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Toward a More Equitable Use of Resources

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“Equitable” means “dealing fairly and equally with all concerned” [1]. The concerned parties are all current and future stakeholders related to natural resources use, which means not only those directly involved in breeding, harvesting or extractive activities, but every human on Earth, as the ways natural resources are used have far reaching implications on biodiversity, climate, environmental and human health, and from there on the world’s future. It also implicitly means that there is a return, a benefit, to share. Further to the impetus of globalisation, resource use activities are no longer limited to the sole satisfaction of the needs of local communities. They are the initial stage of industrial activities that can be located thousands of kilometres away from the site where the resources were harvested or extracted. Using natural capital to turn it into other forms of capital, such as built, social or financial capital can provide benefits that last for generations, well beyond the end of the actual resource using activity. It can also generate negative legacies that can have negative impacts for centuries. How these benefits and negative impacts are distributed is central to equity.

Industrial-scale resource use activities in agriculture, cattle rearing, forestry, water supply or mining, involve a wide range of stakeholders. Each one has specific, more often than not conflicting interests in the way the resource is used and the returns or services expected from the resource use. These stakeholders can comprise companies, their suppliers and the downstream supply chains depending on their products and/or services, the consumers that will purchase the goods and services derived from the use of these resources, employees, unions, the local communities impacted by the activities, authorities, media, academia and research, international organisation, banks and insurance companies, NGOs. Nature, the silent stakeholder, is frequently forgotten here, while it provides the resources at the heart of most economic activities as well as essential life-supporting services. Without a healthy, well-functioning ecosystem at global and local scale lasting wealth generation is impossible. There is a nexus of natural resources, whereby the availability and quality of one resource, for instance water, has an impact on the availability of another one, for instance minerals and metals.

The world faces severe resources constraints due to demographic growth, urbanisation and the development of a large global middle-class (+3 bn people between 2009-2030 [2] with resource-intensive lifestyles. Unsustainable resources use practices are widespread. This makes absolute decoupling [3] between growth, which is needed to foster social well-being, and the diverse negative impacts of growth an absolute must. In such a context humanity needs to re-think the way it uses natural resources and how the benefits are shared from an intra- and intergenerational perspective. Based on the work of the UNEP International Resource Panel the issues and the way forward will be outlined, with a special focus on mineral resources, governance issues and developing countries.

References:

[1] Webster dictionary, online edition (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equitable>) searched on 03/05/2016

[2] Brandt C. and Büge M. (2014) Deutsches Entwicklungsinstitut Discussion Paper 35/2014

[3] UNEP (2011) - Decoupling natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic growth- International Resource Panel report