

Sustainability and growth: São Paulo

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IDS and CEBRAP

Executive summary

The Global Dialogue on Sustainability, Climate Change and Economic Growth was held in São Paulo in October 2011. It was co-organised by the Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The idea was to bring together practitioners and thinkers to explore through dialogue the key issues relating to sustainability, climate change and economic growth both now and over the next 20 or 30 years. It was a diverse and broad-based gathering that not only included entrepreneurs, directors of philanthropic organisations and researchers but also made a particular effort to include spokespeople from marginalised communities – indigenous and riverine smallholder representatives from the Amazon and Atlantic rainforest regions and a pastoralist representative from Ethiopia – who have often been excluded from conventional debates about sustainability, climate change and economic growth. These conventional debates focus on the biological and scientific aspects of environmental resilience, climate change and conservation, and often overlook indigenous people whose knowledge is key to meeting these challenges but whose livelihoods and wellbeing are threatened by unrestrained economic growth and technological expansion.

The key issues for philanthropists identified during the Dialogue were:

- **Recognising diversity** and respecting plural perspectives on challenges and opportunities;
- **Facilitating autonomy** through hands-on engagement with grassroots initiatives, going beyond short-term project cycles and allowing for local-level learning;
- **Supporting relationships**, helping to build networks and broker connections between different levels, sectors and interests; and
- **Addressing power and politics** in both forms of knowledge (integrating the social and the biological) and governance and decision-making processes, recognising that democratisation plays a critical role in relation to sustainability, climate change and economic growth.

Introduction

Two decades after the Rio Earth Summit promised a global shift towards sustainable development, economic growth continues to be fuelled by the depletion or degradation of natural resources and ecosystems. There is growing recognition that the coupling of economic growth with redistributive and inclusive social policies has played a vital role in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in middle-income ‘rising power’ countries such as Brazil. Growth has generated new wealth in Brazil and throughout Latin America, some of which is being directed into new philanthropic activity in the fields of environmental sustainability and human wellbeing. However, the current global growth model also places at risk the wellbeing of millions of people

whose livelihoods are already underpinned by principles of sustainability, notably the world's indigenous peoples. The search for a growth model that is both socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable continues – and global climate change is intensifying the urgency of this search.

This context calls for innovative thinking, and for a creative exchange of ideas among groups of people who rarely if ever come together to share their different perspectives. With this in mind, the São Paulo Dialogue was designed to include actors from very different political and social backgrounds. As befits an event hosted by CEBRAP – a leading research institution with four decades' worth of experience of social and policy analysis – there was substantial academic representation, involving people from both social science and natural science disciplines, with specialisations in change, sustainability, wellbeing, development, citizenship and rights. There were also several community representatives or leaders, from indigenous and riverine smallholder communities within Brazil and one indigenous representative from Ethiopia. These participants were complemented by people working for philanthropic, or grant-making, organisations within Brazil and by representatives from the business sector.

Participant	Role	Area of expertise
Aílton Krenak	Indigenous leader, convenor of the Brazilian Forest Peoples Network and adviser on indigenous affairs to the Governor of Minas Gerais State	Former President of the Union of Indigenous Nations (UNI) and of the Centre for Indigenous Culture (NCI), led the successful campaign for recognition of indigenous rights in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution.
Alex Shankland*	Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)	Social scientist who has worked in Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Angola and Mozambique on rights, participation and policy, particularly in the fields of health, environment and climate change.
Anamaria Schindler	Global Co-President at Ashoka Foundation, Superintendent at Instituto Arapyau and Board Member of several NGOs	Sociologist working on philanthropy and society, seeking to connect the business and social sectors.
Arilson Favareto*	Researcher at CEBRAP and lecturer at the Federal University of the ABC (São Paulo)	Sociologist specialising in territorial development and sustainability, currently engaged in research on international climate change negotiations.
Daniel Belik*	Research Assistant at CEBRAP	Anthropologist who has also worked for the Brazilian national land reform agency (INCRA).
Daniela Sanchez	Researcher at UNDP Bolivia	Economist specialising in theories of wellbeing (<i>vivir bien</i>) with the Bolivia Human Development Report team of UNDP.
Demian Nery*	Documentation consultant	Anthropologist, photographer and film-maker who has worked with indigenous peoples, NGOs and government agencies in Brazil.

