CAPACITIES FOR
Sustainable Development

Building Capacity to Promote Equity within and among Generations:
Lessons from scholarship and practice

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Abstract: The foundational vision of sustainable development as fair or equitable advancement of human well-being within and across generations was first articulated by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 and reaffirmed by subsequent local, national and international deliberations (United Nations 2015; WCED 1987). These commitments to equity have been extended to argue that all people (both current and future generations) should have the freedom and ability to pursue their own visions of the good life (Sen 2013). From this perspective, today's development pathways remain inequitable in the extreme, with the few taking for themselves a disproportionate share of the earth's resources and the opportunities for enhanced well-being that those resources should offer for all (Chancel et al. 2022; ISSC, IDS, and UNESCO 2016; Piketty 2014). If humanity is to achieve the vision for sustainable development it has repeatedly endorsed, a stronger capacity to promote equity both within and between generations must be built and maintained. Such a capacity will almost certainly require addressing three separate but interrelated challenges: i) strengthening values and norms that support greater intra- and inter-generational equity; ii) reorienting institutions toward more equitable processes and outcomes, and iii) redistributing resources and the flows of benefits from those resources within and between generations. This working paper provides a high-level overview of scholarship on inequality and efforts to promote equity in sustainability science as well as insights from the past several decades of practice in the field. The paper is designed as a jumping off point for a seminar series on Building Capacity for Sustainable Development (C4SD) organized by the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, the Sustainability Science Program, Salata Institute for Climate and Sustainability, Center for International Development, and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School. For more information about the seminar series see this link:
https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/programs/sustainability-science-program/c4sd-seminar-series

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1. Introduction:[1]

What capacities are most needed for the effective pursuit of sustainability in the face of the multiple crises currently facing the Anthropocene system? Taken together these intertwined crises – climate, pandemics, extinction, inequity, and others arising from the increasingly intense interactions between nature and society – are threatening the implicit promise of sustainability which has emerged over the last decades as one of the most widely shared goals in human history: **that each generation should hand on to its successors whatever it takes to allow them to achieve a standard of living at least as good as its own, while simultaneously seeking to alleviate poverty and inequity within its own time** (Solow 1993; WCED 1987). Keeping this promise will ultimately require decisive action on multiple fronts. But in this complex world, what will it take to foster our collective ability to pursue sustainability in the face of deep uncertainty and the inevitability of unexpected change?

In the Capacity Building for Sustainable Development (C4SD) research project,[2] we argue that advocates for sustainable development should pay greater attention to building a set of strategic capacities that empower and enable actors (individuals, communities, organizations etc.) to make strategic decisions, and to take deliberate and collective action in the pursuit of sustainability. By capacity we mean both the intention and the ability to accomplish a task or achieve an outcome or, more bluntly, "the ability to get stuff done". Why? Because failure to build, exercise, and improve capacity for the pursuit of sustainability has too often resulted in a "missing middle"—an inability to connect widespread agreement on the goals of sustainable development with the scientific understanding of the dynamics of intertwined nature-society systems that set the stage on which those goals must be pursued.

Three features of today's world make the need to build such strategic capacities particularly urgent:

1) Crises challenging the goals of sustainable development are multiplying and intensifying (Folke et al. 2021), threatening the remarkable progress in many dimensions of well-being that has been achieved over the last two centuries or more (Deaton 2013; McNeill

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[1] This "Introduction" is, in large part, common to all the white papers we have written in support of the present seminar series. Readers who have already encountered it in another of those white papers can skim or skip ahead to Section 2 without loss.

[2] The Capacity Building project is an activity of the Sustainability Science Program, hosted by the Mossavar-Rahmani Center at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

2016). More effective action to address the multiple threats to sustainability is increasingly urgent.

2) The threats to sustainability are interconnected, as is the underlying nature-society system from which they emerge (Preiser et al. 2018). Efforts to address them one-by-one at best become a Sisyphean nightmare of whack-a-mole and often end up competing with or undermining one another. All too visible examples are provided by unsatisfactory results of siloed efforts taken in pursuit of one or another of the UN's 17 SDGs. Strategic approaches are needed to support actions likely to be effective across multiple interconnected challenges and where efforts to foster sustainable development require attention to the whole intertwined system rather than just the parts.

