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Global Civil Society Treaty, Field Hearings on Equity Announced

Civil society groups around the world are developing an informal treaty on equity and sustainability to take to the Rio+20 Summit, according to two of the initiative's convenors. Deborah Rogers (US) and Uchita de Zoysa (Sri Lanka) announced the treaty effort at a press briefing held Wednesday 28 March, 2012, at the international conference *Planet Under Pressure*.

"Equity is the primary issue that needs to be addressed if we want to implement any international agreements on how to protect the atmosphere, the environment, and a sustainable future for human beings," said Rogers, director of *Initiative for Equality*, one of 13 organizations in the coalition launching the Equity Treaty. Others include groups from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America.

The informal treaty is being developed through electronic input from civil society groups around the world, and from *Equity and Sustainability Field Hearings* consisting of local community meetings and one-on-one interviews being conducted by research and civil society groups in countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

"We are forging new kinds of treaties between people that will become independently actionable after Rio+20, irrespective of government inaction to face the global challenges," said

de Zoysa, also a member of the Coalition. “This *Equity and Sustainability Treaty* is one of several *People’s Sustainability Treaties* that will lay out a pathway towards equitable opportunities and conditions for wellbeing and prosperity for all on earth in the future,” he said.

Rogers and de Zoysa will be leading a session on “Equity, Equality, and Pathways Towards Sustainability” at the Planet Under Pressure conference, Thursday 29 March, Room 7 at the Excel Centre, London. Other speakers include Francis Menjo Baye, an economist from Cameroon who researches the impact of equalizing human capital endowments, and Claudia Ituarte-Lima, a Mexican attorney who specializes in bringing indigenous voices into “Payment for Ecosystem Services” schemes such as REDD. Rogers, one of the *Planet Under Pressure* conference organizers, said that the session was designed to bring in civil society perspectives and discussion of solutions—another goal of the conference—in addition to scientific talks and posters on equity.

According to Rogers, inequality is the major barrier blocking the move towards sustainability worldwide. “Inequality blocks sustainable development because it often diverts most economic resources to a few elite groups,” Rogers said. “It’s linked to corruption and to economic instability. It often triggers conflict within and between nations. And it promotes excess consumption by promoting material goods as a symbol of status,” she said.

“Most dangerous of all, inequality prevents collaborative solutions to the world’s urgent problems by generating social fragmentation, destroying trust, and eradicating a sense of solidarity among the world’s people,” Rogers said. She explained that groups of nations have walked out of international climate change negotiations because the proposed allocation of burdens and benefits was perceived as unfair. “Who would sign off on an agreement that blocks them from achieving a decent level of development, in order to preserve the right to a much higher standard of living by others?” she asked.

The call for input to the Equity Treaty is open through April 30, Rogers said, after which the language will be finalized and signatures solicited through an electronic petition. Suggested text may be submitted to EquityTreaty@initiativeforequality.org. The Field Hearings currently underway will compile all their results into one document, to be brought to Rio in June, she said.

Anthony Akpan, president of *Pan African Vision for the Environment* and a member of the Equity Treaty and Field Hearings initiative, said that he is involved because he wants to give “the people at the bottom of the pyramid a voice to enhance their participation in decision-making.” “The gap between the haves and have-nots is wide in Africa. Participation in decision-making processes at all levels of governance in Africa is more or less non-existent—people and communities are not consulted to ascertain their needs and expectations,” Akpan said. “When the call came out, African groups saw these Field Hearings as an opportunity to be heard at the international level,” he said.

Zhiyuan Song, coordinator for the Field Hearings in China, said that economic inequality is on the increase in China, and could constitute a threat to social stability there. “Equity is the keystone of social cooperation, to collectively achieve sustainability,” Song said. “Bringing the voices of the underrepresented communities to Rio+20 by these Field Hearings has equity as its means as well as its goal.”

According to Roberto Guimaraes, Equity Treaty convenor and author of *The Inequality Predicament: UN DESA Report on the World Social Situation 2005*, the Equity Treaty is urgently needed in order to get the attention of decision-makers in the multilateral environmental negotiations. “The world is in trouble on a number of fronts, and growing inequality is one of the keys to the problem,” Guimaraes said. “It’s time for civil society to come together and provide the leadership needed to make progress on this issue.”

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