IISDCOMMENTARY

ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:

An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

The following is the record of an interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), an international networked organization that focuses on the use of ICTs by civil society for social justice and development. The interview was conducted by David Souter, senior associate, IISD and managing director of *ict* Development Associates, in June 2012.

This interview is one in a series of papers being published by IISD's Global Connectivity team to inform and stimulate discussion and debate on the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Internet and sustainability, surrounding the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 (Rio+20), the UN Internet Governance Forum in Baku in November 2012 and the International Telecommunication Union World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai in December 2012 (WCIT-12).

Anriette Esterhuysen is the executive director of APC. She was executive director of SANGONeT, an Internet service provider and ICT training institution for the development sector in South Africa, from 1993 to 2000. Prior to that she worked in development and in human rights organizations involved in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.[1]

Alan Finlay is ICTs and sustainability project coordinator with APC. He has worked in the ICT4D sector for more than 10 years in project development, research, writing and editing.[2]

I would like to start by asking how APC defines sustainability and sustainable development. Do you have something you would call a vision for sustainability?

ANRIETTE – I'll give a very general answer. I think the traditional or historic definition of sustainability in APC is very much the one that was developed by the Brundtland Commission, and that was most pervasive in the buildup to and immediately after the Earth Summit, though maybe not expressed in exactly the same way. It is a definition which emphasizes human development, perhaps even more than it does economic development, and that places a strong emphasis on environmental sustainability. It assumes that social justice is an important element of sustainability: significant inequality between people and between countries results in all kinds of conflict, and conflict undermines sustainability.

---

[1] Biography abstracted from http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/speaker_bios_08/speaker_access_anriette.html
[2] Biography taken from http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Programs/Agriculture_and_the_Environment/Climate_Change_and_Water/Pages/NonIDRCBookDetails.aspx?PublicationID=1092

There is another element important to APC, which I think has had too little attention. Sustainability also requires change—changes in consumption, changes in production, changes in governance. Our approach is that, unless there is sufficient regulation and governance to ensure that economic development takes place in ways that don't harm the environment or harm particular sectors of society, then the necessary changes in production and consumption won't take place, and the resulting development is therefore not likely to be sustainable.

It might be interesting to mention that in 2002–2003 there was an internal debate in APC about sustainability and sustainable development. A subset of members, mainly from Eastern and Central Europe, felt strongly that APC had started on a path of ICTs for development and a rights-oriented approach—concerned with human rights and women's rights—at the expense of a more holistic focus on sustainability which includes environmental sustainability. We have tried since then to integrate that more holistic approach—and I think that's where we are now. We certainly went through a period when environmental sustainability was absent from our approach to sustainable development. That is no longer the case.

ALAN – I'm not a sustainable development expert, but I think it's an evolving question rather than something you can pinpoint and say "This is the position." My sense is that APC thinks it's worth trying to keep the questions open because to nail down a very clear position for environmental sustainability is difficult. But I think in general it takes the view that you can't have the kind of economic development that we've seen in developed countries happening in developing countries, because the resources aren't there. That's in line with what environmentalists have been saying for 20 years or so already.

ANRIETTE – I think we've been quite consistent in one aspect of our understanding of what sustainable development is, in that we've questioned the "development as growth" paradigm, certainly in the last 10 to 12 years since we started focusing very actively on ICTs for development. I think that's something that has always distinguished APC as an actor in the ICT-for-development field—that we questioned the notion of massive proliferation of ICTs, and expanding consumption and growth in GDP, as being the path to sustainable development. We've always emphasized issues of equity, and social justice, and the potential negative impacts of ICTs.

If you go back to the Brundtland Report and the Earth Summit, they were trying to identify ways of enabling the three objectives of economic prosperity, social equity and environmental protection all together. You seem to be suggesting there are disconnections there.

ANRIETTE – I'm a skeptic as to whether you can enable these objectives at the same time. Maybe in a utopian sense, you can, or in some parts of the world, but not at a "system-wide" level. Take a country like Sweden, which managed to convert its economy away from a heavy industrial economy that massively damaged the environment. Sweden is a global player in a much more sustainable way now because it has invested in new economies and emerging industries. I think there are countries that feel that they have achieved some kind of balance and some capacity to focus on all three elements, but that's not the global picture at all. In fact, some of this success in some parts of the world actually contributes to dissonance in other parts of the world. We live in a very aspirational society and so you have the more powerful emerging economies trying to mimic economic development in developed economies. That just increases some of the disconnects.

