

# SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS

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## The Earth Charter and the ESDinds Initiative

### Developing Indicators and Assessment Tools for Civil Society Organisations to Examine the Values Dimensions of Sustainability Projects

**DIMITY PODGER, GEORGIA PIGGOT, MARTIN ZAHRADNÍK,  
SVATAVA JANOUŠKOVÁ, ISMAEL VELASCO, TOMAS HAK,  
ARTHUR DAHL, ALICIA JIMENEZ and MARIE K. HARDER**

#### Abstract

This descriptive report outlines an innovative project in which Earth Charter International is actively involved. The project aims to develop approaches, indicators and tools for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to be able to measure values-based aspects and impacts of their work at the project level.

**Dimity Podger** is Research Fellow at the University of Brighton, UK. Email: [d.m.podger@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:d.m.podger@brighton.ac.uk)

**Georgia Piggot** and **Ismael Velasco** are Research Officers at the University of Brighton. Email: [g.j.piggot@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:g.j.piggot@brighton.ac.uk) and [i.velasco@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:i.velasco@brighton.ac.uk)

**Martin Zahradnik**, **Svatava Janoušková** and **Tomas Hak** are Research Fellows at Charles University Environment Center, Prague, Czech Republic. Email: [martin.zahradnik@czp.cuni.cz](mailto:martin.zahradnik@czp.cuni.cz); [svatava.janouškova@czp.cuni.cz](mailto:svatava.janouškova@czp.cuni.cz) and [tomas.hak@czp.cuni.cz](mailto:tomas.hak@czp.cuni.cz)

**Arthur Dahl** is Independent Advisor, International Environment Forum, Geneva, Switzerland. Email: [dahla@bluewin.ch](mailto:dahla@bluewin.ch)

**Alicia Jimenez** is at Earth Charter International Secretariat in Costa Rica, Email: [ajimenez@earthcharter.org](mailto:ajimenez@earthcharter.org)

**Marie K. Harder**, Project Coordinator and Professor at the University of Brighton, UK, is the corresponding author. Email: [m.k.harder@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:m.k.harder@brighton.ac.uk)

Many CSOs have an intuitive feeling that their projects are more successful when there is a resonance of values with those involved; this project aims to make such aspects tangible, measurable and transferable to other CSOs. The two year, EU-funded project called ESDinds is characterised by a collaborative partnership between a geographically and culturally diverse consortium consisting of four CSOs (including the Earth Charter International Secretariat) and two universities. The research design takes an iterative, grounded research approach to indicator development.

**Keywords:** civil society organisations, indicators for ethical values, indicator development, assessment tools

## INTRODUCTION

Earth Charter International (ECI) and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) across the globe use an approach to sustainable development that is strongly driven by ethical values. Values such as respect, equity, justice and participation are present throughout the Charter and in Earth Charter-based initiatives. ECI—like many civil society organisations—is aware of the importance of adopting a values-based approach to its work, and is conscious of the influence of this approach on sustainable development goals. However, like other CSOs, it lacks tools and methodology to become more systematic in measuring progress and developing an understanding and application of ethical values.

To better understand and measure the impact of the values within the Earth Charter, ECI recently became involved in a wider program involving three other CSOs and two universities. This initiative is a two-year European Union<sup>1</sup>-funded research project, which began in January 2009, called ESDinds.<sup>2</sup>

The ESDinds CSO partners, in addition to ECI, include the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), the European Bahá'í Business Forum (EBBF) and People's Theater (PT). The two research partners are the University of Brighton (UoB) and Charles University Environment Centre (CUEC). The research also benefits from the advice of Professor Arthur Dahl, retired UNEP Deputy Assistant Executive Director. The project is housed at the Sustainable Development Coordination Unit of the University of Brighton in the United Kingdom.

ESDinds innovates in two areas: (1) its emphasis on developing indicators and assessment tools at the project level that are useful to CSOs in measuring the ethical values dimensions of their work; and (2) its collaborative design involving a research partnership between two universities and four CSOs.

