

# **Future Earth (Earth System Sustainability Initiative)**

## **Summary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Transition Team meeting**

San Francisco

9-11 December 2011

The Transition Team<sup>1</sup> of the Earth System Sustainability Initiative<sup>2</sup> met for the second time in San Francisco on 9-11 December 2011 to advance the Initiative design, expected to be completed by the end of 2012 after an 18-month transition. Established by a broad Alliance of partners, the Initiative will mobilize in an unprecedented way efforts in coordinating and focusing research to develop knowledge for responding effectively to the risks and opportunities of global environmental change. The Alliance, founded by the International Council for Science (ICSU), the International Social Science Council (ISSC), and the Belmont Forum of funding agencies, has now broadened to include UNESCO, UNEP and UNU; WMO is an observer.

The meeting mainly discussed overall framework, research strategy, institutional design and communication strategy for the Initiative<sup>3</sup>, and also addressed data and education, through participation of invited experts<sup>4</sup> engaged in the design. The institutional design discussion was also informed by a facilitated one-day brainstorming meeting, attended by several Transition Team members and by a broader set of global environmental change research players<sup>5</sup>.

This note summarizes the main outcomes of the second Transition Team meeting.

### **Future Earth is born**

The Team agreed, with the endorsement of the Alliance, that the Initiative will be called: “Future Earth – Research for global sustainability”. “Future Earth” replaces the working title “Earth System Sustainability Initiative”.

### **Towards the development of a framework for Future Earth**

The Team discussed a conceptual framework for Future Earth, focused on global environmental change research, capitalizing on the Visioning and Belmont challenges, and linking to human development agendas and decision makers concerns, such as food, water, energy. Future Earth research will highlight transformation as key to realize a sustainable

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<sup>1</sup> The full membership of the Transition Team is available at: <http://www.icsu.org/future-earth/transition-team>.

<sup>2</sup> The Initiative arises from the convergence of the two-year Earth System Visioning consultation, originating the [Grand Challenges](#), with the Belmont Forum effort to deliver knowledge to support human action and adaptation to regional environmental change, described by the [Belmont challenge](#).

<sup>3</sup> Three working groups, populated by Team members, are carrying the design forward: research strategy; institutional design; education/interaction with stakeholders/communication. See: <http://www.icsu.org/future-earth/transition-team/working-group>.

<sup>4</sup> Roberta Balstad (data) and Roberta Johnson (education).

<sup>5</sup> The brainstorming meeting, which took place on 8 December, was facilitated by Sara Farley and Amanda Rose (Global Knowledge Initiative). Besides Transition Team members, meeting participants mainly comprised members of the Earth System Science Partnership (ESSP) Scientific Committee.

future, by understanding environmental change: its driving forces, the responses to those forces and its impacts on human well-being. Structurally, Future Earth will represent one overarching framework, with a set of integrated grand themes, addressed through transdisciplinary approaches, and relying on disciplinary strengths.

To present those elements to the broad community, starting with the Planet Under Pressure conference<sup>6</sup> (March 2012) and the Science and Technology Forum<sup>7</sup> associated with Rio+20 (June 2012), the Team decided to:

- Draft a short vision statement, with compelling 10-year outcomes for Future Earth
- Share a framework paper, describing ambition, goals, boundaries, as well as an overall conceptual framework for the Initiative, discussed at the meeting, as a working document for the transition
- Advance the research strategy, with a set of overarching grand themes/questions that relate to the framework, and the institutional design, with key elements and options identified for Future Earth governance.

## **Strengthening the design**

The Team and the Alliance highlighted the importance of strengthening the transition by:

- Sharing externally a more articulate roadmap with clear milestones
- Formulating a comprehensive communications strategy.

## **A funding opportunity**

At the meeting, representatives from the Belmont Forum, that in 2012 will be releasing some new opportunities for funding research, also expressed an interest in contributing to the core funding that will support the integrated secretariat for Future Earth, based on an open and competitive process for the secretariat. The upcoming 5<sup>th</sup> Belmont Forum meeting (January 2012) will represent an excellent opportunity to start a dialogue on this matter with the members of the Belmont Forum.

## **Enhanced engagement with Global Environmental Change Programmes**

To ensure effective co-operation with key players in the global environmental change landscape, the Alliance agreed to invite one representative from each of the existing GEC programmes<sup>8</sup> to join the Transition Team as observer. Such experience and expertise in coordination and planning of international research will be instrumental towards the achievement of a joint, ambitious goal, the design of Future Earth. Programmes had already

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<sup>6</sup> A major international conference focusing on solutions to the global sustainability challenge. See: <http://www.planetunderpressure2012.net/>

<sup>7</sup> The Forum, organized by ICSU and a number of international partners, will provide a space for interdisciplinary scientific discussions, and dialogue between scientists, policy-makers, Major Groups and other stakeholders. The Forum will be held on 10-15 June 2012, prior to the Rio+20 meeting of 20-22 June 2012. Please see <http://www.icsu.org/rio20/science-and-technology-forum>.

<sup>8</sup> Four major global environmental change programmes, all (co)sponsored by ICSU, operate in the planning and coordination of international global environmental change research: DIVERSITAS: An International Programme on Biodiversity Science; International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP); International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP); World Climate Research Programme (WCRP).

given constructive inputs to the process and three of them (DIVERSITAS, IGBP and IHDP) have in principle indicated their willingness to integrate into a new single organization, if a well-planned transition is ensured to allow a new common identity to evolve among the entire community. In such case, the fourth programme (WCRP) would be an independent partner by supporting Future Earth strategically and intellectually, and contributing toward its implementation by mobilizing its community of experts to participate actively in the Initiative.

## **Strong support and strategic guidance from the Alliance**

Representatives of the Alliance, who also belong to the Transition Team in their ex-officio capacity, physically met for the first time on December 10<sup>th</sup>. They strongly encouraged the Team to capitalize on its momentum to develop an innovative, flexible framework that leverages the capabilities and assets of the Alliance partners and their associated communities. Among a number of priorities, the Alliance emphasised the need to enhance the engagement of stakeholders; enhance the engagement of the global South; develop within Future Earth a user-interface platform, capitalising on emerging IT capability. The Alliance will continue to provide strategic guidance and recommendations to the Team throughout the transition phase.

## **Next steps**

The next steps agreed by the Team and the Alliance to move the process forward include:

- inviting one representative from each of the GEC Programmes to join the transition work as observer/expert
- starting a dialogue with Belmont Forum members at their upcoming 5<sup>th</sup> meeting (January 2012) on the process to support a new integrated secretariat for Future Earth
- sending a communication on behalf of the Transition Team to all projects within the global environmental change landscape to highlight the opportunities arising from the new Initiative (January 2012)
- publishing a roadmap towards the establishment of Future Earth (February 2012)
- presenting a conceptual framework and a draft vision statement for Future Earth at the Planet Under Pressure conference (March 2012) to engage the broader community
- presenting Future Earth at the “Rio+20” UN Conference on Sustainable Development (June 2012), as part of the proposal of a mechanism for international scientific cooperation and internationally coordinated research on major sustainable development challenges
- having regular teleconferences of the Alliance partners until the end of the transition phase (these meetings will be organized in connection with the Executive Group<sup>9</sup> meetings)

The third Transition Team meeting will be on 30-31 March in London. For up-to-date information on the transition to Future Earth, please refer to the website:

<http://www.icsu.org/future-earth/>.

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<sup>9</sup> The Executive Group is a subset of the Transition Team meeting regularly to oversee the design on behalf of the Team. Please see: <http://www.icsu.org/future-earth/transition-team>.