

## **South West Sustainability Programme**

Environmentally sustainable development is simultaneously a social, political and economic necessity and a research imperative. Whilst supranational and governmental bodies ranging from the United Nations and the European Commission through to national governments and local authorities (exemplified through Local Agenda 21) maintain a strong rhetorical commitment to sustainable development, beyond the rhetoric there remains considerable doubt as to what such development is and how feasible it may be. In democratic, capitalist societies, sustainable development is only likely to be reached if it is economically sustainable, socially desirable and politically viable. Finding solutions requires true collaboration amongst environmental scientists, social scientists, engineers and the policy community. The South West universities have major expertise and international research leadership in the academic disciplines relating to sustainable development (who work in engineering, renewable energy, political science, economics, management and business, accounting, geography, environmental science, the social construction of knowledge, policy studies, water, and the rural economy).

It is essential that we develop analytically and theoretically rigorous understandings of environmentally sustainable decision-making. There is a need to identify issues where national and regional performance deviates from expected performance, establish procedures for priority-setting among policy areas (with both qualitative and quantitative assessments of the success of such policies), improved tracking of environmental trends, and investigation into interactions between environmental and economic performance, and into the factors that influence environmental sustainability. Coupling environmental degradation and resource consumption with economic and social development requires a major reorientation of public and private investment towards new, environmentally-friendly technologies. Part of this coupling can be reached by going from linear to cyclic thinking and processing.

Seven indicative research areas might be:

- Sustainable energy
- Sustainable policy and regulation
- Sustainability and business
- Comparative sustainable development
- Sustainable transport
- Sustainable construction
- Sustainable land use (including the coastal zone).

## **Regional relevance and business partners**

Currently the UK is lagging behind in sustainability. A pilot study by the World Economic Forum estimated that the UK was in 91<sup>st</sup> out of 142 countries in terms of an environmental sustainability index (based on 68 different measures). The importance of sustainability to businesses will be a major growth area in the next decade. Low carbon fuel and renewable technologies, low energy and carbon building design, energy assessment and market regulation are all areas in which there are considerable opportunities for the South-West region to become a major player in the national and international community. There are already strong links to a variety of businesses. Moreover, regulation is likely to require companies to invest in sustainable futures and the application of environmental and resource economics. Companies will increasingly need to include natural resource sustainability as part of their business costs which will result in potentially major changes to production

design and technology. They will need a strong pool of relevantly trained political scientists, sociologists, geographers, economists, scientists and engineers. A large number of environmental organisations have their headquarters in the South West. Together with the Earth Systems initiative (as described above) this will ensure that the South West is well placed to become a leading centre for sustainability based businesses.