a better, sustainable way of life. The questions may be used as a starting point for:

- policy-makers in governmental and non-governmental organisations in the process of formulating strategies for sustainable development;
- journalists, pressure groups, and researchers who question certain development policies;
- teachers, students and schoolchildren who want to reach a better understanding of how communities depend on each other and on the environment;
- development institutions which are prepared to be sufficiently self-questioning to ask whether they truly understand the assumptions behind what they are doing;
- rural and urban communities which want to take control of their own destinies and;
- families who want to start to make a difference.

The questions, while intended to help identify practical steps, lead us to examine more fundamental issues, such as:

- **identity** — who are we?
- **purpose** – why are we here?
- **responsibility** — are we being true to ourselves?

These issues may seem far removed from the immediate concerns of day-to-day life, but we have reached such a point of crisis that the assumptions which underlie the daily round of commerce, consumption, and leisure need to be questioned from their roots.

There are no "correct" answers to the questions presented here. Workable answers are only likely to emerge when people come together and collectively ask the questions and reflect on the issues which they reveal. The answers that emerge will always be provisional – a best guess, given what we know now. Progress will only be made through a never-ending cycle of reflection and action: asking questions and identifying problems; designing and implementing solutions; and then asking again whether the solution really solved the problem, or indeed whether one's understanding of the problem was correct in the first place. To start this cycle turning we need to ask questions.
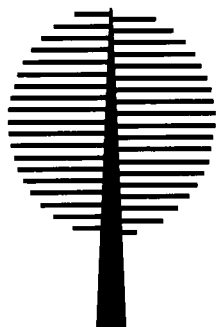
Question 1: Change

In what way is your environment changing?

People often have a sense that their environment has changed during their lifetime but are not very clear how. It is common for rural people to speak of now barren hillsides having been covered with forest in the time of their childhood, or to say that the rains were better and more reliable. City dwellers speak of wells which were always sweet and full and streets which were safer and cleaner. Often these memories are often inaccurate, romanticised, or exaggerated while at other times the changes which have taken place are even greater than the people realise.

A first step towards tackling the problems of the environment is to gain a better understanding of the following:

- the scale, nature, and speed of the changes which occurred in the past;
- how things are continuing to change; and
- the mechanisms and underlying causes of the changes taking place today.

In coming to understand environmental change it is important to recognise the difference between the natural environment and the cultivated environment. Much of what we see today as natural has been significantly shaped by human intervention: cultivated fields, drained lands, dredged rivers, and forests managed for timber production.

There are many techniques for investigating the history of environmental change. Old maps, written accounts of travellers, and pictures can be useful sources. But, in many circumstances, the starting point will be to sit down with a group of people who have lived through the changes and listen to them exchanging memories and opinions. This could be a group of elders in a village or, equally well, a group of senior governmental administrators at national level.

An important objective in exploring the history and future of environmental change is to try and clarify the signs, or indicators, by which we are judging

that change has taken place. Some of these indicators will be measurable, such as the percentage of forest land which has been lost over the last ten years. Others, which may be equally important, may be changes of quality such as the quality of food, water, or transport services.

In determining indicators the human component should not be ignored. The figures might show that the number of acres of cultivated land has not declined but this statistic may hide the fact that the number of people per acre of cultivated land has risen or fallen dramatically. Or, while the water table may not have fallen, the number of hours which people need to devote each day to collecting water may have risen significantly.

While the discussion of indicators is important it should not get bogged down in concerns about precise measurement. Measurement is important in some circumstances but statistics are often meaningless unless placed in the context of useful questions:

- What changes are we trying to identify and why?
- If a change occurred, how would we recognise it?
- Can we identify indicators which relate cause to effect?
  Is it enough to know that change is happening?
- What indicators are already being used at the grassroots?
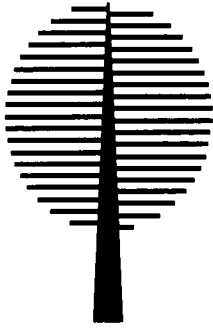
Question 2: Problems

Which problems have resulted from the changes, and which have always been there?

