



Measuring real progress

Headline indicators for a sustainable world

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The world economy is growing: global gross domestic product (GDP), a key indicator of economic activity, tells us so. But if we take into account other economic, social and environmental factors, is global development really sustainable and how can we measure it?

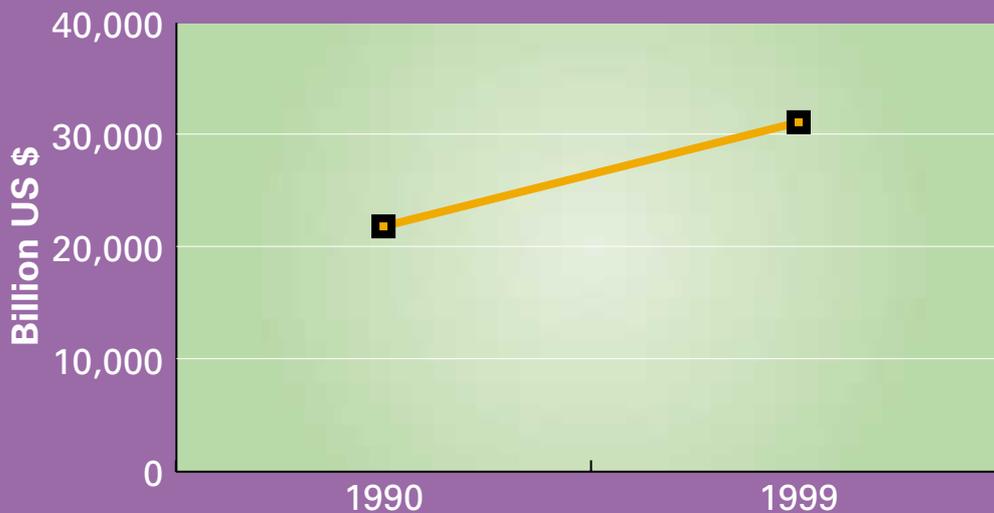
Most people probably have a sneaking feeling that global GDP does not quite show the whole picture, that there is another side to the story, maybe many other sides. Economic growth comes at a hidden cost. But how can we reveal those hidden costs, and tell whether we're making progress to reduce them?

A few countries already use 'headline indicators' of national sustainable development to do this. For example, knowing the number of children in low-income households and adults without qualifications helps to show and measure poverty and social exclusion. Indicators like these, not just of economic growth, but of

social or environmental issues too, give a clearer picture of whether development is truly sustainable. Importantly, when they have been used, they have actually changed economic policy decision-making.

No such indicators exist at the global level. Many respected and influential organisations have suggested something like them, but most proposals have been too complex. Probably the best set of global indicators at the moment is the one proposed by the United Nations (UN) to measure progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But this set contains many indicators, 48 in total, and has not been agreed by governments. The UN also collates indicators for the 'Human Development Report'. But while this is widely acknowledged and used, its indicators focus at a national level and do not reflect many important environmental issues.

Global GDP



Source: World Bank, 2001. World Development Indicators.

School children, Zimbabwe by J Schytte (Still Pictures)



Headline indicators for a sustainable world

As part of an action plan for real progress, we propose that the international community formally commits to developing and agreeing a small set of global headline indicators. We believe they should be adopted by Johannesburg+5, and that national and global monitoring and reporting should be in place by Johannesburg+10. Most importantly, we urge governments to integrate these headline indicators into everyday policy-making.

To start the process, we present a set of 10 illustrative headline indicators, incorporating a range of global economic, social and environmental issues. This set:

- is based largely on the Millennium Development Goals,

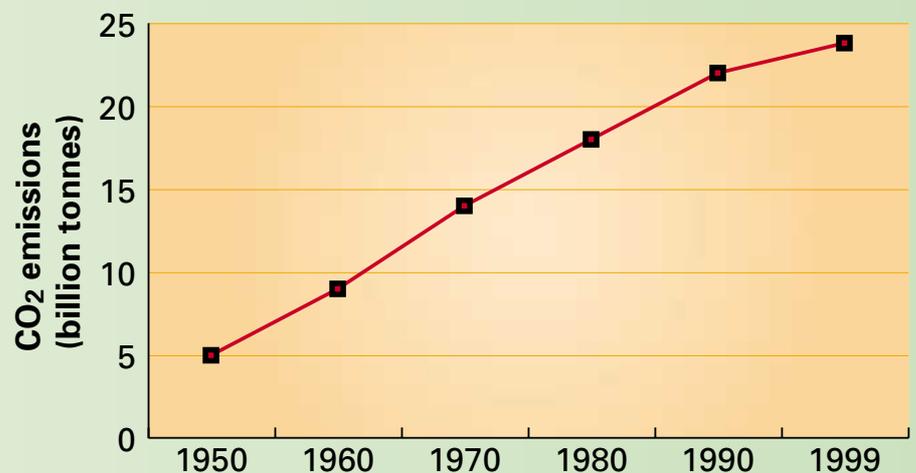
as these have already been accepted by the international community