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

2

In Sweden there is also effectively zero population growth, and therefore a static GDP doesn't imply impoverishment. In countries with rapid population growth it does. How would you respond to that?

ANRIETTE – I think the fact that there are some countries with continued high population growth is one consequence of how the vision of the Brundtland Commission is just not being achieved. If you have a country where people still need to rely on subsistence economies—subsistence farming or very small trade—you'll have continued high population growth unless there is significant human development—investment in health, investment in education, investment in women's equality. What you have at present is improvement at a surface level in health care—through availability of medications, control of diseases like malaria—so you have a drop in mortality rate, but you don't actually have sustainable improvement in levels of human development as a whole.

Are we any closer to sustainability of the kind that you have just described than we were at the time of the Brundtland Report?

ANRIETTE – I think we are. If you look for a net effect, possibly we are not, but many of the components that have the potential to contribute to sustainable development at a holistic level are in place. If you look at something which is generally considered a very important component of development, gender equality, for example, there've been massive differences in many parts of the world when it comes to recognizing the importance of equality between men and women, and empowering women socially and economically as a means of achieving better levels of health, better levels of social well-being, economic contribution and so on.

That doesn't mean that there aren't still huge challenges. But I think there's also much more understanding of the need for sustainability today: there's much more knowledge of the decline in biodiversity in many parts of the world, more understanding of climate change. Particularly after this financial crisis, there's also more awareness that the "growth as development" model is not sustainable. The problem is that there isn't really a framework whereby all of this can be brought together.

I thought your interview with Jim MacNeill [for this project] was very interesting. He said that governments must return to the commitments they made at the Earth Summit and begin to implement policy and institutional reforms needed to bring about an urgent transition to more sustainable forms of development. I agree with him. Later on, he also said that he fears that the net effect of all-pervasive use of ICTs has been to weaken the authority of governments, and therefore their capacity to govern effectively. I think that's a really important point.

I want to explore your views about the impact of ICTs. Looking back over the past 25 years, we have seen what is often called an information revolution or the development of an Information Society. How would you rate the importance of that in comparison with other global trends over that period, such as the end of communism or the rise of the women's movement?

ALAN – These are huge questions. Myself, I don't particularly like many of the social developments that have taken place as a result of the Internet. I think there is a lot that's negative in terms of human interaction—while there have also been lots of positive possibilities for issues like health and education, really practical tangible positive impacts. If you are twinning globalization with the Internet, some of the ways of interacting that have emerged seem to me problematic. I think they are creating ways of interacting that are potentially non-sustainable. I would rate the birth

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

3

and end of communism, and the birth of the women's movement, as much more fundamental influences on the future sustainability of the human race than the Internet. What I mean is that issues of how society is structured, with the extremes of communism versus capitalism and whatever falls in between or outside of that dynamic, as well as the power relationships between men and women, still fundamentally inform human decision-making processes, including decisions on how to govern the Iinternet. They set the terms of engagement of probably any discussion on human relations—I think more fundamentally than how the Internet can change the way we relate.

ANRIETTE – I think it's very hard to isolate the changes and general trends in ICTs. The social changes we are talking about are not just consequences of ICTs but also consequences of changes like the fall of communism and a more globalized world. It does not make sense to focus on the relevance of ICTs on their own because their impact is through other social processes. However, thinking long term, I think ICTs will have a far more profound impact than the fall of communism, for example, and are already doing so. Language and tools are probably the most profound developments that have defined what we've done and where we go as a species. That's why ICTs are uniquely significant, because they bring together those two fundamental human characteristics, language and the capacity to use and make tools, which are both consequences of change and drivers of change.

Let's take the positive side first. What would you say has been the most positive impact of ICTs on the nature of societies and economies over the past 25 years?

ANRIETTE – I think the most positive aspect has been impacts resulting from increased access to knowledge and to information about what's happening and how people experience it happening: for example, chemical spills into the Danube where APC members were involved in campaigns to expose the acts of mining companies and thereby effect change. Similarly, when there's been famine, when there's been war, and when governments engage in acts of corruption or decisions that are very harmful, the capacity for people to access and exchange information means that very little is not exposed.

