

Environmental sustainability and equality

WWF contribution to the UN online consultation on Environmental Sustainability

Inequalities can exacerbate environmental degradation and undermine the attainment of sustainable development on several levels. Globally, differences in consumption patterns, power and capacities between states can adversely impact the health of the planet. On a national and local level, social inequalities between man and women, rich and poor, urban and rural dwellers can restrict access to environmental governance and natural capital, putting the sustainability of both the environment and people's livelihoods at risk. WWF recognizes the complex relationship between environment and equality. This contribution identifies three of the links between sustainability and (in)equality and proposes some answers to the question of how tackling inequalities can help achieve environmental sustainability.

First, current global consumption and production patterns are highly unequal across income groups but the environmental impacts of environmentally-intensive consumption and waste generation often disproportionately impact lower income communities. High-income countries have historically had the heaviest ecological footprint and put the most pressure on planetary boundaries, but the resulting degradation is not limited to developed countries or to current generations (WWF, 2012, Living Planet Report 2012). Similarly, although high income countries have been responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions to date, extreme weather events related to climate change disproportionately affect already vulnerable communities. Taking a global and intergenerational perspective of equality suggests clear priorities for action to reduce the resource intensity of high-impact consumption, now also growing in middle-income groups across the globe.

Second, inequalities between nations in the capacity of states to apply environmental regulations can enable the outsourcing of environmental hazards. Activities regulated or banned in high-income countries, such as the disposal of chemical and industrial waste, are sometimes relocated to developing states, where regulations may be more lax or even nonexistent. Inequalities in state and individual capacities to respond to environmental hazards can also result in greater risk. The countries most severely affected by environmental hazards often lack adequate state and individual power and resources to effectively prepare and respond to risks. Ensuring the enforcement of internationally agreed environmental guidelines and regulations, providing clear accountability mechanisms for businesses operating across national borders and supporting capacity in countries to adequately regulate and safeguard against environmental hazards are important "equalizers" that will also protect the natural environment.

Finally, power disparities within countries, reflected in social and political systems, may also adversely impact the environment. Access to environmental goods and services can differ significantly among groups due to inequalities in income, gender, age, and geographical location. Yet, although poor and disadvantaged groups may be disproportionately dependent on the natural resource base and environmental services for their well-being, they often lack the power to



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influence the policies and strategies that have direct outcomes for their communities. The rural poor, in particular women, are also most likely to face problems with securing land tenure and ownership. (UNDP 2011, Human Development Report 2011). Inequalities in access to environmental governance and land management can diffuse accountability and hamper the attainment of environmental sustainability.

More equal countries tend to have more social cohesion, which often translates into a more sustainable approach to common environmental goods (Melamed and Samman, UNDP 2013). Conversely, higher income inequality is often accompanied by indicators of heavier environmental impact, such as waste production, meat and water consumption, and biodiversity loss (Dorling, *Environmental Scientist*, December 2010 and Haupt, 2012, shapingtomorrowworld.org) While inclusive and participatory environmental decision-making processes do not guarantee sustainable outcomes, they have the potential to build public support for environmentally sound policies and give voice to local communities, including those depending on the sustainability of natural capital for their survival.

Greater empowerment, including by redressing inequalities in access to environmental information, to policy and decision-making bodies and to justice, can provide people with the means to influence the management of the natural environment. Addressing gender inequalities, including by increasing women's ability to own and inherit land and to actively participate in policy and decision-making bodies, has the potential to advance environmental sustainability. Some research has shown, for example, that women are more likely to support pro-environmental policies (Norgaard, K. and R. York, August 2005) in part because of women's incentives to protect the ecosystem services upon which they depend, but also to avert the negative impacts environmental degradation will have on future generations.

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