- relates directly to existing international environmental and social agreements, such as the climate change convention.

So far, little progress has been made to achieve these goals and implement these agreements. We believe a focused set of robust global indicators will encourage and help track progress towards sustainable development – and highlight failure if progress is not made. We also suggest two additional composite indices as another way of measuring how sustainable development is.

Indicator 1 Global emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂)

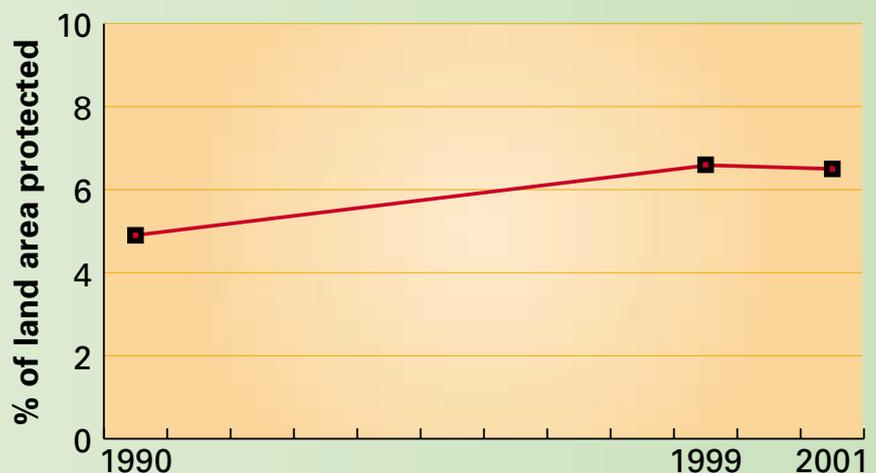
Climate change is the single biggest environmental problem the world faces. Total global CO₂ emissions are a better indicator for climate change than emissions per capita or per unit of economic wealth. Reasonably good data are collected annually. This indicator is rising, which is bad.



Source: World Resources Institute, 1998–99. World Resources.

Indicator 2 Land and sea area protected under national or international law or agreement

The area of protected land and sea gives a rough idea of how well we are conserving nature and the natural resources on which economies and communities depend. This indicator is one of the best we have, even though many very important natural sites are not protected at all, plenty that are protected are poorly managed and it is often hard to define a protected area exactly. The area protected has risen in the last 10 years but is levelling off.

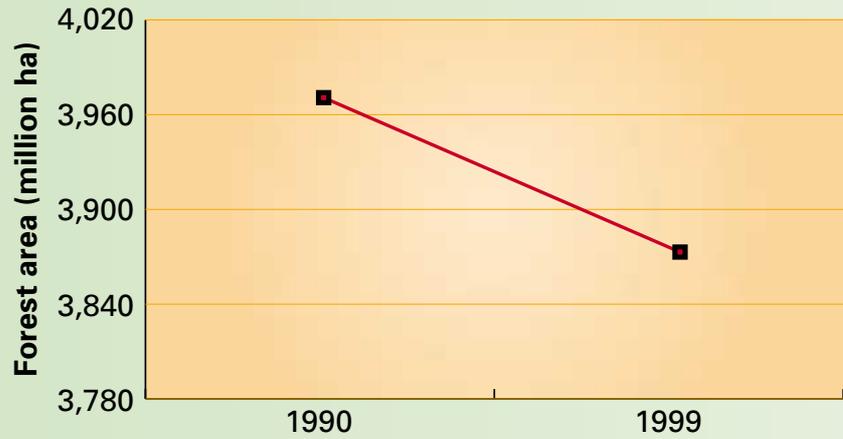


Source: World Bank, 2001. World Development Indicators.



