

Visioning: Towards a new initiative on Earth system research for global sustainability

Prof. Deliang CHEN
Executive Director
International Council for Science (ICSU)

In February 2009 ICSU started a consultative Visioning Process, in cooperation with the International Social Science Council (ISSC), aimed at developing options for a single, holistic international strategy for integrated, policy relevant Earth System research. Based on a global consultation with the scientific community, funders and other stakeholders, and following in-depth discussions at two international meetings – held in September 2009 and June 2010 – the Visioning Task Team produced a document outlining five Grand Challenges in Earth System Research for Global Sustainability. This document also emphasized the need for a single, new overarching structure, which would bring together researchers, funders, service providers and users, and allow for more integration of existing Global Environmental Change (GEC) programmes, the Earth System Science Partnership (ESSP) and other activities.

In parallel, in June 2009, some of the world's main funders of environmental change research established a new, high-level body called the Belmont Forum. Its aim is to align international resources to accelerate delivery of the science-derived knowledge and capabilities that society needs to address environmental change. Members have established the following 'Belmont Challenge': To deliver knowledge needed for action to mitigate and adapt to detrimental environmental change and extreme hazardous events.

In October 2010, the funders from the Belmont Forum, ICSU and ISSC met in Cape Town, South Africa, to discuss the visions and implementation options that have emerged from both the Belmont and Visioning processes. All agreed that there are significant opportunities for convergence between these two processes: both in terms of substantive priorities, and next steps towards their implementation. After the 3rd Visioning meeting in February 2011, and the fourth Belmont Forum meeting in April 2011, ICSU and partners are now building an Alliance to propose a new 10-year Initiative on Earth System Research for Global Sustainability. The goals, characteristics, and recent developments of the Initiative are described on <http://www.icsu.org/what-we-do/projects-activities/earth-system-sustainability-initiative>