3) Better assessments, forecasts, and the scientific models to support them are necessary components of such strategic approaches. But they are not sufficient. The reason is that nature-society interactions constitute complex adaptive systems in which novelty (innovation, evolution), uncertainty and surprise are the norm rather than the exception (Preiser et al. 2018). This complexity virtually guarantees that even the most scientifically informed plans will eventually turn out to be at best incomplete if not altogether wrong. Effective strategies must complement "thinking through" with "acting out" approaches, i.e. with capacities to approach problems and solutions from a systems perspective, to treat interventions as experiments, to learn from those experiments, and to course correct when forecasts eventually, and inevitably, go wrong.

This working paper focuses specifically on the capacity to promote equity within and among generations as one of a broader set of six capacities that we argue connect the goals of sustainable development with the scientific understanding of the multiple, interacting, and complex sustainability challenges currently facing the Anthropocene. These six capacities emerged from decades of research across multiple interdisciplinary—but often disparate—research programs focused on what is needed to foster sustainability (Clark and Harley 2020). Taken together the six capacities enable collaborative action for sustainability in the face of uncertainty. As summarized in Fig. 1, they are:

1. **Capacity to measure** progress toward sustainable development

2. **Capacity to adapt** development pathways to protect human well-being in the face of shocks

3. **Capacity to transform** unsustainable development pathways into sustainable ones

4. **Capacity to promote equity** both within and among generations

5. **Capacity to govern,** i.e., to build and maintain collaborative relationships in pursuit of sustainable development

6. **Capacity to link knowledge with action** for sustainability

The remainder of this working paper is organized in three sections: the first section reviews the state of knowledge and scholarship on inequality, prospects for promoting equity, and sustainable development; the second section highlights what actors are already doing at the cutting edge of building the capacity to promote equity in practice; and the third section synthesizes emerging insights from practitioners and scholars collected as part of the Capacity Building for Sustainable Development (C4SD) research project about what is needed to build and maintain and strategic capacity to promote equity both within and among generations. We hope that the seminar series for which this background paper has been prepared will further contribute to the C4SD research project, deepening the insights found in this working paper.

2. **Equity and Sustainability: A brief overview of the scholarship**

Research on inequality and the challenges of promoting equity has surged in recent years (Chancel 2020; Diffenbaugh and Burke 2019; Hamann et al. 2018; Hickel et al. 2022; World Bank 2022b)—a trend that was further accelerated by the inequalities laid bare by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Fiske et al. 2022; Stantcheva 2022). Both theory (Page 2011; Scheffer et al. 2017) and empirical evidence (Piketty 2014; Zucman 2019) demonstrate that some level of inequality[3] is an emergent property of all complex adaptive systems. For sustainable development, the key inequalities have been shown to lie in people's differential access to the

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[3] We use the term (in)equity as a normative concept describing notions of justice and fairness that are central to social deliberations about what constitutes fair or just distributions of resources and well-being. We use (in)equality as a positive concept describing those distributions of resources (i.e.(in)equality in wealth and ownership of resources, access to forests, roads, electricity, schools etc.) and well-being (i.e. (in)equality in health, subjective wellbeing, happiness etc.).

natural and anthropocentric resources that constitute the ultimate determinants of human well-being in our increasingly intertwined nature-society systems (Dasgupta 2004; Hamann et al. 2018). Those inequalities have a strong tendency to be self-reinforcing as incumbent actors seek to fortify their dominate positions of wealth and power (Beckert 2022) and cultural processes reflect and reproduce inequality (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). Furthermore, recent empirical studies have demonstrated that these dynamics of inequality also undermine the effectiveness of sustainable development interventions, with environmental and social protections often being weakest for the most vulnerable communities (Kashwan 2017; Leach et al. 2018; Nightingale 2017).

How can more equitable access to key resources be promoted? Research shows many ways in which appropriately structured institutions (rules, norms, rights, regulations etc.) have helped. Laws that protect the rights of unions to organize and guarantee access to quality public education are just two institutional mechanisms that have demonstrated ability to foster more equitable distributions of wealth and well-being (Ahlquist 2017; Pierson and Lamont 2019). Progressive taxation systems with robust enforcement mechanisms have been particularly effective at reducing wealth concentration and funding public services that benefit marginalized communities (Alvaredo et al. 2017; Saez 2019). Formal land rights and tenure security for women and Indigenous communities have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing economic disparities and preventing land grabbing by powerful interests (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2019). Universal social protection programs—including cash transfers, health insurance, and pension systems—often show stronger equity outcomes than means-tested approaches that often exclude the most vulnerable (Gentilini et al. 2020; Kidd and Athias 2020).