Douglas Burji	Indigenous leader, South Omo, Ethiopia	Pastoralist, film-maker and spokesperson for people affected by dam-building and land expropriation.
Felipe Szabzon*	Research Assistant at CEBRAP	Psychologist working on health policy, mental health and wellbeing.
Fernando Rossetti	Executive Director of the Group of Institutes, Foundations and Enterprises (GIFE)	Representative of South America's first association of grant-makers.
Gasodá Suruí	Indigenous leader; Cultural Coordinator of the Metareila Suruí Indigenous People's Association	Representative of the Paiter-Suruí People (Rondônia, Brazil), active in community projects supported by the Google Foundation and in debates on carbon credits for REDD+ activities in indigenous territories.
Gilberto Otha	Secretary for Rural Development of the Municipality of Sete Barras (São Paulo State)	Community leader and member of the Guapiruvu Residents' Association and of the COOPERAGUA and COOPAFASB sustainable farming cooperatives in the Ribeira Valley rainforest region of São Paulo State.
Ladislau Dowbor	Professor at the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP)	Economist specialising in economic development and planning, and adviser to the UN and other international organisations.
Laura Trajber Waisbich*	Research Assistant at CEBRAP	International relations and human rights specialist working on transnational mobilisations of ethnic minority groups.
Linda Waldman*	Team Leader, Knowledge, Technology and Society Team, Institute of Development Studies (IDS)	Researcher on nationalism, identity and environmental health; member of the coordinating group for the Bellagio Initiative.
Luis Eduardo Diaz Martins	Member of the coordinating committee of the think-tank Brazilian Grassroots Business Thinking (PNBE)	Telecoms entrepreneur active in the fields of Corporate Social Responsibility and Business Citizenship, and Board Member of several NGOs working in the fields of environmental sustainability, human rights, transparency and participatory planning.
Marcos Campolim	Coastal protected area manager, São Paulo State protected areas agency	Oceanographer who has worked on coastal management, natural resource management with traditional communities and participatory management of protected areas in the State of São Paulo.
Paula Montero	President of CEBRAP	Anthropologist working in the field of culture and politics, as well as deputy coordinator of the São Paulo State Research Foundation (FAPESP).
Vera Schattan Coelho	Research Director of CEBRAP	Political scientist working on new forms of citizen participation, deliberation, and consultation to improve social policies and democracy.

* = Event facilitation and documentation team members

The Dialogue began on the morning of Monday 10 October and ended at lunchtime on Tuesday 11 October. The meeting involved a series of full group sessions and small group discussions with feedback to the plenary. The methodology was designed to avoid formal panel presentations and emphasise instead collective reflection and debate on five key areas:

- **Challenges** to living well together in a changing climate;
- **Dilemmas** in seeking to reconcile economic growth and environmental sustainability;
- **Innovations** in promoting human wellbeing;
- **Partnerships** between different sectors in innovating and overcoming obstacles; and
- **Messages for Bellagio** on what philanthropy and development could do differently or better.

Simultaneous translation was provided for all plenary sessions with members of the groups doing translation in the small break-out sessions. The sessions were also video-recorded, and this material was combined with individual filmed interviews to produce a video mini-documentary of the event.

The discussions were not always easy as participants used very different styles and registers of speaking, and it took time for everyone to develop a common understanding of where everyone was coming from. This was made more complicated by the fact that not everyone was able to participate for the full day and a half.

