Webwatch

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The millennium project

<http://www.millennium-project.org/>

The Millennium Project (MP) is an independent international think tank, founded in 1996 as a spin-off of a 3 years feasibility study of the United Nations University (UNU), the Futures Group International, the Smithsonian Institution and the American Council for the UNU. Since its creation the MP has grown considerably, and currently it brings together and receives the contribution of several thousands of specialists in more than 50 countries in many areas of expertise and knowledge, such as scholars, business planners, and policy makers, who work for international or governmental organizations, companies, and ONGs, among others. It is considered one of the top foresight organizations in the world, and its reports and other publications are used extensively in practice.

The MP main goal is to improve the capacity of mankind of building a better future, by fostering the knowledge about important issues and its dissemination to all relevant stakeholders, focusing in supporting better decision-making. To accomplish this and to facilitate the interaction between various specialists the MP has developed a global network of nodes, currently 38 on some selected countries, and two functional and global modules in the areas of the Internet and the arts/media. The nodes are independent of each other, but they work together to insure that the activities and main outputs of the MP have an international and global perspective.

The main output of MP activities is an ongoing assessment of the main issues and opportunities directly connected with sustainable development in its various dimensions, and the continuous improvement and enlargement of a global network of specialists. Their work is converted in a number of deliverables, including reports, studies, and methodologies, for general use or for specific goals or areas. Among them there is the annual “State of Future” report, the publication that aggregates the contributions of all MP nodes and others specialists, which forecasts about the future and development of mankind. Special reports deal with regional scenarios or specific areas, such as education, ethics, among others. The “Future Research Methodology” report is also other key publication, in which the most recent methods for forecasting the future are presented and critically discussed. Advanced training is also an important area of activity, focused in the analysis of the critical issues, opportunities, challenges, and methodologies on how to tackle them.

The website presents to a global audience what the MP is, and what are its goals and main products. From the main pages direct links can be found to the main MP deliverables, ongoing projects on various areas, and simple video descriptions of its activities. Each project page has a description of the MP main results and deliverables, and its contacts for the people interested in knowing more or obtaining more information. The “About Us” area describes MP current goals, mission, and vision, and how it is possible to keep in touch online with it. More details about the corporate activities can be found in the “Planning Committee” and “Donors” links. Other areas of the site include the list of nodes, with contact information and links to each node website, where specific details about the local activities can be found. The books and reports section has information on the main publications of MP, in particular on how to order them. A “News” section lists news and information related to the project, including meetings and other

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events. Some parts of the site link directly to other sites, such as “The Global Futures Intelligence System” (<https://themp.org/>) focused on the real time analysis of relevant issues, and the “MP Futures” (<http://mpcloud.org/journal/>) a crowd sourced journal in continuous development.

The website contains a lot of information, but is somewhat confusing and hard to navigate. Finding valuable information may be hard, in which the search facility can help a lot. Also, the procedures to contact people involved in the project and subscribe to the mailing lists are outdated and impractical to use. Despite the fact that most publications and reports of the MP are not free or limited to the members of this organization, for people interested in the sustainable development in the medium to long-term the site can be very helpful.

Environmental performance index

<http://epi.yale.edu/>

The Environmental Performance Index (EPI) is a methodology to quantify and benchmark the environmental performance of a country policies and development strategies. The EPI report is published biannually since 2006, and the main authors are the Yale Center for International Earth Science Law and Policy and the Columbia University Center for International Earth Science Information Network, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission.

The EPI was preceded by the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI), published between 1999 and 2005, developed by the same consortium (<http://www.yale.edu/esi/>). ESI was a composite index based on a set of 21 indicators deemed relevant to evaluate the environmental sustainability of a country and its capability for improving its sustainability performance over time. The EPI was developed to complement the goals defined by the UN Millennium Development Goals, and to change the focus of the indicators of the original ESI to outcome-oriented, making it easier to be used as a benchmark index and by all relevant stakeholders, in particular policy makers. The ESI is being continuously developed, and in 2012 the new “Pilot Trend EPI” was released to rank different countries based on their environmental performance during the last decade. For example, Switzerland was the country with the largest EPI in 2012, but in terms of trend EPI Latvia was the best.

The website was designed primarily to present the EPI, especially the results and the methodology in which the index is based on. To enhance the presentation of the results and make them simpler to understand, multimedia is used extensively in the site. For example, in the sliding menu present in the main page it is possible to access

directly the current EPI report and its various features. For example, in the EPI and Pilot Trend EPI tab it is possible to find the main results of the study, in particular countries profiles, a world map showing regional trends, a description of the methodology and indicators, among other information. Some of that information can be explored graphically in the tab “Data Explorer”. In the “Indicators” tab it is possible to find a description of the methodology used to calculate the indicators and the index, and how it can be used by different stakeholders. The current EPI report and the data used in the calculations can be downloaded for free through the “Downloads” tab. Previous EPI reports and the old ESI reports and other publications can be obtained through the “Previous work” link on the top of the main page. The “Community” tab includes a news section, with posts related to the EPI, and a blog and forum where people can pose questions and discuss specific aspects related to the EPI. The more recent posts of this section are also featured in the main page.