The other impact is that ICT empowers individuals. Where governments are failing to make the policies that would enable more sustainable forms of development, individuals are better off if they are empowered, if they can speak out and can use these new tools to strengthen their livelihood capacity. ICTs don't solve problems but, where problems are not being solved, access to ICTs leaves individuals, communities and institutions in a better position to act, and make an effort to solve their own problems.

Let's pursue that for a moment. There is one strand within discussion of the Information Society which argues that information technology is positively transformative in all aspects of society, and so developmental problems are resolvable because of ICTs. Your comment was narrower than that.

ANRIETTE – Yes. I would say they are transformative, definitely. I don't think they have the capacity to solve developmental problems, but, in contexts where developmental problems are not being solved at a sustainable holistic level, they can have an ameliorative effect.

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

4

What about the downsides?

ALAN – You can't really argue with the position Anriette puts forward. I'm more interested, though, in what gets left behind when people start to overemphasize the interaction between technology and society—and I think a lot does get left behind. There are powerful forces involved, like consumerism, big business and so on, that's the first thing. These forces tend to drive or shape the interaction, at least when it comes to the mainstream. Then, on the more practical level, there are impacts on the environment that we need to take care of. I used to think it was all about everyone having their voice, but I'm less convinced now that that's a productive model of human interaction. I think constructive and orchestrated debate and exchange is much more important than voice. The problem with the Information Society is that it's very hard to find places where that constructive exchange happens.

ANRIETTE – Can I respond to that? There is a bit of a chicken-and-egg point to consider here. I think that if voice is linked to organization and to advocacy, when voice feeds into dialogue and debate and the development of demands and people and institutions coming together—in other words, if voice can feed into politics—then the consequences are fantastic, and ICTs can strengthen that.

The ICT sector is the fastest growing contributor to climate change, and also one of the fastest growing contributors to waste generation. Whose responsibility is it to address that?

ALAN – Obviously governments have a massive role to play and consumers have a responsibility, but the biggest role surely is big business. The problem with ICTs is that it is an unsustainable business. We talk about the rise of Asian economies, but when they're based on ICTs—or more specifically on ICT production—there is something of a false economy going on there. To go back to what Anriette was saying: one problem is that the conversation is often unclear about the ideological underpinnings of how people use the term "sustainability." To my mind, environmental sustainability should pose a new model of society. I'm sure a lot of people agree with that. But that is getting left out because it's being driven by the interaction between profit making, consumerism, the dependency of emerging economies on ICT industries, etc. etc. So how do we unpack that? Business has a massive role to play but it's tricky. How can they take responsibility and how can we ask them not to make the profits they are making at the same time? So the government would have to play a strong role in shaping the balance of responsibilities between business and the consumer.

You just said that "ICTs are an unsustainable business." Why?

ALAN – Well, on the one hand, in a practical sense, the resources that they depend on are finite—if you think about the mining of the rarer minerals and metals that go into ICTs. Maybe we will develop something that replaces those, but I think that's an uncertain future. On the other hand, it's based on a profit-driven model—it's about getting more consumers and shortening the lifecycle of technology. The finite resources and consumerism don't go together. That's not a sustainable equation.

ANRIETTE – I don't think that ICT business is, in itself, more unsustainable than any other industry—than the motor vehicle industry, for example. I think it actually has the capacity to be far more sustainable. The lost opportunity has been that it has not pursued a path of sustainability, and that's a really huge lost opportunity. I think the Internet in particular started out with lots of people who, maybe quite naively, had a vision of the Internet being a force for good. But they don't take responsibility, and they're not forced to take responsibility. It's interesting to look at what Vint

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

5

Cerf said in his interview, that the unsustainable practice in the ICT industry comes from the edges, not from Internet companies like Google, but from, for example, manufacturers of hardware.

This illustrates in a sense how the ICT industry has developed in a way where it's not taking sufficient responsibility. Is the footprint of Facebook, which keeps millions of users online for hours, really less than that of a notebook manufacturer? We need more awareness and change at broad ICT industry level and this will take time, and contestation. You can compare it with mining. No one who's into making money out of mining starts off being interested in sustainability or social change or doing things in a different way. But the extractive industries have been put under increased pressure— at national level through communities that are directly impacted, in home countries where there's more focus on environmental standards. And the overall effect of the extractive industries is less harmful now than it was 20 years ago. I don't see any real such movement in the ICT sector. The potential is there to use more renewable energy, to use different materials, to have equipment last for longer periods, but this is not likely to happen without widespread regulatory intervention and consumer activism.