This Global Dialogue sought to create space for people to talk to each other, to listen and learn from each other and to develop synergies in terms of their interests which might extend beyond the Bellagio Initiative itself. Discussions and reflections made during the Dialogue showed the need to be aware of the high degree of diversity of perspectives associated with sustainability, climate change and economic growth and the need to be aware of how political considerations shape people's opportunities and engagement.

Participants also noted that this Global Dialogue occurred at a particular moment in time, when economic growth and the financial crisis are restructuring relations between nations and, along with this, the possibilities for philanthropy. The financial crisis of the North has been accompanied by a mushrooming of wealth in Latin America, leading to a growth of both commercial and philanthropic investment from the South. While recognising that there is a huge diversity within the philanthropic sector, participants felt that this restructuring also represented an opportunity to introduce a new paradigm for philanthropy and international development.

This report provides a record of the main lines of argument, points of divergence, and reflections on potential roles for international development and philanthropy in relation to sustainability, climate change and economic growth. Verbatim quotes have been included to give a flavour of the discussion, but not all of the rich conversation is contained in the report, and there is no assumption that everyone in the room agreed with all of the points.

Challenges

The initial reflection session used a card-sorting exercise to elicit both the elements of wellbeing that were most valued by participants and the challenges to living well that they felt were most significant. In terms of the most valued dimensions of wellbeing, the group emphasised values and relationships, including love, identity and family, and the discussion on grouping them linked individual rights and freedoms and collective processes of empowerment. The constraints and challenges to wellbeing were identified as belonging to the following groups of issues:

- **Contemporary conditions:** the level of uncertainty and complexity and the pace of change (whether climatic or social) with which people and organisations have to deal;
- **Threatened values:** fear, ignorance and greed were named as factors that undermine the values that promote living well together;
- **Scarcity and inequality:** despite recent progress in reducing material poverty and inequality in some countries, including Brazil, deprivation and unfair distribution of material resources continue to undermine human freedom and wellbeing;
- **Politics and institutions:** democracy has advanced in Brazil, across Latin America and in many other regions of the world, but growing global economic interdependence and recurrent crises have imposed limits on government action and restricted the space for political engagement.

The discussion also raised the challenge of population growth, and the need for behaviour change so that individual reductions in consumption could help to build collective resilience.

A recurrent theme was that many challenges also brought with them opportunities, including:

- **Climate change responses that give new value to sustainable natural resource use,** including community management of biodiversity, green energy and payments for environmental services;
- **New social opportunities and information technologies,** including the internet and the range of urban services to which the masses of poor people moving into the cities now have some access;
- **New forms of political, economic and natural resource governance,** including participatory management of public policies, cooperative and association-based employment and income-generating initiatives and the revival of indigenous and traditional communities' ancestral resource management techniques;
- **New civil society networks** linking grassroots organisations, the private sector and advisory and research institutions.

There was broad agreement in the session that these opportunities could be maximised if support was made available for those social groups who are currently facing the greatest challenges to help them develop their capacity to identify and make use of these opportunities. However, there were very different perspectives within the group on the balance between the negative implications of the current context and the opportunities that it afforded. For example, the group heard from a participant whose people in Ethiopia are facing threats to their lands, livelihoods and even lives as a result of dam-building for hydropower and land-grabbing for commercial agriculture. For him, access to the internet for networking with international supporters is a welcome opportunity, but its value is limited when the government uses repressive tactics to close down the space for democratic debate on the merits of these development projects at home. Brazilian indigenous participants whose peoples and territories are facing similar threats pointed out that even in a country with a consolidated democratic environment such as their own, dams and other infrastructure projects could still be pushed through in an authoritarian manner in the name of economic interests.

Voices from the discussion

Civil society organisations increasingly operate in networks, whether in Brazil or across the world, but we aren't making the most of the innumerable possibilities for collaboration.

People often lack the capacities necessary to make the most of emerging opportunities... how can social movements best develop the ability to identify these opportunities?

We need to go beyond enabling internet access... we need to train people to change the way they look at things, to turn young people into conscious, active citizens.