It is not enough simply to recognise and record that changes in the environment are taking place. Environmental changes are not necessarily bad. For thousands of years people have modified their environment through cultivation, harvesting, irrigation, and human settlements in ways which, apparently, could be sustained. Many of these changes have been of immense benefit to mankind. It is often far from clear that an environmental change is a problem and frequently people disagree over whether a change is a problem or not.

There are, for instance, marshlands all over the world which have been drained and used for cultivation or settlements. Today, scientists are suggesting that such reclamation projects have harmed the environment; yet the people who benefit directly from the land fail to see such changes as problematic.

Similarly, in forestry the story is not black and white. The introduction of fast-growing species has done a great service in providing vital firewood and construction timber while, at the same time, such projects have done immense long-term harm to the environment. Frequently, it is clear to all that the environment is being damaged. However, the people living in such places may not perceive that, overall, their lives have got worse. Life expectancy has increased, literacy levels have risen, infant mortality has fallen, more people have access to reasonable water, and more people have more choice. The millions of beneficiaries of modern development may recognise the damage to the environment but, nevertheless, regard fewer trees and polluted air as an acceptable price to pay.

For those concerned with the environment there is little purpose in campaigning to solve a problem if people do not see the situation as problematic. People will only become mobilised to save the environment if they see that the cost of environmental change outweighs the benefits of

modernisation. Where people's prime concern is not with the environment, there is a prior need to encourage people to ask some questions which highlight the link between lifestyle and damage to the environment:

- To what extent are the undoubted benefits of modern life bought at the cost of damage to the environment?
- To what extent are the problems of modern life a consequence of environmental change?
- How will the quality of life be affected if environmental damage continues unchecked?
- What would be the consequences for a people's way of life if certain environmentally damaging practices were stopped?
- Are there safer options to present practices which could yield the same benefits?
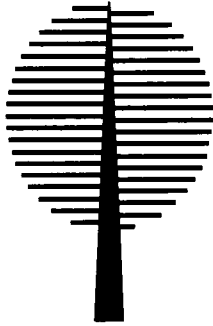
Question 3: Victim

How is your environment being affected by others in ways which seem out of your control?

People feel little incentive to conserve their environment when they feel that the really important factors influencing their lives and their environment are completely out of their hands. Why should villagers conserve the soil on their small holdings when every day they see government bulldozers building roads and logging companies felling forests? And why should governments of Third World countries make sacrifices to protect their natural environment when they know that Europe and North America are largely responsible for consuming resources and damaging the ozone layer?

When people feel that they cannot make a difference, they either try to lose themselves in making the best of today or else they convince themselves that the problems are for others to solve. To break out of this cycle of despair people need to be encouraged to untangle their feelings of helplessness and ask:

- who precisely is damaging our environment, and in what way?
- what benefits do they get from damaging our environment?
- do they know about the damage they are doing?
- are we benefiting from this damage as well ? If so, how do the benefits balance against the costs? and
- is the situation really out of our control? How can we get more control?

Most of us are victims on a range of different levels simultaneously. We may be suffering from the smoking habit of our neighbours, drinking water which has been contaminated by others, inhaling fumes from vehicles which only benefit private businesses and, maybe, suffering the acid rain or nuclear fallout from the power stations of distant countries.

Some of the guilty parties are beyond reach because they are no longer living, such as our own ancestors or foreign businesses which have exploited resources to extinction and then left. But where the damage is still going on,

the basic response is the same on whatever level we are considering: to establish clear evidence of cause and effect. Once guilt is established there are various avenues open such as persuasion, shaming publicity, boycotts and legal action.
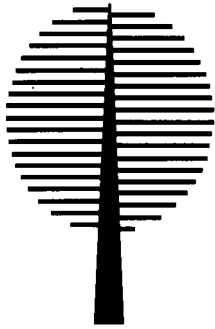
Question 4: Culprit

How are you affecting other people's lives?

While we are quick to realise how our lives are being harmed by others, we are less ready to appreciate the damage we ourselves do. Even when we do realise our way of life is damaging it can be hard to see realistic alternatives, particularly for city dwellers who depend on the complex infrastructure of modern society. The apparent insolubility of the problem becomes an incentive to ignore it and, once again, to focus attention on day-to-day problems with achievable solutions.