The Global e-Sustainability Initiative and others have argued that ICTs will achieve major reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Do you buy that?

ALAN – Well, that's not new. The World Wildlife Fund's been saying something to that effect for a while now. Of course there are going to be lots of areas where that will be the case. But the thing is, how do you calculate it? I don't have faith in the calculations.

ANRIETTE – I don't either. There's no consistency. So you have that potential for reduction in greenhouse gas emissions on the one hand; and then, on the other, you have large numbers of cheap mobile phones of poor quality that don't last very long flooding African markets. The ICT for development sector tends to see this as a "solution" and without considering the harmful impacts of the resulting explosion in e-waste. So I would agree with Alan. It will take much more than is happening now to put an end-to-end approach, making ICTs more sustainable, in place. The potential's there but I don't see either industry or governments moving in that direction. It will only change when imperatives on profit force the ICT industry to change. And that's a trend in all industries—so maybe yes, maybe in 20 years' time the cost of energy, the cost of waste processing and so on will force them to change their practices.

Can we go on from that to rights and governance? What effect do you think ICTs have had on human rights?

ANRIETTE – They have increased awareness of human rights and human rights violations. I think ICTs are a huge enabler of certain types of human rights—particularly rights to freedom of expression and opinion, and freedom of association, and also of rights to culture and access to culture. On the other hand, maybe—I think this is what Alan was saying—they enable voice but they don't necessarily enable social change or social justice on a sustainable level. For ICTs to create all this awareness and to be an enabler of rights in the long term you need institutional capacity: you need changes in governance, you need rule of law, you need mechanisms that will deal with violations, and you also need a rights culture. One of the points Alan was making was that having so much expression doesn't necessarily build a rights culture.

I remain optimistic. I think ICT has had a positive effect on rights and can continue to have a positive effect on realizing rights. But not on its own. The capacity to speak comes with the capacity to be heard and to be censored, and to be

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

6

imprisoned, as well as the capacity to be listened to and for governments to make change. You need changes at other levels as well. You need an ecosystem, as in so many other aspects of work on sustainable development. Just having ICTs play a catalytic role is not enough.

What about the impact of the Information Society on governance?

ALAN – This is much more Anriette's terrain than mine, but my gut feeling is that there was something of a peak when it had a positive impact but now it's declining in some way, that it's now not necessarily being taken that seriously as a mechanism to promote good governance.

ANRIETTE – ICTs make everything very immediate, including negative actions on the part of governments, and governments' incapacity and corruption. This is very challenging. Dealing with being watched and having your mistakes exposed all the time, as an institution, is extremely difficult—governments don't like this. One of the big challenges in poor governance is political will, but lack of capacity and lack of resources are also major contributors. ICTs challenge governments enormously. There was a very short-term approach to this—an approach to ICTs that saw it as a means of fast-tracking progress from inefficient or poor governance to good governance—and that has not turned out to be true. In fact, I think the contrary: rather than the ICT revolution making it easier for governments that lack capacity and the political will to become better, I think it makes it harder for them to become better.

The positive effect is that citizens are more empowered, but I'm not sure that governments are more empowered. For a government to be a good government and do its job well, it does need to be empowered. It also needs legitimacy. The sad thing is that so many governments are responding to ICTs and the challenge that ICTs pose by trying to become more authoritarian rather than by becoming more legitimate.

How do you see that evolving?

ANRIETTE – I think institutional capacity is absolutely critical. Political will is also absolutely critical. A government must want to be a good government, one that makes policy and implements policy and regulation in the interest of the public, with a particular focus on those who are excluded in its society. Once that is in place, I think they can cope. Governments also need more human capacity development.

But what will happen with governance will be a consequence of institutional capacity development at *all* levels of society, because the stronger other institutions (civil society, the media, institutions of learning and culture, and so on) are at a national level, the more likely you are to have a stronger public sector. Investments in education and in political and social development that integrate ICTs can make a difference. It will be different in different countries, and the consequences will be very uneven.

Going back to something you were talking about earlier, the responsibility of governments to act as public interest regulators in the information and communications sector. That's consistent with quite a lot of past thinking about the role of governments, particularly in democratic societies. Isn't it also at odds with some of the philosophy that's been around within the Internet, of minimizing the role of government?