The evidence shows that cities achieve sustainable progress when poor people are brought into the decision-making process and this participation continues for more than one generation.

Many people made promises to our community in order to get access to our natural resources... but when the trees had all been felled we were left with nothing.

Now that 'civilisation' has come everything has become more difficult for my people... the government has done horrible things in the name of development, while promising to overcome our difficulties.

This kind of investment is not good for indigenous peoples, this is not what they want... their sacred places are being sold.

Dilemmas

The second part of the discussion focused on the dilemmas that emerge when seeking to link wellbeing, economic growth, sustainability and climate change. Again, participants shared very different perspectives. Some felt that economic growth necessarily led to environmental degradation, given that it depends on the consumption of energy and scarce natural resources. Others felt that it is both possible and desirable to find less resource-intensive growth patterns, given the need to continue to expand the material basis for human wellbeing.

However, all agreed that economic growth and development are not the same thing, as there are situations where human beings can achieve greater freedom to realise their potential without economic growth. There was also agreement that this freedom should be sought on the collective as well as individual level (and that the latter included the search for a more balanced relationship between society and nature), and that economic growth should have as its aim the expansion of human wellbeing.

Specifically in Brazil, the current growth model was felt to be overemphasising the primary sector – particularly natural resource extraction and agribusiness development – using technology based on 'hard' scientific analyses and narrow biological thinking rather than an understanding of social and cultural diversity and ecological complexity. This model has significant environmental impacts and does not result in intensive job creation. At the same time, technological change is reducing the availability of unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in the growing mega-cities. Although the country has managed to reduce poverty and inequality in recent years, maintaining this trend will require a new cycle of innovation in both the economic and institutional domains. While such a capital- and technology-intensive development phase may generate renewed economic growth, it will also pose new threats for unskilled and underemployed workers.

The specific dilemmas posed by climate change were addressed in the discussion, but were less present in the concerns raised by the community representatives than other aspects of wellbeing.

The discussion highlighted the potential for climate change to affect both economic growth and wellbeing by:

- **Direct impacts on poor and vulnerable people in particular regions**, through changes in rainfall, temperature or sea level;
- **Indirect impacts on traditional livelihoods**, through environmental protection measures that exclude indigenous peoples from their territories, or the expropriation of natural resources in the name of 'green' investments (such as hydroelectric dams); and
- **Indirect impacts on the cost of living**, as seen in the influence of drought and flood on the recent rises in global food prices.

In the specific case of Brazil, the discussion highlighted the need to differentiate between impacts in different regions. In the Amazon region, a key issue is the risk that even purportedly 'green' investment can stimulate land-grabbing and environmentally destructive infrastructure projects (including dam-building). In the semi-arid northeast, by contrast, the threat of desertification is most intense. In addition, participants in the Dialogue identified other vulnerable elements of the Brazilian population. The impacts of climate change on the wellbeing of the urban poor are potentially serious, given the precarious conditions of many informal settlements and their vulnerability to disasters such as floods and mudslides – a vulnerability which is exacerbated by the fact that these urban communities' level of social and political organisation is relatively weak compared to the indigenous peoples of the Amazon or the smallholders of the northeast. This, in turn, highlights the importance of building opportunities for less organised communities to develop both local networks and longer-range alliances with groups that have greater experience in organising.

The issue of social and political organisation is particularly strategic in view of a recurrent theme of the discussion, which was the importance of communities' own autonomy and governance over responses to the social and environmental changes that they are facing. Participants agreed that in addressing the dilemmas associated with environmental sustainability, economic growth and climate change, a key factor is the nature of the decision-making process itself. Where power relations operate to exclude those social groups who are most skilled and experienced in living sustainably, mainstream models emphasising unsustainable resource exploitation and consumption are likely to prevail and, in so doing, to undermine wellbeing.

Voices from the discussion

Growth for growth's sake is the logic of the cancer cell.