Indicator 3 Area of forest in the world

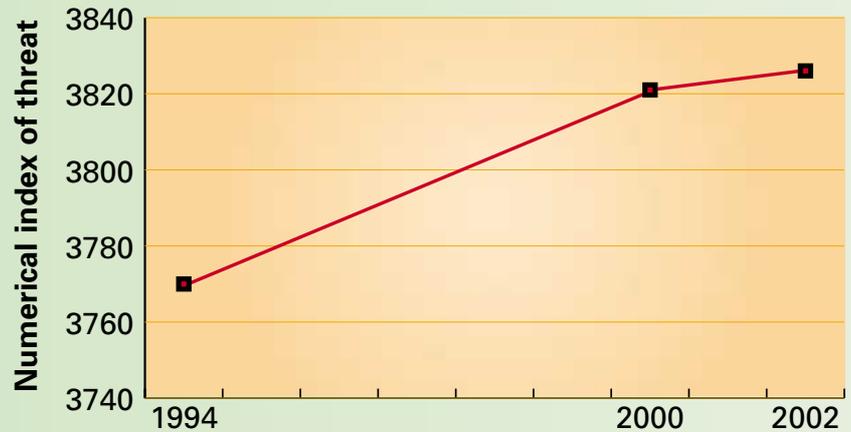
Forests, notably tropical forests, contain a greater variety of wildlife than many other habitats. Natural forests can show how well we are protecting biodiversity and other natural resources. This is a good indicator, even though it doesn't distinguish between low and high quality forest and it is hard to separate out non-natural forests that contain less biodiversity. Forest area is falling rapidly, which is a serious problem.



Source: FAO, 2001. Forest Resources Assessment.

Indicator 4 Index measuring threat of extinction of wild birds

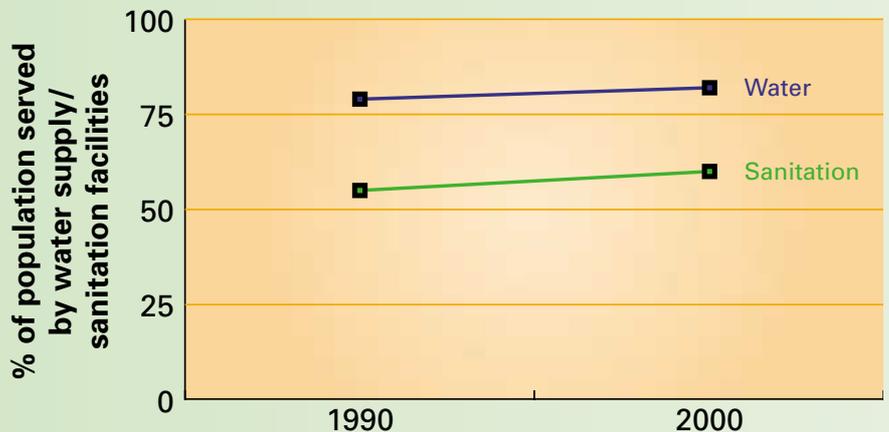
The IUCN Red List identifies and documents those species most at risk of extinction. Red-listing involves a careful assessment process, so changes in the numbers of species listed are good indicators of biodiversity trends. The Red List covers a wide range of plant and animal groups but at present there is enough data to develop an indicator only for birds. The threat of extinction among the world's birds is rising, which is bad.



Source: BirdLife International, 2002

Indicator 5 Access to adequate water and sanitation

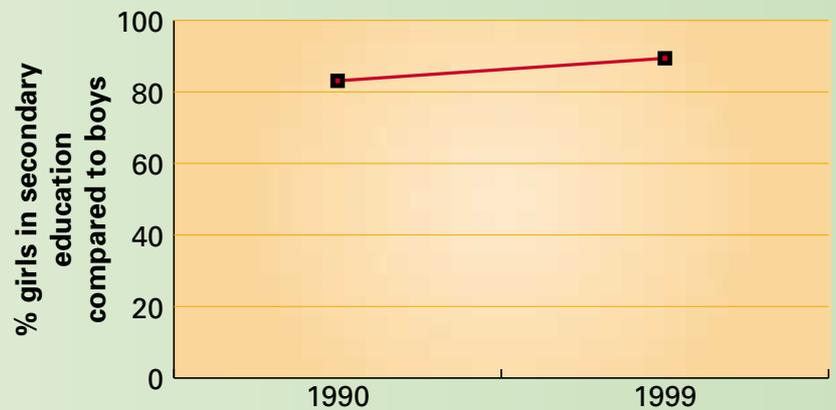
During the 1990s there was a slight improvement in the proportion of people with access to safe water and sanitation but it was not sufficient to meet the MDG target of halving the proportion of people without access to water by 2015. The small proportional increase means that there are in fact more people without access to sanitation in 2000 than in 1990. There are now 2.5 billion people without access to adequate sanitation and 1 billion with no access to clean water. This is not sustainable.



