

Press Release

Sustainable Buildings: Media, Public Perceptions and the CIB

*Dr Rodney Milford
Immediate Past President CIB
Programme Manager, cidb South Africa*

*Presented at the SB07 Regional Sustainable
Buildings Conference, Hong Kong, December
2007*

Rodney Milford is the Immediate Past President of the International Council for Research and Innovation in Building and Construction (CIB) and Programme Manager for Construction Industry Performance at the Construction Industry Development Board (cidb) in South Africa.

The CIB is a world wide network of over 5000 experts from about 500 member organisations active in the research community, in industry or in education, who cooperate and exchange information in over 50 CIB Commissions covering all fields in building and construction related research and innovation. Sustainable construction is one of the four priority themes of the CIB. As such, the CIB is very active in sustainable construction activities through the CIB Secretariat and the CIB Members.

Specifically, CIB, iISBE and UNEP are the co-organisers of the regional and global Sustainable Buildings conference series.

Over 12,000 world leaders gather in Bali this week for the United Nations Climate Change Conference for talks that aim to forge a new global consensus on tackling climate change and to lay the groundwork for a successor to the UN Kyoto protocol for reducing greenhouse gas emissions which expires in 2012.

However, while there is no doubt that global climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing mankind at present, concerted action by governments and the business sector has (with notable exceptions) been slow to respond to the severity of the situation. This presentation at the Sustainable Buildings Conference in Hong Kong reflects on the role of the public, the media and other leaders in placing climate change firmly on the political agenda – and specifically in placing the impact of the use of buildings on the political agenda.

In 2004 I made a similar presentation to this at the SB04 conference in São Paulo. At that stage, the global agenda was focusing on broad sustainable development issues, and specifically on broad environmental issues. The mood of the day in 2004 was summed up by Ex President Mikhail Gorbachev who speaking on behalf of Green Cross reflected that:

- Following [the Rio Earth Summit in 1992] for the first time in history, the world community managed to map out and agree on a strategic plan designed to address the twin problems of poverty and ecological disruption
- However, serious obstacles emerged as implementation moved forward
- By and large, the governments of the industrialized countries chose to retract their commitments

In contrast, in September 2007 the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has stated:

- “I am extremely encouraged by the fact that climate change was so directly and constructively discussed at the highest level for the first time in history
- This event has taken us into a new era
- Today I heard a clear call from world leaders for a breakthrough on climate change in Bali
- And I now believe we have a major political commitment to achieving that”

This presentation reflects on some of the drivers for change since Rio in 1992 and Bali in 2007.

i) From Green to Climate Change

In the 1960's, 70's and 80's and early 90's there was significant advocacy (from Greenpeace and others) raising the awareness of issues such as pollution, the destruction of the rain forests, genetic engineering and others. However, over the years, the issue of climate change began to evolve as a central focus. This was in a large part brought about by civil society advocacy groups, the press and other media, as well as the increasing occurrence of severe storms that captured the attention of millions around the world. But while climate change was being recognized by scientists and the general public in many parts of the world, many government leaders were slow to respond. Specifically, the USA and Australia did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol reached in 1997 calling for agreements on greenhouse gas emissions.

ii) From Advocacy to Science Based Advocacy

A significant event in the path of government action in combating global warming was the 2006 Stern Review, in which the then Chancellor of the Exchequer in the UK, Gordon Brown, asked Sir Nicholas Stern to lead a major review of the economics of climate change to understand more comprehensively the nature of the economic challenges and how they can be met, in the UK and globally. This government led report concluded that:

- 1% of global gross domestic product (GDP) per annum is required to be invested in order to avoid the worst effects of climate change
- Failure to do so could risk global GDP being up to 20% lower than it otherwise might be

Although criticized in some quarters, this techno-economic report was recognized as a significant contribution by many governments around the world. For example, in my home country, the South African Minister of the Environment stated:

- "The Stern Review is a clarion call to all world leaders, to acknowledge that the overwhelming scientific and economic evidence requires urgent action
- We have reached a point in the debate where the scientific and economic case is so persuasive that failure to act is both negligent and irresponsible
- I trust the Stern Report will also contribute to the groundswell of pressure on those governments and corporations that still keep our common global future hostage

Another significant milestone was the release of the Fourth Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007. (The IPCC was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)). This report produced "conclusive evidence of climate change".

The IPCC received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for the contribution that they had made in raising the issues global warming.

The Nobel Peace Prize was shared with ex USA Vice President Al Gore, who has been a tireless campaigner around the issues of global warming. His film "An Inconvenient Truth" which was based on significant scientific evidence had brought the message of global warming into the homes of millions around the world.

Science based advocacy has now placed the issues of global warming firmly on the political agenda in many parts of the world.

Recent surveys show how advocacy through the media and other form has raised the awareness of the issues of global warming. For example, a survey by the BBC in July found that around 70% or more of people surveyed in developed countries such as Spain, France, Canada, Australia and the UK believe that major actions are required to address climate change. However, in the USA less than 60% of people believe that major actions are necessary. (It is interesting to ask whether public opinions are reflecting the views of the political leaders, or whether the political leaders are reflecting the views of the public?)

Public recognition of global warming is also high in developing countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, China, Indonesia and others, but Russia and India only around 40% of people surveyed believe that major actions are required to address climate change!

iii) From Climate Change to Green Buildings

Through a combination of civil advocacy (enhanced through the media) and science based advocacy, climate change is now placed firmly on the political agenda. However, increasing focus is now also taking place. Specifically, the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report showed that the building sector has the largest potential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Specifically, the operation and maintenance of buildings accounts for around 40% to 60% of all greenhouse gas emissions.

This recognition of the importance of buildings is not new, and, for example, in California in the USA, an Executive Order introduced in 2000 requires that all public sector buildings “are models of energy, water, and materials efficiency” – which are assessed through the LEED rating system.

In the USA, for example, 11 federal agencies, 17 states and 53 municipalities require buildings to meet either local green standards or those set by the US Green Building Council (USGBC). Furthermore, Washington is the first major US city to require LEED compliance for private projects.

Other such initiatives focusing on buildings are also found in other countries – but the need to enhance this focus on buildings is now becoming increasingly more important.

In this regard, the UNEP Sustainable Building and Construction Initiative (SBCI) Round Table meeting held in conjunction with SB07 in Kuala Lumpur in September concluded that “we need to go with an advocacy agenda to Bali”, and that we must “capitalise on the excellent political momentum” that exists at present.

The environmental impact of buildings has been placed firmly on the agenda at Bali.

iv) From Green Buildings to CIB

Over the years, civil advocacy has raised the general level of awareness of issues around global warming around the world, but more recently advocacy has moved strongly towards S&T based advocacy which has created significant political momentum.

While, ultimately, the actions necessary to address global warming will be determined by the political agenda (at meetings such as Bali), the stage is now set to strengthen S&T based policy, legislation and regulation. And there is also an urgent need to move from S&T based policy, legislation and regulation to S&T based solutions.

The science community and government agencies will play a very strong role in this movement – but the pace of the movement will be determined by the leadership demonstrated at the climate change negotiations in Bali and others to follow in the run-up to the renegotiation of the Kyoto Protocol.

The media has a strong role to play in furthering global climate change agenda – and the future of our planet.