One third of the world's population is below the poverty line, so either we stop growing and redistribute what we have, or we keep growing but improve distribution.

To be a citizen, it's not enough just to be a consumer... but under the current paradigm inclusion is via consumption.

The financial crisis is driving a vicious circle of short-term thinking.

We need an economy of solidarity, where there is a virtuous circle operating at the local level and we are not only consuming fragments of things produced far away without any connection with the local reality.

Democracy needs to be about democratic relations between peoples, not about a franchise operation to export the model favoured by governments in the North.

When some farmers in my community changed to agroecological production they lost money, but gained in satisfaction; when people who had made a living from unsustainable palm-heart extraction changed to working with the cooperative, they changed their view of the world and gained in self-esteem.

Development isn't only about creating new things, but also about valuing traditional knowledge.

We worry about our lands, but we also need to worry about water, which is a common resource and shouldn't be transformed into a commodity.

Contact [between mainstream society and indigenous people] brought many problems [for indigenous communities] but also some benefits... we need to learn how to make use of the advances of modern society; the biggest difficulty is dealing with a world of which you have no knowledge.

We need to get more people thinking about how to live well and about the wellbeing of future generations; these are not easy things and they don't happen from one day to the next, but even if we can't make use of them today they can benefit future generations.

How can we discuss a better world if we have an agenda that separates social and environmental issues?

Innovations

Participants felt that the key recent innovation in Brazil and Latin America was the establishment of a democratic environment, as this had created new spaces for dialogue on values, aspirations and understandings of wellbeing.

In Brazil, democratic innovations such as the mechanisms of participatory democracy pioneered in recent years had made it possible to negotiate different forms of development. The democratic environment had allowed different social groups, including indigenous peoples, to exercise greater autonomy in their deliberations on how to respond to changes and challenges, in their choices on how to live well in the world and in their decision-making on how to manage the natural resources of their territories. It had also allowed indigenous people, interacting with different groups and organisations, to come together in networks beyond their immediate vicinity, strengthening their ability to contest the powerful forces seeking to seize control of natural resources.

Some democratic governance innovations had originated among indigenous peoples themselves, as they sought to adapt traditional structures to deal with new challenges. A representative from the Paitei-Suruí people of the Amazonian state of Rondônia, for example, described how his people have created an 'indigenous parliament'. This brings together elders with traditional wisdom and younger leaders with formal education to manage negotiations with outsiders, including the Google Foundation (who are supporting a GIS-based territorial mapping and protection system) and companies wishing to purchase carbon offsets based on reforestation activities in the Paitei-Suruí territory.

In Bolivia, although a discourse of 'living well' (*vivir bien*) inspired by indigenous values has come to the forefront of national policy and politics under the government of Evo Morales, the economy is still dependent on unsustainable resource extraction and conflicts and contradictions continue. Nevertheless, innovations are also emerging. A Bolivian participant described how nut gatherers

in the Amazon region of the country had organised collectively to escape from debt bondage and created a cooperative that now successfully manages the sale of their nuts to high-value markets by securing organic certification.

Voices from the discussion

We use traditional social networks, where it is the role of each person to tell the next person what they have seen or heard... you have to be willing both to listen and to talk.

The search for common solutions means valuing local capacities to respond to challenges in a way that honours both your ancestors and your descendants.

Federalism was a political innovation developed by indigenous peoples... the Iroquois Confederacy was established before the English ever got to North America.

Why don't we go beyond payment for environmental services? Wouldn't payments for cultural services be a good innovation?

In [a more isolated area] small initiatives were able to bring about big changes... In the city, where large-scale land speculation operates and people have their minds on making millions, NGOs think in a very different way; it's hard to think about local realities and a broader meaning of economic development.

We have created a collective project managed by grassroots organisations; this is the opposite of an NGO intervening in local realities.

The most important thing is to develop people's belief that they are capable of taking decisions, and build their capacity to deal with problems.