Research has also begun to explore the special challenge of safeguarding the well-being of future generations who are unavailable to advocate for themselves in decisions made today (González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016). Relevant institutional arrangements include embedding strategic foresight capabilities into governance bodies (Wiebe et al. 2018), insulating decision-making from short-term political pressure (Boston 2017), and strategic use of sovereign wealth funds to safeguard the value of natural resources for future generations (Barbier 2019), and constitutional provisions that explicitly recognize rights of future generations (González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016).

All such institutional reforms—whether designed to promote intra- or inter-generational equity—face the problem of incumbency: efforts to perpetuate the inequitable status quo by those who benefit from it. This means that building the capacity to promote equity requires effective strategies of empowerment capable of destabilizing existing power structures (Kashwan, MacLean, and García-López 2019; Scoones 2016). Social movements and civil resistance have sometimes been successful in combating the power of incumbent actors (Chenoweth 2021; Stirling 2015). Research into what makes social movements succeed is limited but suggests that social movements are effective when they i) cultivate awareness of structural inequities and the discourses which validate and perpetuate them; ii) organize participants with a diverse array of skills, abilities and perspectives around common grievances; and iii) mobilize available resources in disciplined strategies of political activism and civil resistance around clearly defined issues (Chenoweth 2021; Chenoweth, Hocking, and Marks 2022; McGee and Pettit 2019). Research into what makes social movements succeed around the specific goals of sustainable development is more limited still, highlights several distinctive features. These include the importance of bridging environmental and social justice concerns, building coalitions across traditional movement boundaries, and leveraging scientific knowledge alongside local and Indigenous ways of knowing (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Temper, Walter, et al. 2018). Ultimately, effective movements for sustainability combine what Sen (Sen 2013) termed "informed agitation"—activism grounded both in strategies of empowerment and in nuanced understanding of complex nature-society interactions.

3. **Building Capacity to Promote Equity: A brief review of practice**

The last century reflects a complex record of efforts to build more equitable distributions of wealth and well-being (Piketty 2020; Putnam 2020). Persistent colonial pillage on the international stage coexisted with progress in many countries to expand access to healthcare, public education, social protection programs, and increased union membership (Manjapra 2020; Milanovic 2016; Pierson and Lamont 2019). By the third quarter of the century, however, this increased capacity to promote equity began to be systematically dismantled by the expansion of neoliberalism and the resultant erosion of laws and regulations designed to protect the interests of the poor and the stability of the middle class (Cohen 2020; Pistor 2019; Stiglitz 2012). Today, growing awareness of the scope and consequences of inequality have led to renewed efforts to

foster more equitable distributions of wealth and well-being (Ahmed et al. 2022; Boushey, DeLong, and Steinbaum 2017), but also intense backlash against these efforts manifest in the consolidation of wealth and power among global oligarchs and the rise of authoritarian populism that often redirects economic grievances toward marginalized groups rather than addressing structural causes of inequality (Müller 2021; Snyder 2018).

Some strategies for promoting equity have been implemented from the top down, such as efforts by major institutional investors to re-imagine capitalism and shift the principles guiding private companies from maximizing shareholder value to a vision of corporate purpose that embraces a broader responsibility for both social and environmental impacts across their operational contexts (Fink 2022; Henderson 2020; Polman and Winston 2021). Similarly, government initiatives have increasingly adopted equity-centered approaches to public investment, such as the C40 Cities' Inclusive Climate Action program which requires member cities to ensure climate initiatives deliver tangible benefits to marginalized communities (C40 2019). Some national governments have also proposed progressive taxation and targeted spending to address economic disparities, exemplified by Chile's tax reform package designed to fund an ambitious social agenda aimed at reducing the country's steep inequality (López and Miller 2008; OECD 2022). International development institutions have likewise shifted toward equity-focused frameworks, with the World Bank adopting its "Shared Prosperity" goal that specifically tracks income growth of the bottom 40 percent in each country as a core metric of development progress (World Bank 2022a).

Other strategies have been bottom-up, most notably in a recent wave of social movements which together comprise what is perhaps the largest mass mobilization in history (Chenoweth 2021). Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, the Farmers' Protest in India, the LUCHA movement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, #MeToo, Occupy Wall Street, the Sunrise Movement, and the Yellow Vests in France are just a small fraction of the social movements which have burgeoned around the world over the past decade demanding greater equity both within and between generations (Miller-Dawkins 2019; Temper, Demaria, et al. 2018). Beyond public protest, other bottom-up approaches have gained traction, including cooperative movements and solidarity economic networks that create more equitable ownership structures through worker-owned enterprises and community land trusts (Preluca, Hakelius, and Mark-Herbert 2022; Schneider and and Saegert 2023). Indigenous-led land back movements