The ESDinds initiative has adopted an iterative and grounded approach to indicator development that currently involves a series of iterations of exploratory and collaborative case study research with CSO partner projects and will later involve an expanding pool of CSOs to form a new community of practice, finishing with a conference planned for December 2010. The following sections outline the key concepts important to the project, the features of the partnership approach and the elements of the approach to indicator development.

## INDICATORS FOR ETHICAL VALUES: AN INNOVATION FOR CSO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

There are many indicator initiatives that measure the effectiveness of national and international sustainable development and education for sustainable development (ESD) strategies (Hak et al. 2007; OECD 2003; Reid et al. 2006; UNESCO 2009). Recently, there has been a shift within the field of sustainable development indicators (SDIs) from traditional approaches of capturing isolated environmental, social and economic phenomena towards measures that focus on the goals of humanity's efforts for sustainability, which include wellbeing, quality of life and happiness (European Union 2007; Meadows 1998; OECD 2009; Stiglitz et al. 2009). Although all indicators are value laden and 'inform or promote particular kinds of societal behaviours' (Reid et al. 2006: 14), none of these indicators have attempted to address explicitly the ethical values of individual, community or institutional behaviour that underlie efforts to address sustainability issues.

At the level of CSO projects, few holistic SDIs and assessment tools have been developed to assess progress towards sustainable development.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, recently developed SDIs and indicators for ESD do not provide significant inspiration or methodological help for the development of indicators that measure the ethical values associated with CSO sustainable development and ESD projects, whether at the individual, project, organisational or community level.<sup>4</sup> This gap persists despite the emphasis placed by discourses associated with ESD on the role of civic and ethical values, principled action and spiritual acumen in individual and societal transition towards sustainable development (Fien 2001; Glasser 2004; O'Riordan 1994; Orr 2002). There is a need for indicators that CSOs can use to assess the ethical values dimensions of their work. The ESDinds initiative aims to address this gap.

### KEY CONCEPTS: ETHICAL VALUES AND INDICATORS

In addition to the concept of sustainability, the two key variables fundamental to the aims of the research are 'ethical values' and 'indicators'. Each concept can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways and is associated with research, praxis and measurement across many disciplines. In this brief report, we outline these terms as defined within ESDinds.<sup>5</sup>

#### Values

Values are generally considered to be intangible and therefore unable to be weighted, measured or counted directly. However, behaviour and practices connected to values can be observed and measured (Handy 1970). It is the careful definition of values and the identification of observable referents (variables) in the empirical world that is of crucial importance for achieving the goals of the research. For the ESDinds project, we have chosen to apply the definition of values used by Rokeach (1973: 5):

A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state

of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.

The research is also oriented towards ethical values, which some might call human, spiritual or moral values. Ethical values are understood as ‘what is believed to be good and of primary importance to human civilisation, and are often articulated as ideals. Moral values inform judgement by defining right from wrong, and good behaviour from bad’ (Anello 2008: 19).

The approach of ESDinds is to try to understand and identify, through grassroots participatory research with CSOs, those ethical values which CSOs from different contexts consider essential for progress towards sustainability. In this sense, we are developing indicators for the ethical principles, practices and outcomes that are the operational expression of ethical values<sup>6</sup> (Anello 2008: 19). We have also drawn on academic literature, such as virtues and values classification guides from the fields of moral development and human developmental psychology (see Peterson and Seligman 2004), and a wide range of values measurement studies, to aid in both the definition of ethical values and associated measurement approaches for the purposes of value identification and indicator development.

### **Indicators and Assessment Tools**

Indicators are understood as proxy measures that are used to monitor the progress of projects, in conjunction with other processes which aid decision making (Reid et al. 2006). Gallopín (1997: 15) describes useful indicators as ‘variables that summarize or otherwise simplify relevant information, make visible or perceptible phenomena of interest, and quantify, measure, and communicate relevant information’.

