

Equitable Earth Initiative



Principles and Mission

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Equitable Earth Initiative

www.equitable-earth.org

Equitable Earth Initiative connects research, policy and practice to promote governance of land and resources for sustainable prosperity.

Equitable Earth Initiative is an international organization that connects research, policy and practice to promote governance of land and resources for sustainable prosperity. Our approach is to build capacity and promote learning across levels, so that decision-makers who work in national and international processes can learn directly from what is happening at the grassroots and more effectively support empowering grassroots development processes.

Equitable Earth Initiative: Principles and Mission

Challenges in Land and Natural Resource Governance

One of the principal causes of humanity's inability to achieve sustainable development is failures in governance. *Governance* includes the actions and procedures of *governments*, but is broader than this, encompassing the many ways, both formal and informal, that organizations, communities, and societies manage their common affairs, accommodate diverse and sometimes conflicting interests, make collective decisions and take cooperative action. In the pursuit of sustainable development, land and natural resource governance is crucial. The international community has recognized this in the crafting of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the governance of land and natural resources being explicitly reflected in targets and indicators in seven of the SDGs, and implied in several others. However, the task of nurturing systems of governance that are effective and just has yet to be achieved. The list of seemingly intractable governance challenges is long: the difficulty taking decisions in conditions of incomplete knowledge and uncertainty, unjust power relations and inappropriate incentives that skew decision-making, weak and inequitable land tenure systems, new technologies that isolate already marginalized communities from decision-making, and the inability of governance institutions to take a long-term view, to name a few.

Failure to overcome these challenges comes in part from the way that they are conceptualized. Among the most common assumptions are

Land and natural resource governance refers to the sum of the many ways, both formal and informal, through which people accommodate diverse and conflicting interests and engage in cooperative actions regarding land, ecosystems and natural resources. They are the organizations, institutions and processes that shape human beings' relationship with nature.

that people and nature are separate and distinct, that human beings are individualistic, materialistic creatures whose motivation is to maximize their self-interest, and that conflict is the natural state of affairs. At the heart of environmental challenges are a handful of factors which are often ignored—factors related to ways in which our governance systems engage with culture and values, and how they implicitly understand our role as human beings in this world. From various places around the world there are

examples of success in addressing the challenges of sustainability, including for instance in the customary systems of indigenous groups, in community-based natural resource management initiatives, and in systems of multi-level landscape governance. A common thread across these success stories is that they often explicitly address these less tangible cultural, philosophical and spiritual elements of sustainability—concerns which are normally treated, at least in the West, as belonging in the domain of art and religion. Indeed, it is typically assumed that these kinds of religious, spiritual and cultural considerations are beyond the purview of both national and international policymaking and NGO and government programming. At Equitable Earth Initiative, these considerations are at the heart of our work.

In this brief document, we outline a set of principles and values that guide the work of Equitable Earth Initiative and shape our mission. These are intended as initial thoughts meant to introduce ourselves and our values to potential collaborators and to stimulate dialogue on alternative ways to conceptualize land and resource governance in the context of sustainable development. We expect that these ideas will continue to evolve through experience, reflection and dialogue with collaborators.

Our principles

There are several principles and values that inform the work of Equitable Earth Initiative. Here we present five which we think are fundamental to the pursuit of sustainable prosperity.

The first is the *nobility of the human being*. The culture of consumerism, individualism and materialistic self-interest is pervasive, but we do not accept that these characteristics should be taken as constituting what it means to be human. Although we as human beings do not always live up to our potential, we believe that being human is defined by qualities such as intelligence and wisdom, empathy and justice, creativity and wonder. This has profound implications for addressing the challenges of governance of land and ecosystems. We believe that there are powerful human motivations that go beyond material incentives and which could be mobilized in the pursuit of sustainable prosperity. Recognition of the nobility of the human being implies, moreover, that programs and projects for conservation and sustainable development need to go beyond merely “raising awareness” and transferring technical skills, and to help individuals, communities and societies to rise to their full potential.

The second principle that guides our work is *interconnectedness*. At one level, this refers to the oneness of the human race. An apt analogy is that of the human race as a body with individual human

beings as the cells of that body. This understanding of the oneness of humanity suggests that the well-being of the individual and the well-being of global society as a whole are integrally connected. Economic activity, political processes, and everyday actions of people in one part of the world can have impacts on people on the opposite side of the globe, and human well-being is shaped by social, political, and economic processes at every level from the local to the global. *Interconnectedness* also describes nature itself—the earth is composed of interconnected physical systems—as well as the connection between humanity and nature. It is not simply that we rely on the natural world for resources that we use, and that year by year we are placing ever greater demands and stresses on the earth. We are embedded in, connected to, and part of the natural world as a human race, as communities, and as individual human beings. At Equitable Earth Initiative, we believe that ignoring and undermining of this interconnectedness is at the root of the environmental challenges that we face in the world today.

