

# PEOPLES' SUSTAINABILITY TREATY ON EQUITY

## 1. PREAMBLE

The current crisis of development, compounded by the global environmental crisis, hinges on the exhaustion of a particular system of development which is ecologically predatory, socially perverse, politically unjust, culturally alienating and ethically repulsive. The deepening of poverty and inequality have become structural features of the world system, reinforced by the conveyor belts of trade and financial globalization. In today's world, the nourishment and health of markets and corporate interests matter above human, individual, and nature's well-being. This must change.

Reducing inequality is critical to the needed transformation to sustainability. Inequality erodes trust and undermines cooperative solutions to urgent social, economic, environmental and political problems. It is not possible to successfully negotiate the kinds of collaborative agreements and arrangements needed to solve the world's problems unless people and societies perceive that they share common interests, and that it is in their mutual interest to form these collaborations. Land and other natural resources are not increasing; thus, the only way to have sustainable development is to ensure a more equitable global distribution of wealth and resources within and across generations. In short, there must be real movement to greater equality<sup>1</sup> before humankind can hope to successfully negotiate and implement the agreements needed to confront global environmental change and bring about sustainable development and human security.

Economic, political, cultural and social inequalities have sharply increased over the past several decades, within and between nations. Never in recent history has wealth—economic, non-economic and environmental—been so concentrated in the hands of so few individuals, classes and corporations. This has led to a whole host of documented societal ills which affect rich as well as poor, including physical and mental illness, substance abuse, teen pregnancies, and high rates of school dropouts and incarceration. These growing disparities undercut human well-being and social cohesion by exacerbating violence, crime and conflict, and by inhibiting economic growth and stability in many countries. Inequality also disempowers women (and thus the protection of children), minorities, and Indigenous Peoples, thereby compromising human potential and eroding cultural diversity. Furthermore, inequality is one of the key drivers of unsustainable behaviors, enabling overconsumption by making it socially acceptable for some to have far more than others, and engendering destructive forms of consumption by tying consumption to social status.

The failure to redress situations of inequality and the persistent increase of inequality in both rich and poor nations have been driven by economic models which are geared towards the pursuit of profits and of corporate well-being rather than the promotion of the welfare of peoples, their local environments and life as a whole. Economic policies dominate, constrain, and undermine social and environmental policies, and national politics is subject to the unregulated and unrestrained interests of corporations and financial interests. Monied interests have disproportionate influence over

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this Treaty, "equity" and "equality" are used interchangeably, although it is acknowledged that *equity* refers specifically to the condition of fairness whereas *equality* reflects the condition of being equal in one or more ways. By using either term, the text assumes that these conditions go together.

elections, policy-making, and enforcement; organized labor and other forms of community autonomous organizations have been broken up, and redistributive social safety nets have been dismantled. The result has been the breakdown of the social fabric of nations and the consequent backslide of social and environmental rights hard fought and won in previous decades. Contrary to the politically motivated belief that equality engenders less individual responsibility, we recognize that the circumstances of all people are interdependent and bound together. We reject austerity in public spending, and assert that those who have been relegated to a vulnerable, impoverished or disempowered position require social solidarity and inclusion to recover their rightful place within society. Likewise, equality does not mean reduced individual freedoms; it means enhanced social, cultural, economic and political capabilities and freedoms and a higher quality of life for most.

There have been few serious efforts to resolve the inequality predicament. Although poverty alleviation efforts have experienced some successes in the past decades, they have rarely been accompanied by attempts to address economic and political inequalities, and thus the reduction in poverty has not generally resulted in better lives for the poor. In fact, data indicates that even when poverty has been reduced, it has typically been accompanied by increasing inequality. Measures such as progressive taxation and redistribution of wealth through social programs, undertaken with some small success in the post-Depression mid-twentieth century, have eroded over the past several decades or are currently under attack under the guise of "balancing the budget." Also, foreign aid as a proportion of gross national product has fallen greatly in several of the wealthiest countries. In short, rather than progress, we see regression on the issue of inequality.

We, the undersigned, therefore call for the deep systemic changes required to substantially end inequalities, eradicate poverty, prioritize human well-being, protect the right to sustainable development for all, achieve environmental justice, and bring about peace between peoples. We decry economic and political systems that perpetuate these blights on humanity, and condemn international negotiations and institutions which delay the move towards these necessary systemic changes.

The way forward cannot be based on piecemeal reforms and after-the-fact transfers, but must instead tackle the fundamental, underlying mechanisms and policies which inform, generate and protect growing inequality. Economic systems which inherently generate ever-larger concentration of economic and non-economic wealth must be replaced by institutions and mechanisms which incorporate democratic and community-based decision-making and support shared prosperity. Economic, financial and taxation policies must support such democratically-controlled, equality-generating decision-making structures and processes. The perpetuation of ever-growing shares of economic wealth within privileged sectors of the economy, including large corporations and economically dominant families, must be addressed through altering the economic mechanisms which drive it, including inheritance and immortal corporate personhood.

