

## Sharing Experiences: Infrastructure - Sustainable Development

Written by Marit Hendriks

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As political leaders and corporations around the globe search for solutions to their needs, more and more of them are beginning to realize that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Increasingly the pressures that we all feel are common, and to meet and deal with these requires sharing experiences, knowledge as well as technology.

In an increasingly digital world the speed of innovation seems to many to be breathtakingly fast but this is hardly surprising because of the essential characteristic of all networked ideas – they can be instantly copied, enhanced and repurposed. As the writer and journalist Thomas Friedman has noted – the world is hot (warming through climate change), flat (increasingly connected through the internet) and crowded - there are increasing numbers of us.

There is, of course, the challenge of protecting intellectual property but with millions of young people fuelling the pace of change the old models for patent protection need rethinking.. It may be scary or unnerving for governments and businesses, but the structural migration from control to freedom is undeniable and unstoppable. The visionary response would be to encourage citizen empowerment through social media rather than blame or try to restrict access.

When governments and world leaders meet in Rio at the [UN Conference on Sustainable Development](#) (UNCSD – the so-called Rio+20 conference) in June to review commitments to Sustainable Development, the conflict between control and digitalized democracy will be a key element and an underlying thread to the discussions. But not every one is on the same page; some see the UN as unnecessary, interfering and over-bureaucratic; others put greater value on the need and support provided by multi-lateral agreements.

To progress along the path of sustainable development requires a change in our current trajectory. And this, in turn, needs the empowerment provided by a diversity of openly shared ideas and the digital flow enabled by local connectivity. The question is one of adequacy. Do we get by with a series of short-term technological fixes or do we engineer our infrastructure investment to be future-proofed? This is of particular relevance to emerging economies and countries that are just developing their infrastructure. It is here where technology and knowledge transfer and learning can enable improvement through information, learning, and

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community and welfare development.

But this is not just for the 'developing' countries – in the digital world we are all in developing economies.

Sharing best practices is key. That is why there is so much interest in [visiting countries like Sweden](#). These countries have served the world by taking a lead in network provision and proven (in economic as well as societal terms) the benefits of a more open, more connected, faster changing economy enabling important social and welfare support for isolated rural communities. Many of the challenges and problems faced here are similar in many other countries; and many of the solutions, therefore, are the same.

The barriers are often misperceptions and self-imposed but the message to those leaders who resist these digital freedoms is quite simply that legacy systems cannot prevail. Far better that leaders embrace the next generation and not yearn for some imagined past, which, if they were honest, was really not that great.

Last November, at the [UN Broadband Commission](#) meeting Geneva, the desperate plea from complaining leaders longing to retain some sense of control was that 'bloggers should be better educated'. The answer, from Finland, was that whole-hearted engagement in social media was now an essential part of governance.

And in other fields too – the ability to deliver foreign language teaching to scattered populations, to shrink the costs of local government, to reduce pollution, to attract new firms and decent, green and productive jobs to unfavoured regions, to deliver high-quality healthcare in far away places – all these and more are easily achieved as soon as the essential infrastructure for connectivity is truly fit for purpose.

As they say in Sweden "*Idéer som överbrygger avstånd föds där de behöves som mest.*" "Ideas are born where they are needed most" - we should make Rio+20 the time for this idea.

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For video of Community Study Tour to Sweden see: ['Growing Stronger Communities - Pathfinder tour](#)

Editor note: Take-up rate for broadband is a critical issue and in boosting usage the role of women in ICT is important. Readers may wish to note the ITU programme for '[Women and Girls in ICT](#)', that is running in conjunction with World Information Day - May 17th.