Source: UNICEF, WHO and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, 2000. Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000 Report.

Indicator 6 Ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education (%)

In many low-income countries girls are less likely than boys to attend and stay at school, as parents often value girls working at home, especially if it is simply too expensive for a family to send all children to school. The gap between boys and girls enrolling in school is narrowing in all regions, which is good, but the level of disparity remains very worrying in South Asia. This indicator does not reflect the quality of education provided.

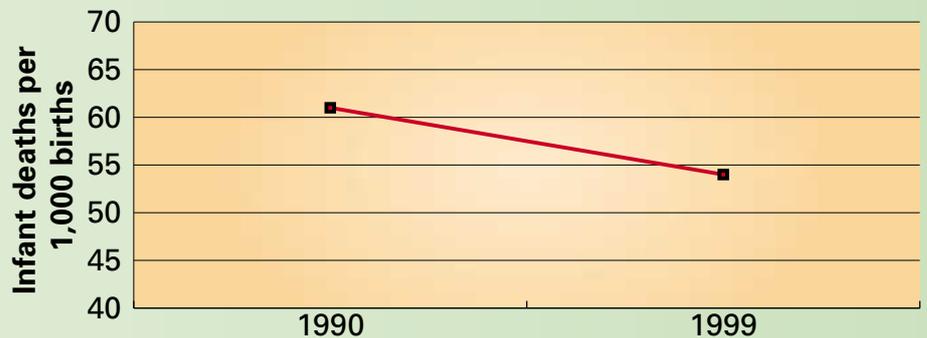


Source: World Bank, 2001. World Development Indicators.

Indicator 7 Infant mortality – deaths per 1,000 births

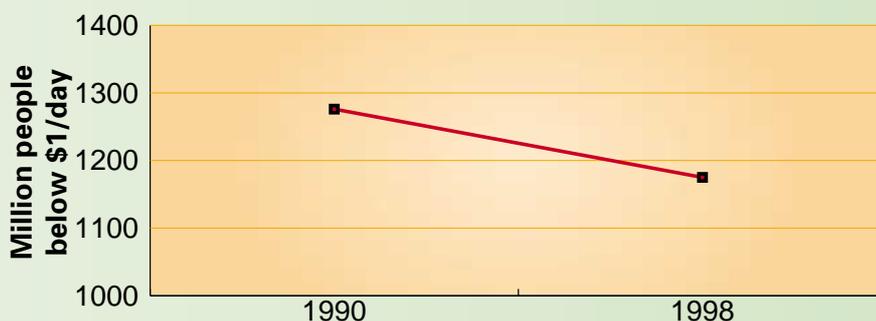
Infant mortality is a symptom in many parts of the world of malnutrition, unsafe water, conflict and HIV. Immunisation, disease prevention and access to basic medical supplies can all reduce infant mortality.

Great progress has been made in the last 10 years as infant mortality fell in 26 developing countries. Worryingly, however, it rose in another 11 countries, mostly in Africa, where the situation is already the worst.



Source: UNICEF, 2002. State of the World's Children.

Indicator 8 People living on less than \$1 US per day



Source: World Bank, 2001. World Development Indicators.