ESDinds has used the framework of ESD indicator types outlined in UNESCO (2007) and based on Sollart (2005) to capture from the empirical case study research the various ways in and points at which ethical values find expression in CSO initiatives. Adapting from this framework, the indicator types developed include indicators relating to the CSO context, processes and learning approaches, and indicators relating to the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the program or project.

An associated aspect of indicator development is the identification of appropriate assessment tools. Therefore, in addition to researchers from the universities supporting CSOs to develop indicators, they are also supporting CSOs to identify associated measurement methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, narrative, forum theatre, action research) and specific assessment tools at levels of complexity appropriate to CSO contexts.

It is important to note that social systems are many and varied, and are dynamic rather than static (Reid et al. 2006: 7). Therefore, the primary contribution of this project will not be a definitive and comprehensive set of values-based indicators and assessment tools, but rather an approach developed by CSOs in partnership with research institutions that can be used by other CSOs to develop values-based indicators and assessment tools relevant to their own contexts. The next section outlines the design features of the partnership approach we have adopted that is fundamental to the usefulness and value of the project.

## **PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS**

The partnership approach of ESDinds has involved creating a consortium of CSOs to commission, co-design and participate in a research process in collaboration with academics that deliberately privileges the needs and perspectives of CSOs in the design. The approach has a number of important implications. First, it contextualises the work of the universities within society. Second, it forces the universities to take an interdisciplinary approach to research because CSOs do not recognise academic boundaries.

The partnership is characterised by a number of important elements that emphasise the primary guiding and decision-making role of the CSOs in the initiative:

- The CSO partners form the primary advisory and decision-making group, particularly on such aspects as project direction, desired outcomes, research approaches and project outputs. There are formal face-to-face meetings for research program review and decision making among the CSOs, with input from the research institutions.
- The project design includes reflection and consultation space to improve the level and quality of collaboration between the university and CSO partners, to study how CSOs can internalise the learning from this project and how that learning can be shared with other such partnerships.
- Decision making among the partners is consultative, so that the CSOs' views and voices are positively taken into account.
- Funding is directed towards the CSOs, not just the research institutions.

By putting the CSOs at the heart of every stage of the research process, the project ensures that the research outcomes will not sit on a shelf or be only conceptually interesting, but will be highly practical and transferable, embedded in the policies and practices of CSOs that will increase their local relevance and take-up, their application and replication, and their wider policy impact.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF INDICATORS AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS**

The research design involves an iterative, participatory and grounded approach to the development of indicators and assessment tools. The first phase involved identifying both a broad 'pool' of important ethical values for the CSO partners and the practical expressions of these values as well as deriving pilot indicators. The broad pool of values and pilot indicators were identified largely through content analysis of data collected from case study research (Stake 2000) with six CSO projects, interviews and workshops with key informants, and CSO documentation. The values which were identified from the data as significant for the CSOs and confirmed from further analysis by the CSOs were: unity in diversity, trust/trustworthiness, justice, empowerment, integrity and care/respect.

The second (ending May 2010) and third (ending November 2010) phases of the project involve field research to develop and refine indicators for these specific values and assessment tools appropriate to a range of CSO contexts and needs for rigour. At the time of writing, the second phase of the project is underway. Researchers have carried out field visits with five CSO project partners based in Mexico, Sierra Leone, Italy and Germany to try out the pilot indicators from the first phase and identify additional or more appropriate indicators. There is also scope to broaden the field of significant values and gain deeper understanding of the role these values play in CSO projects. Findings will be analysed for further development in the third phase.

At the end of each phase, there is a formal review meeting between the CSO partners and research institutions to embed lessons learned and make key decisions.

In parallel with the third phase of the research, commencing in May 2010, an additional 50 to 80 CSOs will be invited to try the approach developed by ESDinds for CSOs to create their own values-based indicators, or, if they prefer, to use the indicators and assessment tools already documented as useful to the other CSOs. The purpose of this expansion phase is to multiply the number of CSOs involved to determine that the indicators developed are useful across a wide range of contexts and to form a community of practice. A conference in December 2010 will provide a forum for all CSOs involved throughout the initiative, as well as other interested parties, to share their experiences by attendance or written representation.