It's hard to scale a local innovation up to the global level – there are no cake recipes for this.

Philanthropy

Participants linked to the grant-making sector in Brazil described a scenario of rapid growth and change. When other participants drew attention to the association of 'philanthropy' with old-fashioned and paternalistic religious charity in the country, the grant-makers explained that their preferred term was 'social investment'. This was felt to capture a dynamic reality, where in addition to increasing grant volumes there was a shift towards more strategic forms of support. GIFE, the Brazilian grant-makers' association, now has 133 members disbursing almost US\$1.2 billion per year. In Brazil as in Latin America as a whole, corporate rather than private giving has become the dominant modality. The GIFE representative explained that, overall, there are five different types of philanthropic organisation, focusing on:

- **Charitable assistance**, which deals with symptoms rather than causes of social problems and fills gaps left by failures of service provision;
- **Multi-project operations**, funding initiatives dealing with various issues without any strategic focus;
- **Funding in search of a focus**, where grant-makers try to align their economic activities with their philanthropic work;
- **Strategic and professional operations**, with clear objectives, social analysis expertise and a commitment to working with rather than for the community; and

- **Large-scale strategic operations**, focused on policy influence and social technology dissemination, building sectoral and cross-sectoral alliances.

Connecting philanthropy to local realities was seen as an undertaking that brought challenges for both parties. Community representatives were concerned at the pressures and bureaucratic demands that funding mechanisms placed on their organisations, and at the power imbalances that risked stripping the dignity of those on the receiving end of philanthropy. Grant-makers worried about the risks of fragmentation, with high transaction costs and a loss of strategic impact. The way forward was felt to lie in finding ways of scaling up local innovations that respected and valued the capacities of local actors and their traditional forms of natural resource governance and decision-making.

Voices from the discussion

We are witnessing the extermination of the last peoples who have a worthy relationship with nature... if philanthropy wants to support sustainability, it should support these peoples.

We need to limit the role of intermediaries who come between philanthropists and grassroots groups.

We need to understand that autonomy is not the same as isolation.

The role of philanthropy is not to fund innovation but to fund communication between innovators, so everyone can choose which 'best practices' are most appropriate for each local context.

With the growth of philanthropy and social investment, Brazil has become a key player in the export of social innovations.

I object to the term philanthropy; it does not dignify those who are on the receiving end... how can it operate in a way that does not take the dignity from those who receive?

Historically, philanthropy was only about giving and receiving, but now what works is co-authorship and collaboration.

Specific suggestions for discussion at the Bellagio Summit

Voices from the discussion

The asset that this gathering can offer is that of bringing together multiple worldviews into a map of social transformation, both vertical and horizontal. This [Dialogue has produced] a vision of the world that is unequal, a map of social change in scale and depth. What is key is how people have reacted to change and how we have to behave in the face of change.

How will these messages be taken to Bellagio? There is a risk that social conflicts may be underplayed and local experiences reduced to banality, whether they are happy or painful.

Considerable discussion was had about where participants thought philanthropists could focus their attention in mutually productive ways. The changing context – in terms of the current financial crisis in the North, emerging wealth in the South and new patterns of grant-making

coupled with increased democracy and state responsibility to react to citizen demands – were seen as offering the potential for a paradigm shift in international giving. In addition, the fact that climate change is global, but its manifestations are particular and affect poor people in particular, further underscored the need to recognise interrelationships between sustainability, climate change, economic growth and diverse perspectives on wellbeing.

Recognising diversity

A key challenge in relation to sustainability, climate change and economic growth is the recognition and significance of plurality. The diverse perspectives of participants showed the wide range of features and approaches and very different visions. Some participants saw climate change as creating opportunities while others understood it to have negative effects. There were also different positions around economic growth, and whether or not it is possible to have economic growth without increasing the pressure on the environment. While some argued that all resources are finite and all economic growth therefore has a negative effect, others felt that some kinds of economic growth – which have a focus on wellbeing – can and will be necessary. Proposed ways of operating in a context with such diverse perspectives included the following.