The role of culprit, like that of victim, is played at a number of levels. Victims are both our immediate neighbours and people whom we will never meet. As a general rule, the wealthier we are, the more damage we are likely to be doing to other people's environments. The extraction of raw materials, industrial processing, and energy production necessary to sustain modern industrial society, by their nature, damage the environment. It is clear that the high consumption of materials and energy in the wealthy countries and among the urban elites of Third World countries damages the environment of people too poor to reap the benefits. The damage is done also to the silent majority of those yet to be born.

There is, however, little point in simply helping people to feel guilty for the consequences of actions for which they see no alternatives. If people need to burn fuel to keep warm or to commute to work, arguments about the evils of energy consumption are only likely to raise their defences against criticism. People not only need to be able to unravel the complex web of cause and effect which results in others being harmed by their actions, they also need to be able to identify achievable alternatives. To help us identify the victims of our actions we need to ask:

- To what extent do our day-to-day actions consume non-renewable resources?
- What measures are we taking or could we take to ensure that we at least replace the renewable resources which we use?

- How do our actions directly and indirectly lead to pollution?
- How can we change our actions to reduce or eliminate our harmful effects on others?
- How would others, such as governments and employers, need to change in order to help us to do less harm to others?
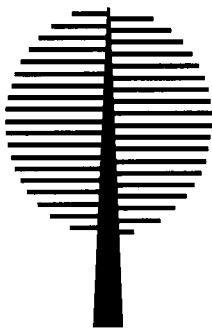
Question 5: Knowledge

Who knows what about the environment?

Effective action to save our environment requires knowledge, but no single science encompasses all of the relevant knowledge. Those involved in designing actions to help the environment must seek knowledge from a variety of sources.

Some kinds of information derive from the special skills and equipment found in specialist academic institutions. Much of the important knowledge about the state of the environment, however, relates to how people use the environment in ways which cannot be measured with electronic equipment or satellite photographs. Among the experts on the depletion of sources of firewood are the women who spend hours each day collecting fuel. Similarly, in agricultural societies dependent on irrigation, the traditional water steward probably knows more about the changing state of water resources than the professional engineer.

Within government departments and large NGOs it may not always be necessary or wise to pay for external consultants to provide specialist knowledge. The field engineer who has spent 30 years in a public works department building roads and small dams is likely to have a wealth of knowledge and opinion regarding the changing state of the environment. Too often, policy-makers ignore the greatest database an institution possesses: its field staff. Such institutions need to work at becoming more "reflective"– not just implementing projects but learning from the experience. For a reflective institution, field staff are not mere tools to implement policy but rather they are the eyes and ears of the institution.

Among the more conventional academic sources of knowledge, there are often unrecognised overlaps between different disciplines. Environmental questions inevitably cross boundaries between conventional academic and professional disciplines. The interesting and important answers are likely to lie in the grey areas where subjects overlap.

When seeking to inform decisions about the environment, whether at the level of national government or street committee, we need to ask:

- Who at the grassroots level has expert knowledge?
- Which academic institutions have the required expertise?
- What other disciplines may have useful knowledge to bring to bear on a problem, or who could benefit from our studies?
- What, precisely, are the questions we want to answer?

This last question is particularly important. Generally, sources of information are only as good as the questions put to them. We need to seek knowledge with well-focused questions but also with minds open to unexpected knowledge which can lead to new lines of inquiry.
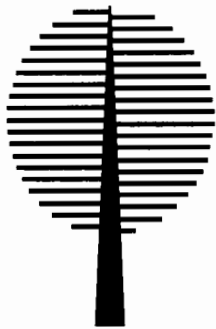
Question 6: Community

Who else shares your problems or has similar ones?

It has become fashionable in recent years to talk of community participation, yet it is often far from clear who the community is. A community is not just a village or urban neighbourhood. It is also a community of scientists working worldwide on a particular problem, and a community of nations brought together for reasons of trade or defence. People and institutions belong to several communities at once: family, work place, street, ethnic group or religious community, etc. The "community" is the common thread linking people together with respect to particular problems and issues.