In addition to these public policies, we must also develop social programs and campaigns to confront and overturn inequalities in social status and dehumanizing perceptions of different categories of humanity, including differences in gender, race, ethnicity, religion, health, ability, and other fundamental human attributes. Finally, organized civil society itself, along with educational, religious, civic, cultural and business institutions, must undertake a review of their own internal policies and practices to determine how they impact others and perpetuate inequalities, and introduce changes to empower the voices and full participation of those who have been excluded or marginalized.

## 2. PRINCIPLES

The principles we articulate include both moral and pragmatic values which relate to our common humanity. They support human well-being and happiness, fairness between people, human development, human rights, and the pragmatic concerns associated with equity such as achieving various urgent social and environmental goals.

### **Principle #1. Equity as Fundamental Human Right**

Equity is a fundamental human right which is necessary for justice and solidarity, human well-being, and social systems that are viable over the long term.

### **Principle #2. Equity as Foundation of Sustainability**

Equity is the foundation of environmentally sustainable systems and practices; it is necessary for the trust and cooperation needed for a rapid and effective transformation to sustainability, and is thus necessary for our survival.

### **Principle #3. Equity as Essential to Well-being**

Equity is central to the well-being of all. Human beings are at the heart of development, and their well-being the focus of all productive and social activities. We therefore value and prioritize meeting the real and long-term physical, social, political and cultural needs of people, and protecting healthy, functioning natural systems: not economic profits, growth, and other objectives which are short-term, serve only the few, and do not support widespread human happiness or ecological balance.

### **Principle #4. Equitable Right to Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development for all is fundamental to the human future. Development must be sustainable and equitable, providing resources to all.<sup>2</sup>

### **Principle #5. Economic Activity as Means**

Equity promotes sustainable economies. Economic activity is a means and not an end in itself; it must protect life opportunities for current and future generations, respect the integrity of the planet's life support systems, and foster a quality of life that reflects the dignity necessary for all people.

### **Principle #6. Equity at All Scales**

Equity must be fostered and experienced at all scales and in all relationships: between nations, between regions, between ethnicities and races, between generations, between family members, between genders, between indigenous and other perspectives and life ways, and between humanity and other beings on earth.

### **Principle #7. Equity in All Dimensions**

Equity and inclusiveness must be fostered and experienced in all essential dimensions of life, including wealth and income, access to economic resources and opportunities, political power and decision-making, maintenance of cultural autonomy, access to natural resources and land, protection of public institutions and properties, having a voice within social groups and organized civil society, social status, sharing of necessary burdens, protecting human rights, and freedom from economic, political, military, and cultural domination.

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<sup>2</sup> See separate "People's Sustainability Treaty on Rights for Sustainability"

### **Principle #8. Equity Through Systemic Change**

We can only create meaningful and lasting change towards equity through systemic change which alters underlying social, economic and political structures and mechanisms; not through palliative reforms and after-the-fact transfers.

## **3. COMMITMENTS**

The systemic social, economic and political structures, institutions and policies that require changing in order to foster true equity are found in all realms of public and private life, including but not limited to economic, taxation and finance; business and industry; political and governance; caste, race, and ethnicity; gender and sexuality; health care and sanitation; environmental protection; education, research, and other intellectual endeavor; journalism and media; communications and technology; law enforcement and judiciary; security and military. Moreover, changes in fundamental beliefs, worldviews, and understanding of relationships will be necessary to transform the inequality paradigm. This will mean making changes in our religious and spiritual views, philosophy, psychology, views of self, identity, and relationship, the arts and literature, as well as popular culture and the media. The following is not a comprehensive list of all that needs to change, but rather a sampling of the most critical changes that will cause more beneficial pro-equality change to ripple through the entire system.

We governments, business, civil society, communities and individuals will commit to the following:

1. We must democratize our local, national, and international economies, financial instruments, capital, workplace decisions, and access to economic and natural resources, implementing transparency as well as the principle that those who are affected must have a say in decisions. Examples of democratized economic mechanisms which tend to generate equality include public banking and customer-owned credit unions, worker-owned cooperative businesses that include community and customer stakeholders, housing and food cooperatives of various kinds, land-owner and farming cooperatives, and many other public or democratically-controlled economic entities.
2. We must put into place local, national, and international social support mechanisms to ensure that every individual has his or her basic human needs met, including food, shelter, health and sanitation, clean air and water, education and intellectual development, means of livelihood, freedom of expression and association, the right to languages and cultural heritage, and social and political participation, and ensure environmental justice in shared geographical regions. These mechanisms should be publicly developed and enforced with input from affected populations, and not rely on the good will of private individuals and institutions.
3. Sovereign Debts incurred to facilitate financial speculation, unnecessary consumption or consolidation of power by elites—not to increase the production of goods and services for the benefit and welfare for all—should be thoroughly and independently audited, and the costs borne exclusively by those who benefited. All future borrowing must satisfy the conditions spelled out in this Treaty concerning financing for sustainable development.
4. We must alter the mandates of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and other international economic bodies to require them to promote equity among nations, and to foster equitable and democratic economic development within nations.