- Promote partnerships that support and integrate local innovation in environmental governance through agreements and contracts.
- Facilitate partnerships with the state and encourage state actors to acknowledge innovation and adjustments that favour the local or indigenous level.
- Complement the focus on the local with a determination to see legal frameworks and international agreements honoured by the state, because ‘wellbeing needs to guarantee life and rule of law’.

Facilitating autonomy

Autonomy was identified as an area that has significant potential for the engagement of philanthropy and international development. All the participants emphasised the need for local groups to build and own appropriate solutions, to define their priorities and to determine how to behave in the face of environmental and other change. This should allow local people greater opportunity to use the process of change to strengthen their positions, to build on opportunities and to enhance wellbeing. Thus one possibility for philanthropy is to support local populations’ ability to react to trends and changes. Allowing for autonomy also helps to deal with questions of dignity, identified as an essential element of wellbeing.

As part of facilitating autonomy, participants pointed to the need for hands-on engagement with grassroots initiatives. This hands-on engagement could include the following.

Going beyond short-term project cycles

Short-term project cycles do not allow for the integration of skills that enhance autonomy and they also hamper opportunities to build management capacity needed for autonomy. Integrating skills in management, finance and organisational training can take substantial periods of time. They are also not easily measured and do not always produce tangible results.

Taking risks and supporting unconventional structures

Grassroots initiatives are not always legally structured or technically organised to deal with management of funds and may need legal frameworks to be designed to facilitate this. Yet support from philanthropic organisations can help grassroots initiatives by permitting them to ‘fail-forward’, learning through mistakes. This can be facilitated by:

- having a structural design that allows for a learning curve;
- introducing flexibility to carry out projects, and elimination of red tape;
- ensuring that funds can be locally managed in ways that are not specifically agreed in advance and that can take account of unforeseen issues that arise.

Supporting relationships

There was considerable discussion about the importance of relationships that go beyond the local level, and that seek to connect people across time and space. Participants spoke about ‘a global democracy that inspires relationships among people and collaboration between people, not a democracy of governments’. This was seen as a particular space where philanthropic organisations could make a decisive contribution that goes beyond monetary value. There was a strong feeling that philanthropy could provide support for networks, for dialogue, for sharing of ideas across geographical and political boundaries. In particular, philanthropists could use their influence, networks and relationships to shape the priorities of other agents making decisions around sustainability, climate change and economic growth.

Addressing power and politics

The recognition of diversity also involves a more holistic, comprehensive approach to sustainability, not only taking into account different perspectives on social, environmental and economic issues, but recognising the interrelated nature of the social and natural worlds. Understanding the interrelationships between economic growth, climate change and sustainability is also about recognising the power of concepts such as ‘knowledge’, ‘territory’, and ‘ecosystems’. Such concepts – and their ability to shape people’s experience of wellbeing – depend on knowledge and are mediated by power. Social and political relations and forms of dialogue shape what happens on the ground, yet these are often masked by a strong emphasis on the biological and scientific aspects of climate change, environmental resilience and conservation. There is a strong need for a more holistic approach which integrates the social and the biological.

The importance of politics and power cannot be overemphasised. At present environmental issues are at the margins of Brazilian consciousness and there is little space for critical perspectives on the current growth model within debates on sustainable development. But perhaps this is an opportunity to use philanthropy to go beyond development fashions and to explore opportunities for structural change.

Governance and democratisation processes go together and are critical in relation to sustainability, climate change and economic growth. It is really important not to overlook politics and to ensure that local communities and actors are able to participate and shape their engagements with development and philanthropy.

Focusing on the importance of democratic governance, local environmental knowledge and autonomy can lead to the fruitful inclusion of poor people and to a more holistic, comprehensive approach to sustainability, climate change and economic growth that takes into account social, environmental, economic and political issues.