The approach is consistent with best practice processes for community-level indicator development (Hardi and Zdan 1997; Palmer and Conlin 1997; Smolko et al. 2006), which emphasise the importance of engaging broad participation of stakeholders in an iterative process. Fundamentally, the approach chosen ensures that CSOs take on the 'responsibility to determine, monitor and report their own locally grounded, context-specific and bottom-up SD indicators' (Reid et al. 2006: 9) and provide other CSOs with learning about how ESDinds has done it for them to do the same and of course improve upon the process.

In addition to the empirical work described, the research process continues to involve an examination of academic literature to identify (1) indicators that have been used for those ethical values the CSOs consider important, (2) how the presence or change in values has been measured and (3) possible assessment tools that may be useful for the CSOs. The review of academic literature will continue throughout the project.

## **EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

The primary expected outcome of the ESDinds initiative is the development of a replicable process, applicable in a wide range of national, cultural and organisational contexts, for CSOs to create indicators and assessment tools to measure the values dimensions of their sustainability projects. Also, by linking our findings about the significance of ethical values in sustainability to the academic and policy literature on SD and ESD, the project will contribute to a deeper conceptualisation of the process of individual and social transformation towards sustainability. Furthermore, by

linking the value-based indicators and assessment tools developed through ESDinds to the academic literature on measuring values, we will be able to comment on wider social, organisational and individual impacts associated with the values we will have examined. Additionally, the grounded partnership approach ensures that the CSOs involved will benefit from the research project. Finally, the initiative will contribute lessons about research designs involving collaborative inquiry between CSOs and universities.

## NEXT STEPS

It is hoped that the indicators and assessment tools developed in ESDinds will evolve over time. The community of practice established in this project will refine existing indicators and develop new indicators and the associated processes. Any organisations interested in joining in the ongoing process of developing values-based indicators, or in sharing their expertise, are encouraged to attend or otherwise contribute to the ESDinds conference to be held in December 2010. Details of this conference will be available on the ESDinds website: [www.ESDinds.eu](http://www.ESDinds.eu).

## Notes

- 1 Primary funding for the ESDinds research project is provided by the European Commission through FP7-ENV-2007-1 grant #212237.
- 2 ESDinds full project title is Development of Indicators and Assessment Tools for CSO Projects Promoting Values-Based Education for Sustainable Development.
- 3 Existing indicators are limited to 'litmus test' indicators, related to national and international frameworks (see Lempert and Nguyen 2008), or are focused on only one component of sustainable development (for example the eco-footprint approach described by Wackernagel and Rees 1996). While few comprehensive SDIs exist specifically for CSOs, some inspiration might be taken from firms using sustainability reporting as a means of assessing their social, economic and environmental responsibility. There have also been SDI initiatives focused on measuring sustainable development at the community level (Palmer and Conlin 1997; Smolko et al. 2006; Sustainable Seattle 1998).
- 4 Although some surveys on human values exist (mostly on a national level, see for example the World Values Survey 2005), they allow neither systematic monitoring of the values relevant for sustainable development nor detailed exploration of values at the lower level as, for example, a firm or a civil society organisation.
- 5 In this brief report, and indeed before the close of this conceptually challenging project, it is not possible to enter into a presentation on the complexities associated with context and cultural variation of values and indicators. By working with a diverse group of CSOs across the globe, the ESDinds project will explore and report on approaches to dealing with cultural and contextual diversity in indicator development.
- 6 In this two-year project we will not be identifying causal relationships between specific values and project results, nor creating empirical models providing predictions of project success based on certain values or attitudes. Other SDI initiatives also highlight this theoretical and practical challenge (Reid et al. 2006), with the empirical connection between attitudes and human behaviour being very difficult to prove.

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