have reasserted territorial sovereignty and revitalized traditional governance systems that prioritize inter-generational equity and ecological stewardship (Lefthand-Begay et al. 2025). Labor organizing has also evolved to address new challenges, with innovative approaches to collective action emerging in historically marginalized sectors, such as domestic workers' alliances, app-based driver associations, and agricultural worker coalitions (Kochan et al. 2022). As part of this wave, an unprecedented mobilization of youth activists are advocating for the well-being of future generations (Knappe and Renn 2022). Young people in countries as diverse as Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Nigeria, Pakistan, Portugal, and the United States have brought innovative lawsuits against their own governments—arguing that governments have an inherent duty to protect natural resources on behalf of future citizens (Orangias 2021).

Despite these efforts, global inequality is on the rise by virtually every indicator (Chancel et al. 2021; Riddell et al. 2024). And today's world remains rife with incumbent actors seeking to undermine efforts to improve the well-being of poor and vulnerable communities today (Mtero, Gumede, and Ramantsima 2019) as well as efforts to pass onto future generations the necessary resources to pursue their own well-being (Middeldorp and Billon 2019; Stokes 2020).

4. **Emerging Lessons at the Interface of Practice and Scholarship**

While the past several decades have generated important insights into the dynamics of inequality and lessons strategies can help foster greater equity, we still know relatively little about how to build and maintain the capacity to promote equity in practice. As part of the C4SD research project, we are conducting interviews with practitioners and scholars at the forefront of ongoing efforts to promote both intra- and inter-generational equity to begin to distill and synthesize the lessons coming out of their work to date and point to directions forward for efforts to build and strengthen the capacity to promote equity. Here are five initial lessons that have emerged from this research so that we believe are important for building the capacity to promote equity (there are surely more):

1) **Empower local leadership**: Actors at the forefront of successful efforts to promote equity emphasize the importance of local leadership. The Poor People's Campaign, an NGO calling for a 'moral revival' to confront the interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, and ecological devastation attributes their effectiveness as well as the moral

force of their mission to the fact that the organization is led by people who are directly impacted by poverty and therefore have a deep understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by the poor. The Poor People's Campaign fosters local leadership by building their organization from the ground up through local chapters that are better positioned to address local needs while simultaneously contributing to a national social movement that has generated substantial policy impact.
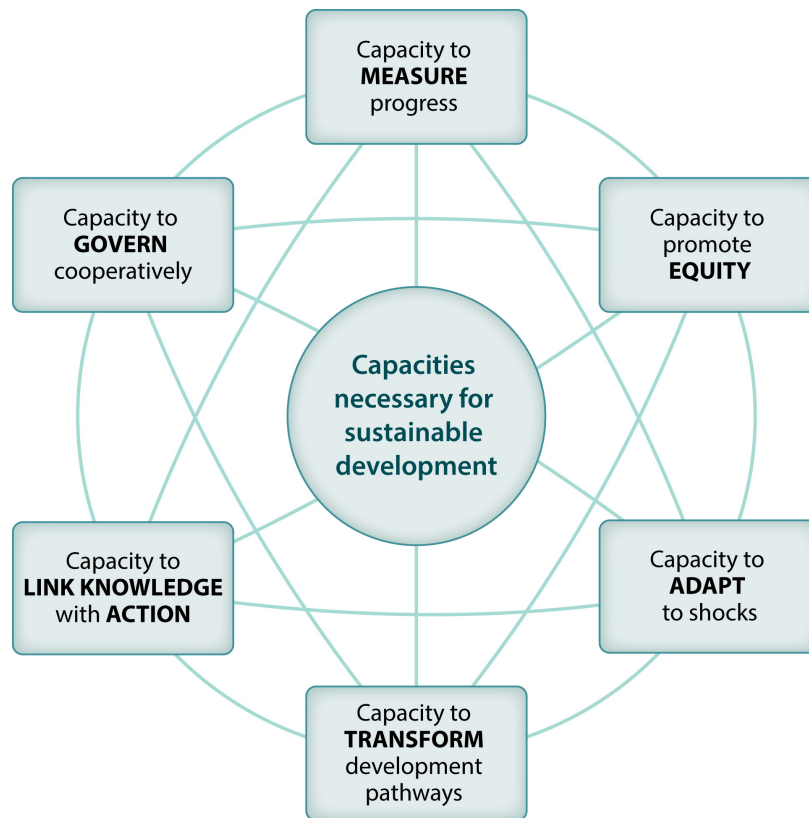
2) **Make equity an organizational priority**: A second lesson in building the capacity to promote equity is the importance of making equity a core organizational priority guiding both every day and strategic decision-making. Wegmans Food Markets, a privately held American supermarket chain with a strong track record in improving the well-being of both their employees and customers has made equity a cornerstone of their business strategy. From education scholarships for employees that have increased employee retention, to innovative nutrition programs that measurably improve the health of Wegman's customers, Wegmans' commitment to equity has helped the company retain a spot on Fortune Magazine's list of top 100 companies to work for every year for the past twenty-five years and to remain competitive in the American grocery industry that is increasingly dominated by larger chains. Similarly, Azura Group, a family-owned Moroccan fruit and vegetable exporter, centers their business strategy on respect for the environment and commitment to the well-being of their employees and the communities where their food is produced. Today, Azura Group markets 100% carbon neutral tomatoes to European customers while paying their employees 23% above the local living wage. This approach has made Aura Group an industry leader, attracting customers and distributors in Europe who appreciate the company's social and environmental commitments.