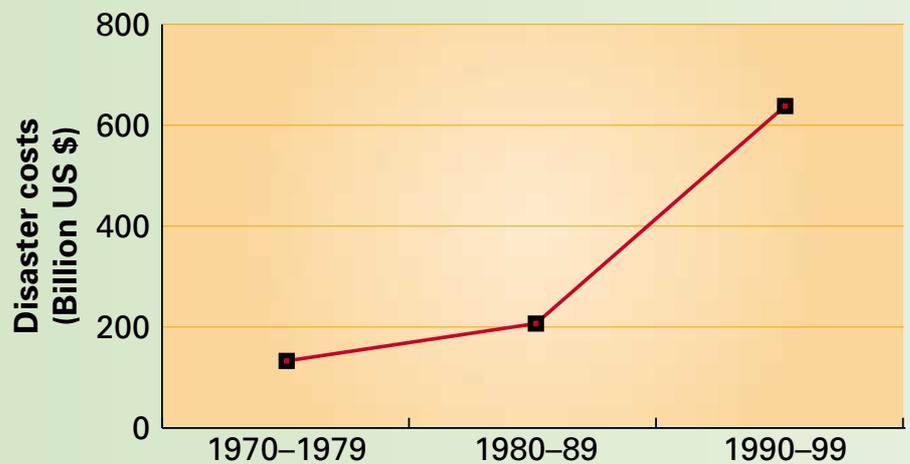
\$1 per day is typical of the poverty line in many low-income countries. While poverty has been declining by this measure, a staggering one billion plus people still lived on less than \$1 per day in 1998. The UN trade and development body, UNCTAD, have forecast that the number of people living on less than \$1/day in the world's 49 least developed countries will increase by 2015 if current economic trends continue. This is unacceptable.



Opposite from left to right: Deforestation, Sierra Leone by N Gordon (Ardea), primary school, India by R Shaw/Christian Aid (Still Pictures), collecting water by M Edwards (Still Pictures), Seychelles magpie-robin by C H Gomersall (RSPB Images), Above: city centre slums, Bombay by H Schwarzbach (Still Pictures)

Indicator 9

Economic losses from 'unnatural disasters'

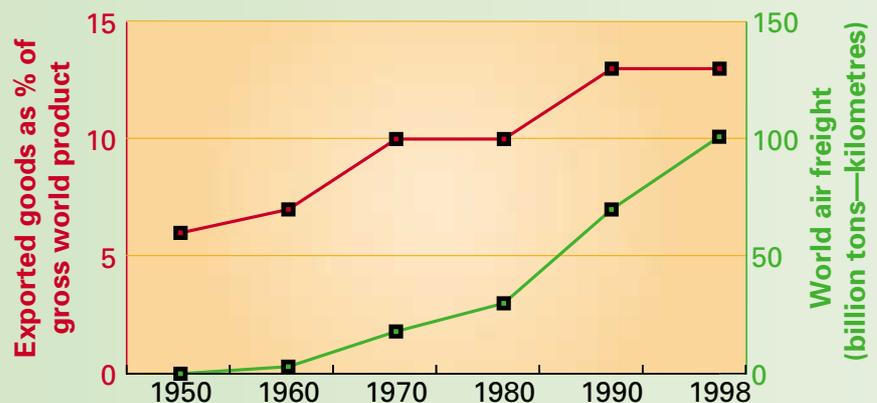


Source: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2002. *World Disasters Report*.

Global warming, which is fuelled by human activity, is responsible for an increasingly volatile and warm atmosphere. This leads to disasters such as floods, droughts and storms. Because both the number of disasters and the number of people affected have significantly increased during the last 30 years, the costs of damage from these disasters have leapt dramatically as well. Real impacts could be even higher as many costs are unaccounted during disasters, especially in developing countries.

Indicator 10

Fossil fuels and the global economy



Source: New Economics Foundation, 2000. *Collision Course*.

Economic growth and trade have increased significantly in recent years. This provides mostly wealthy consumers with a wide choice of goods to buy. But global trade depends on fossil fuels. The planes and ships used to move goods around the world are one of the fastest growing sources of the greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change. Since international air and marine freight fuels are not taxed or included in agreed targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, this worrying trend is likely to continue.

