

A close-up portrait of Helen Mountford, a woman with dark hair and glasses, looking slightly to the left. She is wearing a dark top and a pearl necklace. The background is dark and out of focus.

The key
is to produce
food efficiently
and reduce
wastage

Ms Helen Mountford has been Deputy Director of the OECD since 2010. She joined the OECD in 1997, and was Head of the Division on Climate Change, Biodiversity, and Development from 2006–2010. Her work at OECD has included a leading role in the preparation of the 2001 and 2008 OECD Environmental Outlook reports, as well as analysis of policies in the areas of water pricing, biodiversity incentive measures, market-based instruments, and reform of environmentally harmful subsidies. **Arpita Dasgupta** caught up with her on the last day of the Delhi Sustainable Development Summit.

The Delhi Sustainable Development Summit, 2013, addresses the important issue of tacking climate change by weighing the local as well global approaches to the same. What do you think the summit has achieved?

I think one of things that is most impressive about the Summit is that you really bring together policy-makers from countries around the world together with civil society, NGOs, business actors and so much more. So, to me, I think there are a couple of things that come out of the conference, and one of them is the urgency of the need to act, and the other one is the fact that across all of these sectors, different walks of life, there's a lot of interest and energy and willingness to work together to fight for solutions. I think that's one thing that comes out that is quite positive.

Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. This is especially applicable to India and the rest of the Third World. But at the same time, it is understood that food production has an inherent impact on land and other natural resources. Keeping this in mind, how do you view the objective of sustainable food production?

A major challenge for us is still to eradicate hunger and poverty and food production is obviously going to be critical in that. One of the things is to produce food much more



efficiently. We are moving to two billion more people to a population of nine billion and we need to feed all of them. At the moment we have enough food; one of the problem is that we waste a lot. So one of the challenges towards sustainable food production is to reduce that wastage! In developed countries, or in OECD countries, about a quarter of food is thrown away in the rubbish. That is not something we can keep doing. We are also moving to diets much heavier in meat and this uses much more resources so we need to look out for healthier diets which are lower in meat. These diets are not only healthier for us they are also good for the environment. Another critical factor will be better management of water resources. Agriculture accounts for about 70 per cent of water usage now, and a lot of that is wasted. So, for example, moving to more efficient systems, such as drip irrigation can reduce water usage by 60 per cent or so, depending on the area. There is a lot of potential out there for new solutions to reduce waste but we need to put in place the right measures to do so.

The meat production angle is crucial today in terms of its unsustainability. How can this challenge be overcome?

It is very difficult! The minute you start talking about food and food preferences and diets, it is very personal. People feel that you are critiquing them and their ways of life and nobody wants to discuss that. I

used to be vegetarian but no longer am. Just that fact that I was a vegetarian would make people defensive! So one of the things we need to focus on is the health aspects. I don't think we can go suggesting that everybody stops eating meat or turn vegetarian — that approach is not going to work at all, and on the other hand we know that moving towards diets that are higher in meat and fat are not healthy. Obesity is rising in a lot of countries leading to heart problems and others. So I think taking all these together, rather than focusing on the environmental angle, we should focus more on health. Additionally, lowering meat in diets can also reduce wastage. For example, in certain restaurants in America, you get served steaks big enough to feed a family of four! Obviously not all of that gets eaten. We need to also reduce portion sizes to eat healthier.

Sustainable development cannot be achieved by unilateral action, but requires coordination and contribution of many different actors. How does the OECD facilitate this?

That's one of the things we specialize in the OECD is a multi-disciplinary organization so we are working together with governments and delegates from different ministries, such as economy, finance, agriculture, tourism, trade, and environment. We work together with delegates from all these ministries. What is often seen in countries is that all these different ministries are not speaking



or collaborating with each other, but we bring them together at OECD. For example, we have a forum which brings together all these different ministries to talk about green growth and sustainable development and find solutions together. We also have a business unions and environment NGOs participating so it's not just the government. It's also civil society and business that we bring together to look for practical solutions.

You have worked in a recycling company in the UK previously. And in a world that is constantly inching towards a culture of use-and-throw, how do you think this mind-set/culture can be changed?

I think one of the questions that I thought before working for recycling company is that a lot of it is going to be by educating the children and bringing people up with a set of values. So one of the things we did was household recycling schemes; we would go to some areas and you would get very bad sorting of the waste. So what we would do was to go visit the schools in those areas and talk to the kids who were about 9-10 years old. This is the perfect age range because if you can convince them to recycle, or turn off the lights, or not use

too much water, they will nag their parents till they consent and teach their younger siblings as well. So education is critical. Apart from this, yes it does take a cultural move and I do think the media will need to be involved because it does inculcate some of the ideas that make up our consumer culture. But there is still hope.

I live in Paris and coming here to India, talking to people and I find that everyone is focused on the importance of owning a car. It's a status symbol. We have seen that in a lot of cultures, in the US certainly. Now in Paris, I don't have a car, I have got a young family but we don't need a car and it's not because I am an environmentalist, a lot of friends in Paris don't own cars. It's such a hassle to own a car! The public transport in Paris is very good and walking is comfortable. So there are possibilities there but it takes time and it takes cultural shift.

The say innovation is the sexy side of sustainability! Being a part of this Summit and otherwise too we have been hearing a lot of crazy ideas; what is the most outrageous climate conservation idea you have come across?

There are actually a number of ideas that are pretty crazy. For example, putting up lots and lots of mirrors in the desert or growing algae in the oceans! Now while they may help climate change mitigation, it would completely change ocean ecosystem. We need to think of the other impacts before implementation. So there are some pretty bizarre ideas doing the rounds, but I think the importance of innovation is to have a thousand flowers bloom and then you find which ones work. But if you do not have the crazy ideas then you might not have some of the radical new ones which may actually lead to a real solution.

A final question: How much of action do you see on the ground today in terms of climate change mitigation?

I think we are moving to a new period. For a long time there we needed the deliberations in order to convince people that you needed change. I think now there is a much broader awareness on the importance of taking actions. There is now a general understanding that climate change is happening and that we must do all we can to limit the damage and also adapt. I think we have sort of gotten over the so-called hump of awareness-raising and the understanding that it is important. The next series of deliberation will focus more on what to do, who should do it, and how to do it. So we need the deliberations, but at the same what we desperately need are examples that have worked in the past. One sees a lot of excellent action at the local level. There are a number of cities are very progressive, such as Copenhagen. In fact the OECD has done work on Green cities and one finds that these are often hotbeds of policy experimentation. If some policy works, then it might get scaled up to the national level. We see some proof, but we need more examples at the national level that sustainable development is possible and green growth is possible while at the same time ensuring development and economic growth. ■