When faced with environmental problems, identifying the community of people who are under the same threat or who have experienced similar threats elsewhere, may be the first step to both increased knowledge and increased power. A village threatened by a proposed new dam may be able to do nothing while a community of a hundred villages working together may have some chance of success. An urban street without sanitation may have no options but the same street as part of a large and organised neighbourhood can lobby for services.

At the international level, governments threatened by environmental problems may be able to identify and benefit from other countries which have experienced similar problems. At the other extreme, households subjected to pollution from manufacturers can come together to search for practical technical solutions and to exert pressure on the offenders.

The process of defining your community could reveal that the "culprit" who appears to threaten it can be more usefully considered as a member of a broader community which is jeopardised by some other source. For example, two villages fighting for access to land might both be in the process of being robbed of traditional territory by an outside force.

In a world of rapidly improving telecommunications and international postal services, the opportunities for creating networks of individuals and organisations campaigning on specific issues are greatly increased. The starting point for forming such a community is to ask:

- Who else is threatened by the same problem?
- Who might have had the useful experience of being threatened by similar problems?
- Which actions are possible for a group which are not practical for individuals?
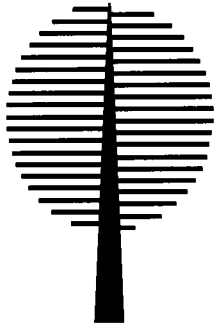
Question 7: Values

What are your aspirations?
Who is your role model?

The single most important factor determining the future of our environment is people's sense of values. If Third World villagers aspire to a world in which every town is like New York and every family has two cars and all the consumer goods of an affluent society, there is little point in seeking minor improvements to traditional agricultural systems. If development and conservation efforts are designed simply to cure immediate problems then we are merely addressing the symptoms and ignoring the cause.

It is neither just nor realistic to expect the rural and urban poor to lower their aspirations while the rich of the industrialised world and the urban elites continue to enjoy environmentally unsound levels of consumption. There is a need for the industrialised countries to identify new and alternative ways of life not only for their own good but to provide a model which can eventually be achieved and sustained by all.

In many countries, people are questioning whether the Western industrial model is really what they want. Although this question has often been raised in the past, notably by Gandhi in India and Nyerere in Tanzania, it has rarely taken root either in government policy or popular aspiration. The rhetoric of indigenous processes of development has rarely been translated into sustained programmes of action without crumbling before popular demands for modern amenities and governmental desire for greater international status.

At all levels, from village to central government, there is a need to debate and clarify the direction in which we want society to move and to understand the implications of that desire. Similarly, we need to examine current policies and actions and reveal the often unspoken aspirations which they embody.

A debate on values will inevitably be open-ended. There will never be full agreement and perfection will never be attained. But questions such as the following help to highlight the issues which are at the root of the problems of the environment:

- Who do you most want to be like?
- What would you need in order to feel that you have enough?
- What would be the consequences, both locally and globally, if everybody achieved the same quality of life as that to which you aspire?
- How do the things that you desire compare with the things which you are losing as the environment deteriorates?
- What values and aspirations are implicit in the current policies of your institution (e.g. government, school, family) and in other institutions which affect you?
- What things most offend you? What is your scale of values in terms of good and bad?

Values are the hardest things to discuss, but society's values are the driving force which determines what it does and does not do. Only when we know who we want to be and why, can we start to question whether our current actions are true to that ideal.
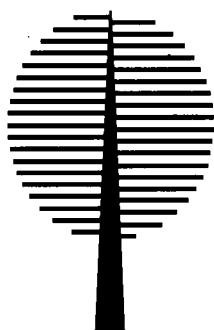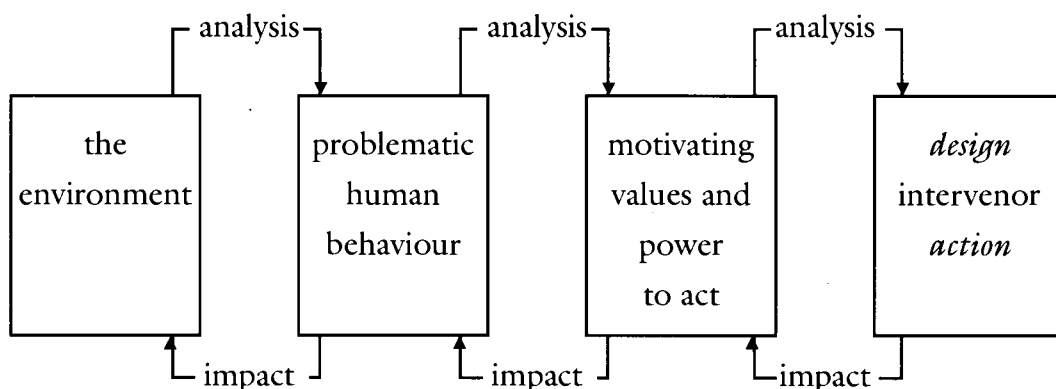
After the Questions...?