Left: industrial pollution, Port Talbot, UK by D Hoffman (Still Pictures), right top: flood victim, Bangladesh by S Noorani (Still Pictures), right bottom: anemones, Maldives, bleached by global warming by P Kober (Still Pictures)

Composite indices

Composite indices offer a different way of measuring and showing how sustainable development is, by bringing together several important issues into a single, easy to understand number. Here are two examples:

Index 1

Ecological footprints – balancing the environmental budget

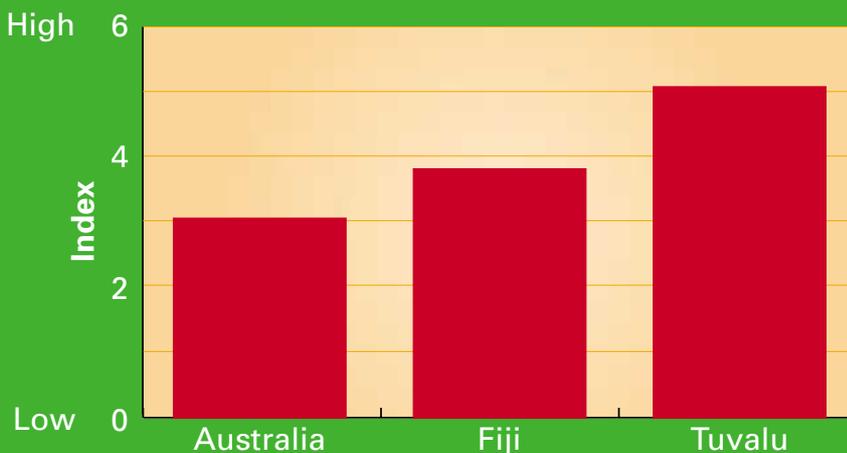
Measuring ecological footprints is a way to estimate the pressure of human economic activity on the planet. It represents the natural resource base required to produce the food we eat, to provide space for infrastructure, and to absorb the CO₂ emitted from burning fossil fuels. As such, it is a useful thumbnail guide to levels of consumption. This indicator suggests that in 1999 humans consumed over 120% of the earth's capacity. Because it consumes disproportionately, the North is occupying some of the 'environmental space' of the South. Our overall footprint on the earth has risen by over 40% in the past 40 years and this is bad, and unsustainable in the long term.



Source: Redefining Progress, 2002. Ecological Footprint Accounts.

Index 2

Vulnerability index



Source: SOPAC, 1999.

There has been considerable work in recent years to develop an index measuring the environmental vulnerability of countries. Any such index is built up from a country's sensitivity to the weather, human pressures, geological and geographical features and its general ecology. There are also attempts to develop broader measures of vulnerability that include economic and social factors. The UN Development Programme is soon to launch a World Vulnerability Index.

The index will allow easy comparisons among countries, describing their relative resilience and suggesting which nations need most help from the international community. The chart shows vulnerability of three sample nations in Oceania.



Interpreting indicators

Indicators are useful tools for assessing changes over time, and can provide valuable insights into important issues. But what you measure and how you measure it expresses your priorities. So indicators must be interpreted with care. For example:

- The amount of carbon dioxide we create per unit of economic wealth generated is going down as we use lower-carbon fuels and become more fuel-efficient, but the total amount of carbon dioxide emitted is going up as we make more things and generate more wealth.
- Average incomes are rising around the world, but the difference between how much the poorest and the richest people earn is getting bigger every year.
- The number of people with access to freshwater is growing, but, as the population rises, so is the number of people who do not have access to freshwater.

Call for action

As the world develops, we need real progress that is sustainable. We call upon world leaders to commit to:

- developing a focused set of global headline indicators of sustainable development and to formally agree and adopt them by Johannesburg+5. The indicators should be developed in conjunction with the process for monitoring progress towards the MDGs, and may include a subset or refinements of indicators already proposed by the UN.
- integrating the agreed indicators into national economic policy-making, by formally assessing the impact of economic policy decisions on the chosen indicators.
- monitoring national data that will enable national and global reports to be prepared in time for Johannesburg+10. National governments would be responsible for preparing national reports by 2010. The UN would be responsible for preparing a global report by 2012.
- providing the necessary resources to enable all nations to participate effectively in this initiative.



BirdLife International is a global partnership of conservation organisations, working in more than 100 countries worldwide. The BirdLife partnership strives to conserve birds, habitats and global biodiversity, working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources.

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The New Economics Foundation (NEF) works to build an economy centred on people and the environment. Founded in 1986 NEF combines research and policy, with training and practical local action. It is the international research home of the Jubilee Debt Campaign and has a programme of work on globalisation ranging from corporate accountability to climate change.

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Oxfam International is a confederation of 12 non-governmental organisations working together in 120 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty, suffering and injustice.

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Cover photo: Fisherman, Lake Turkhana by A and J Root (OSF)