The third principle is *community-driven development*. Equitable Earth Initiative is committed to the idea that the only real and sustainable development is development that springs from individuals learning and acting together in communities as protagonists of their own advancement. *Community* is the expression in culture of interconnectedness and is an essential component of sustainable development. Where societal forces of materialism and radical individualism have undermined community, community must be reanimated. Local communities can be supported with partnerships from outside facilitators and agencies, and societal change is needed to address inequalities, but each community should take ownership and generate its own motivation for sustainable development.

One of the greatest obstacles to a genuinely community-driven development is the use of position, privilege and power to manipulate, marginalize and oppress groups within a community or society. This brings us to the fourth principle at the heart of Equitable Earth Initiative: *justice*. From the principle of the interconnected oneness of the human race it follows that injury to one human being is injury to us all; genuine well-being cannot be achieved for some while others suffer. Furthermore, the interconnectedness of human beings with nature implies that injustice in social affairs will inevitably result in unhealthy relationships with the natural world. When, for example, the gulf between extremes of wealth and poverty widen, one result is that people's circle of caring—for other human beings and for nature—narrows, and the unsustainable exploitation of nature, whether for greed and the continuation of opulent consumption or out of dire necessity, expands. Social injustices, whether longstanding or recent, are one of the primary obstacles to achieving sustainable development.

Lastly, the fifth principle that is central to Equitable Earth Initiative's work is *learning*. While some elements of solutions have been worked out, we must approach this work with a spirit of humble and open-minded inquiry. Not only does Equitable Earth Initiative strive to ensure that its personnel are continually learning and basing their contributions on experience, but we believe that learning should be embedded as a key component of social action. All of our work aims to promote the incorporation of learning processes into policy development and social action around land governance and natural resource management.

Our Mission

Sociopolitical processes are complex and many of the societal challenges related to sustainability resist easy solutions. The far-reaching, long term impact of our current economic structures is also increasingly being recognized. Yet, interventions for improving environmental and land governance, natural resource management, and policy related to sustainability continue to be carried out with short time lines, subject to fads and fickle changes of direction. Too often, existing knowledge is not mobilized and experience is not translated into learning. Equitable Earth Initiative is founded on the belief that learning should be embedded in all social action and that sustained long term learning by individuals, communities and institutions will be at the heart of achieving sustainability.

One of the cornerstones of our mission, therefore, is the coordination of collaborative research and learning processes on land and natural resource governance. One way we do this is by helping communities and organizations to learn from what they do—to treat their planning and action processes as opportunities for learning, in this way building their capacity for charting their own development path. We also assist communities and other partners to carry out their own mapping, research, and spatial planning, particularly where it addresses questions around people's relationship with the land, inclusivity, equity and justice, sometimes helping them to apply useful technologies where these have the potential to enhance their learning.

Governance challenges for sustainability also play out at higher levels, in processes at national, regional and global levels. Unfortunately, policy and governance processes at these levels are often disjointed and fractious, lacking in vision, and subject to the lowest common denominator. Societal level discourses around sustainability, justice, and aspirations for the future tend not toward consensus and united vision, but instead usually reinforce echo chambers. On the other hand, at a smaller scale, many

communities are engaged in ongoing processes of developing and updating institutions, practices, and worldviews for effective stewardship of ecosystems and resources. Yet this kind of coherent but continually adaptive learning from the grassroots is seldom mobilized to inform policy and governance processes. An approach to addressing this gap which some civil society organizations have adopted is to advocate on behalf of such communities. At Equitable Earth Initiative, however, we see our role differently. The second cornerstone of our mission is building the capacity of our community partners to themselves actively participate in policy processes and societal discourses at higher levels.

The third cornerstone of our mission is an outgrowth of the other two. For collaborative learning processes and community engagement in policy dialogue and societal discourses to have a sustained impact on the pursuit of sustainable prosperity, they need to become part of the institutional landscape. This implies facilitating forms of integration and collaboration which go beyond ad hoc communication and mere networking. Our third area of work, therefore, is facilitating the emergence of multi-stakeholder, multi-level institutional ecosystems that mobilize communities, institutions, and individuals for the pursuit of just governance and collective well-being. We help to create the kinds of platforms, monitoring and learning systems, and other institutional connections that result in institutional systems which nurture flexibility, experimentation, and diverse, community-driven approaches in the context of widening circles of united effort.

Through these three lines of action—supporting collaborative research and learning processes, helping communities and grassroots organizations to build their capacity to participate in policy processes and societal discourses, and facilitating multi-level institutional collaboration—Equitable Earth Initiative connects research, policy and practice in order to promote learning on approaches to land and natural resource governance that contribute to sustainable prosperity.