3) **Get the details right:** Successful efforts to promote equity emphasize the importance of getting the details right. Research and experience show that projects and programs designed to foster equity often fail to achieve their goals. The Graduation approach to poverty reduction, pioneered by BRAC in Bangladesh and later adapted by the Poverty Action Lab, demonstrates the importance of carefully calibrated design elements. Initial

randomized controlled trials found that simply providing assets to extremely poor households produced minimal lasting impact. However, when researchers refined the model to include complementary components—carefully sequenced transfers, skills training, coaching, healthcare access, and savings mechanisms—the program achieved remarkable results across contexts. A six-country study found that this attention to integrated design details led to sustained income increases of 30-40% for participants even after program support ended (Banerjee et al. 2015).

4) **Develop an equity measurement system:** Without a robust measurement system, efforts to promote equity are left without sufficient data to understand the characteristics of the populations they aim to support or whether interventions are improving equity outcomes. Successful efforts to promote equity begin with quality data and build measurement systems capable of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of both equity processes and outcomes. At its inception, Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL) marshaled as much data as possible to understand the landscape of energy insecurity globally as well as barriers to energy access for vulnerable communities. This analysis laid the foundation for leaders from government, the private sector, civil society, philanthropies and international organizations to identify areas ripe for collaboration and pursue the goal of access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all by 2030. Similarly, government statistical offices are increasingly recognizing the importance of developing equity measurements systems. The UKs Office of National Statistics found that their established capacity to conduct rapid well-being surveys during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic allowed them to quickly understand the ways in which the pandemic reinforced existing inequities and to identify ways to better support the country's most vulnerable citizens. Activists working to empower marginalize communities and fight the power of incumbent interests also emphasize the importance of measurement in efforts to promote equity. The Alliance for Appalachia, an American NGO, emphasizes the link between a transparent measurement system to track the harms done by the coal industry and the capacity of local environmental activists to hold coal companies accountable for their actions (Tarus, Hufford, and Taylor 2017).

5) **Re-orient institutions toward equity:** Finally, while individual actors can make important contributions to equity, without underlying institutional change equity-enhancing interventions often fail to sustain or reach widespread use. This means that innovative programs, policies, and technologies with demonstrated ability to promote equity must then be institutionalized through changes in laws, rights, and regulations. Costa Rica's transformation of its electricity sector illustrates how institutional reorientation can drive lasting equity gains. By embedding principles of universal access and environmental sustainability into its electricity utility during the 1950s, Costa Rica achieved near-universal electricity coverage (99.5%) while generating over 98% of its electricity from renewable sources. Unlike privatization approaches in neighboring countries that often left rural and poor communities behind, Costa Rica's institutionalized commitment to equity ensured that even remote communities received service, while keeping electricity affordable through cross-subsidization mechanisms (Godínez-Zamora et al. 2020; ISF 2020).

Our intention is that the seminar series for which this working paper provides a foundation will provide further opportunity to refine (or refute) these lessons as well as to add new lessons we have not yet included.

Figure 1: An integrated perspective on capacities for sustainable development. Six interdependent capacities are necessary for the successful pursuit of sustainability: (a) capacity to measure progress toward sustainable development, (b) capacity to promote equity within and between generations, (c) capacity to adapt to shocks and surprises, (d) capacity to transform the system onto more sustainable development pathways, (e) capacity to link knowledge with action for sustainability, and (f) capacity to devise governance arrangements that allow people to work together in exercising the other capacities. Source: (Clark and Harley 2020)

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