5. We must develop global financial mechanisms that equitably share the burdens of moving towards sustainability in proportion to past and present benefits of overconsumption and pollution generation.
6. We must make and enforce, at the national and international levels, prohibitions on military and economic aggression, colonization and domination, and enforce the rights of all people to political and economic self-determination, free of external interference by foreign states or institutions.
7. We must find ways to de-link elections and political decision-making from money, to create the space for political diversity, to allow political discussion and decision-making that are inclusive and open to all, and to enable a growing political and social conscience of critical and autonomous citizens.
8. We must develop effective international mechanisms and processes by which we can negotiate access to scarce localized resources (such as minerals or water) in a way that protects the local community as well as meeting needs of the world's citizens.
9. We must ensure equity in land ownership and food production through land redistribution.
10. We must overcome excess consumption among the wealthy by de-linking consumption from social status; social status should instead be linked to engaging in equitable and sustainable behaviors.
11. We must enact local, national and international legal protections for equality between all, including genders and sexuality, races and ethnicities, religions, ages (with special protections for children and the elderly), mental and physical abilities, and other human attributes. Traditional cultural discrimination is not a reason to deny full rights and humanity.
12. We must ensure equity of "voice" by democratizing the news and entertainment industry and communications technologies for widespread public benefit rather than private profit.
13. Equitable and effective sustainable development governance requires ~~and~~ effective human capacity building, which implies equal opportunities for basic education and personal intellectual development, and equal access to policy supportive knowledge generation and decision making.
14. We must ensure equity of intellectual resources by making public all access to education, research, and scientific publication.
15. We must address social inequalities with carefully-designed social programs to educate about and de-stigmatize all groups, and to make behaviors and speech that promote prejudice, discrimination, objectification, dehumanization and hate socially unacceptable.

## 4. SIGNATORIES

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED civil society organizations, institutions, communities, and individuals, hereby commit to the Principles and Commitments above, and will work to further develop the Action Plan (see Annex, below):

1. Anthony Akpan (Pan African Vision for the Environment)
2. Ara Beittoei (Lund University\*)
3. Chuck Collins (Institute for Policy Studies\*)
4. Collins Magalasi (African Forum & Network on Debt and Development)
5. Daniel Mathews (Boston College\*)
6. Deborah S. Rogers (Initiative for Equality)
7. Gaston Meskens (Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry, University of Ghent\*)
8. Malcolm Damon (Economic Justice Network)
9. Nazmul Huq (Action Research for Community Adaptation in Bangladesh)
10. Noha el Shoky (Popular Campaign to Drop Egypt's Debt)
11. Patricia Paixão (Iniciativa ProAlt)
12. Paul Raskin (Tellus Institute\*)
13. Roberto Guimarães (DesiguALdades.net)
14. Tirso Gonzales (Indigenous Studies Program Coordinator, University British Columbia-Okanagan\*)
15. Tom Athanasiou (EcoEquity)
16. Uchita de Zoysa (Centre for Environment and Development)

\* for purposes of identification only

## 5. ANNEXURES

### I. ACTION PLAN

*The following are ideas for action that were received from participating Equity Treaty Circle members (the Signatories, above). These and other proposals yet to be received will be developed as actionable projects with clearly defined objectives, goals, strategies, timelines, and commitments.*

- 1. Institutional Equity Review:** to conduct a thorough “Equity Review” of our structures, funding, policies, beliefs, activities and/or impacts on others, in order to assess where there is room for improvement in terms of equity and equality;
- 2. Institutional Equity Adjustments:** to alter our structures, funding, policies, beliefs, activities and/or impacts on others in order to ensure equitable voice, participation, and benefits to all those with whom we are in relation, including the poor, women, other racial and ethnic groups, and other categories of human attributes;
- 3. Building Alliances for Equity:** to build strong alliances and working relationships with others in nearby or distant communities who are less well off, in order to take their needs and perspectives into account, and to work towards shared protections and benefits;
- 4. Building Equitable Economic Alternatives:** to help build (and give our business to) democratically controlled, transparent and equitable economic alternatives such as those described in part III;

**5. Promoting Equitable Structures, Systems and Policies:** to support and promote all the structures, systems and policies outlined in part III;

**6. Withdrawing Support from Inequitable Practices:** to cease participating in or giving business to activities which are known to foster, facilitate, support or induce slavery, human trafficking, child labor, and other dehumanization of exploited individuals or groups; and

**7. Campaign to Overturn Social Inequalities:** to launch, or participate in, local, national and global campaigns to overturn social inequalities and the objectification, dehumanization and demonification that accompany these inequalities of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and other categories of human attributes.

**8. Solidarity of Allied Campaigns:** to join in solidarity with allied campaigns to advance a more coherent and effective global movement for a fundamental shift that places equity, justice, resilience and human well-being as the core purposes of development.