Moving from questions to action

The problems of the environment are not, fundamentally, scientific or technical – they are social. It is human activity which causes the problems, and the solutions lie in addressing human behaviour. People are the source of both the problems and the solutions. While the problem may be anything from deforestation to pollution, the solution lies in influencing both the values and the power of the different people concerned.

Figure 1. The chain of influence

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 ┌─ analysis ─┐      ┌─ analysis ─┐      ┌─ analysis ─┐
 │            ↓      │            ↓      │            ↓
┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐
│   the    │   │problematic│  │motivating│   │  design  │
│environment│  │  human   │   │values and│   │intervenor│
│          │   │behaviour │   │  power   │   │  action  │
│          │   │          │   │  to act  │   │          │
└──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘
      ↑            │      ↑            │      ↑            │
      └─ impact ───┘      └─ impact ───┘      └─ impact ───┘
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Reflecting on the issues which the questions in this booklet are designed to highlight should lead to a greater understanding of the problems. Taking the next step of identifying the essentially social solutions depends on understanding why people behave as they do. There are, we suggest, three broad categories of problematic human behaviour:

- **Ignorance.** Frequently, people are unaware of the effects of their actions on others, on themselves, and on the environment.
- **Desperation.** Often, even though people know that what they are doing is damaging, they continue because they can see no realistic alternative course of action.

- **Greed.** As we all know, some individuals only care for the short-term benefits for themselves and their immediate family and friends.
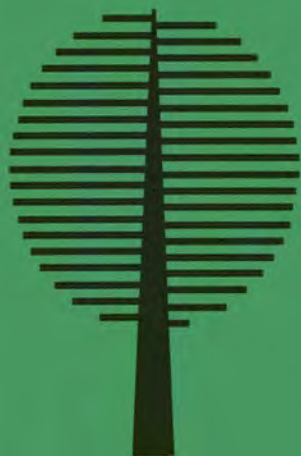
The approach to dealing with each of these aspects of human behaviour is different. Trying to cure ignorance through education is pointless if the problem is not ignorance but desperation. Each of the three broad categories of problem requires its own type of response:

- **Improve understanding through communication and feedback.** Tackle ignorance by improving the processes of communication and feedback between the different components of society so that people come to understand better the impact of their actions.
- **Offer practical choices.** Help to fight desperation by, wherever possible, presenting people with realistic alternatives rather than criticising behaviour.
- **Encourage equitable development.** Resist individual greed by developing a political commitment to protecting society and the environment, and encouraging social justice.

A special case of the problem of ignorance is our own ignorance. Ignorance is not just a problem of others. The problems of the environment and development are so complex that none of us really fully understands what we are doing. Only by recognising our own ignorance can we develop the humble and questioning attitude necessary for the long and hard search for sustainable and equitable solutions.

Founded in 1948 as the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the IUCN brings together States, Government agencies and a diverse range of non-governmental organisations in a unique world partnership: over 900 members in all, spread across some 136 countries. As a Union, IUCN seeks to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. The Union builds on the strengths of its members, networks and partners to enhance their capacity and to support global alliances to safeguard natural resources at local, regional and global levels.

The Strategies for Sustainability Programme of IUCN works to strengthen strategic planning, policy and implementation skills aimed at sustainable development at global, national and local levels. Working with networks of strategy practitioners from member governments, partner institutions and NGOs, the Programme assists in the conceptual development and analysis of experience in strategies, the development of a range of strategic planning and action planning skills, and improved methods of assessing human and ecosystem wellbeing.