The site is simple, appellative, and the relevant information about EPI, including the current and previous reports, is easy to find. Yet, the inclusion in the site more information on the EPI and related areas will be a good idea. The EPI is a good example of an Environmental index that can be used by policy makers and other specialists working in the sustainability area, making this site a worthwhile stop.

Bioenergy knowledge discovery framework

<https://bioenergykdf.net>

The Bioenergy Knowledge Discovery Framework (BKDF) is a Web-based platform developed by the US Department of Energy (DOE), to collect and organize all relevant information related to the increasingly important bioenergy sector. The main partners of the initiative are the DOE Biomass Program, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the energy.gov initiative, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, and the Idaho National Laboratory.

The new Web 2.0 and social networking technologies allow people and organizations a more simple and efficient sharing of information. BKDF tries as much as possible to harness the power and capacities of those new tools to fulfill its main goals of supporting and promoting the development of a robust and sustainable bioenergy industry. Thus, all data and information collected or contributed represents a knowledge system that allow all relevant stakeholders the possibility of better assessing the economic, environmental, and social impacts of the current and future development options, such as feedstocks production, biorefineries, among others. Besides trying to provide online access to the more recent data, BKDF also

provides some decision supporting tools to help people making sense of the data.

Hence, a proper designed and functional site is fundamental to achieve the main goals of BKDF, and in the author's opinion that aim was achieved. The site has a clear and attractive appearance, and from the main page it is possible to access directly the key sections of the site. For example, "The Bioenergy Library" gives access to publications and data on various areas, including biofuels and feedstocks production, logistics and production processes, among others. Other links point to the Billion Ton Study and its updates, an US strategic plan aimed to develop the area of bioenergy, to relevant news or events in the area, and to the available decision supporting tools. A description of the BKDF goals can be found in the "About" and "Overview" sections. One of the interesting features of the site is the US map that presents visually the data and results of models and tools available in BKDF. To assist people beyond the information and data available, discussion forums are offered in a variety of subjects. An area dedicated to potential contributions of individuals and organizations is also accessible. Both areas are available after registration at the site.

As a site developed and supported by the US government agencies, almost all information available is focused and was the result of work performed in the US. Yet, many of the information available, as for example those related to feedstocks or the impact of production processes can be valuable in other geographic settings. Hence, the information available at the site may be already relevant to people on the area, and even more in the future as more data and information is added.

Resilience alliance

<http://www.resalliance.org>

The Resilience Alliance (RA) is an interdisciplinary international network of scientists and practitioners created in 1999 with the main goal of studying the dynamics of socio-ecological systems and how environment and societies interact with each other. The members of this organization came from a wide array of organizations, mainly universities, research institutes, governmental and non-governmental agencies and/or organizations.

Socio-ecological systems are by nature complex and nonlinear systems, where the interactions between the different parts are difficult to describe and to model accurately. Yet, understand and being able to describe the resilience and adaptability of real system is fundamental from a sustainable development perspective and to assist proper policy and decision-making. The RA develops its activities in this area, in three main lines that complement

each other. One is theoretical and deals with advancing the current knowledge of the dynamics of complex adaptive systems. Other line of research deals with testing the theoretical developments, which are experienced extensively in the field, mainly through case studies and model applications. The development of principles, management tools, guidelines, and other instruments is other main area of activities, aimed to support sustainable development and based on the results of the other RA lines of work.

The Communications and Outreach programme aims to disseminate the main results of the research developed by this organization, and to build a global network in the main areas of expertise of the RA. The website is a key part of that program, as it serves to present RA and its activities to the public. Thus, a complete description of the organization, what are its main goals and research areas, and governing bodies can be found in the "About RA" section. Other part of the site include a brief description and analysis of the key scientific concepts behind its main lines of activity, namely what it is resilience and the various dimensions of adaptability. The "Research" link allow people to see what are the current and past projects (designated as case studies) undertaken under the umbrella of the Resilience Alliance, with a reference to publications and other relevant information. The "Resources" area presents other general information, including a bibliography, guidelines, and a list of researchers of RA with contacts, among other materials. The Resilience Alliance also has a newsletter that can be subscribed in the site, to keep people informed of its activities. RA is responsible for editing and publishing the quarterly online open access journal "Ecology and Society" (<http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/>), an interdisciplinary journal that deals with the interactions between society and natural systems, and how they impact sustainable development.

Some areas of the site are limited to the members of the Resilience Analysis, in particular ongoing case studies. The design is simple, but information may be difficult to find, as the text font is small and the pages lack organization, with long lists, without a search facility. Yet, the site has valuable information to people interested in the area, in particular the online journal with many articles in different areas, and the contacts lists may help in being in touch with experts in this area.

Final words

We will return on the next issue with a fresh selection of sites. If you know of sites that are worthy of being presented, send us all relevant information to the following e-mail address: amartins@fe.up.pt. Any suggestions will be considered with great attention for possible publication. In that case the contributors names will be acknowledged in this column. Surf well.