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

7

ANRIETTE – It's completely at odds with that philosophy. The Internet sector is such a private sector-driven terrain, and, you know, there's a bit of a frontier mentality to it as well. The ICT sector also has a kind of moral high ground, you know, thinking, "We're different from the big mining companies. We're different from other global industries. We're nice guys, we're not bad guys; we don't need to be regulated." The reason why you can't just glibly dismiss that attitude is because governments' track record in regulating telecommunications and ICTs hasn't been very good. If you look at other areas where you need to regulate for sustainable development, governments don't have a particularly good track record either, and so it becomes harder to argue in favour of them playing that regulatory role.

But, if not them, who else?

ALAN – That's exactly the problem. In South Africa we tried to get a business-led e-waste management program together, and it's basically dissolved into nothing. It was meant to be business-led. But quite frankly, because of its cost implications, business will do superficial marketing in its response, primarily. I think there are places where you do need a strong government; it needs to be legislated.

ANRIETTE – I don't think there is an alternative to governments here. Maybe the only alternative way of looking at it is to do with how you get there, which is where the rights-based approach becomes a very useful one for us to think about. In the ICT sector we talk a lot about multistakeholderism or multistakeholder policy approaches. But there's also a discussion that emerged from human rights, a rights-based approach, which is also based on modes of dialogue and partnership, and inclusive policy and regulation. Whether you call it multistakeholder or inclusive or rights-based, having business involved in developing policy and regulation is important—but I don't think self-regulation is a sustainable alternative. It can play a very constructive role, but it is not enough.

One last question. We've just had Rio+20, and the outcome document barely mentions information technology. In a year or so we'll be holding the 10-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society. Do you think there is enough dialogue between these two worlds, and do you have any suggestions about how to improve it?

ALAN – I personally don't think so. There's some work we've been doing, for instance, in the water management sector. There are people who've been in it for years, but don't think about ICTs as something separate from their work. They assume technology to be just a natural project decision choice and not something with its own agency in the way that the ICT-for-development sector does. I don't know if this is their shortcoming, or a challenge for the sustainability of the ICT-for-development sector itself. Perhaps ICTs are so mainstreamed in the everyday that the sector has to some extent lost its relevance to others—but there are bound to be lessons lost if that's the case. Despite groups like APC having links with environmental groups historically, there seem to be massive gaps between the work that the ICT-for-development sector does and work that environmentalists have been doing. I'm not even sure there is a co-awareness of each other's work.

ANRIETTE – I don't think that any conversation is really happening anywhere about sustainable development as an integrated approach. If you are talking about conversations between the ICT universe and the sustainable development universe, I would say, "I know who the ICT people are but who are the sustainable development people?"

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

8

I see the sustainable development sector or movement as completely fragmented. On the one hand, there is a focus on climate change, which is quite narrow and quite conservative—it's really just about dealing with what's already happened. Then you have the biodiversity people, you have the pollution and air quality people, and you have trade justice and poverty-eradication people. I don't really see sustainable development being talked about anywhere, not in an integrated sense.

I want to make one more point, which is to do with the Millennium Development Goals. I think that we went from the Earth Summit, a kind of holistic sustainable development approach, to one in which governments started acting on the MDG process, which is in many ways not a sustainable development approach. I'm not saying that it wasn't necessary to focus on those specific targets, but one shouldn't underestimate the effect that doing so has had on the discourse around development, and also the responses at national level, and on the engagement between civil society and government policy-makers. The MDG approach followed the path of dealing with symptoms and consequences of the absence of sustainable development, rather than on drivers for sustainable development. It's had quite a profound effect. When we talk about interaction between the ICT sector, ICTs for development, and justice and development, we should factor that into our analysis.

Thank you very much.

IISD COMMENTARY OCTOBER 2012
ICTs, the Internet and Sustainability:
An interview with Anriette Esterhuysen and Alan Finlay, Association for Progressive Communications

9

About IISD

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change and energy, and management of natural and social capital, as well as the enabling role of communication technologies in these areas. We report on international negotiations and disseminate knowledge gained through collaborative projects, resulting in more rigorous research, capacity building in developing countries, better networks spanning the North and the South, and better global connections among researchers, practitioners, citizens and policy-makers.

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 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.

Acknowledgement