Community Dialogues

Empowered lives. Resilient nations.
In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the Equator Initiative launched its first community dialogue, the Community Kraal. The success of the Community Kraal inspired a further thirteen community dialogues over the following decade that have celebrated grassroots efforts in conserving biodiversity, improving local livelihoods and wellbeing, and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. During this time, more than 500 community members have participated in these forums, forging partnerships between their organizations and linking local leaders with policy makers at the international level.

Who participates?
- Equator Prize winners from around the world;
- Representatives from the Equator Initiative’s fourteen partner organizations;
- The Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme;
- United Nations and UNDP representatives, UN Goodwill Ambassadors;
- Civil society and indigenous peoples’ organizations, and members of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; and
- Media representatives.

In addition, conference participants, including government and international organization representatives, visit the community dialogue space informally or to participate in organized panel discussions and exchanges.

What are community dialogues?
- Originally designed as a response to the lack of representation of local and indigenous groups at international forums, community dialogues strategically position local and indigenous voices in national and international policy processes.
- Community dialogues are a place for representatives of Equator Prize winning communities and other local and indigenous representatives to share their experiences and practices with each other.
- They are an opportunity for participants to develop capacity in specific areas related to sustainable development and environment through targeted workshops and trainings.
- The broad objectives of the community dialogues are:
  - To highlight the importance of community work in achieving global poverty reduction objectives such as the MDGs;
  - To recognize and celebrate the winners’ achievements; and
  - To provide a forum through which community representatives can interface directly with global and national policy makers.

Where do they take place?
- Community dialogues are held at international UN or civil society conferences. This creates an opportunity for participants to attend large scale international policy forums, often for the first time, gain access to policy makers, participate in meetings organized by other civil society groups, and share their experiences and practices with a diverse audience.
- Fourteen community dialogues have taken place around the world. Six of these have taken place alongside international Equator Prize award ceremonies, while others have been held to coincide with the World Conservation Congress, Conferences of the Parties to the CBD, UN summits, and the World Parks Congress.
- Community dialogues are located in strategic positions at conference venues, maximizing the flow of delegates and community representatives between the civil society and governmental spaces. At the Community Poble (2008), for instance, the World Conservation Congress organizers granted the Equator Initiative a space inside the official conference venue, allowing for an easy flow of conference participants to the community dialogue and vice versa.

Who supports community dialogues?
Community dialogues are often developed on a limited budget. Financial contributions are made by Equator Initiative partners, UNDP, and the GEF Small Grants Programme to fund the participation of the prize winners, the facilitation team, interpretation, and the space.
EQUATOR DIALOGUES
2002–2012
Community Dialogues and their corresponding international conferences

Community Commons
UN Millennium Review Summit, New York, 2005

Five representatives of the Community Commons were selected to participate in the UN Civil Society Hearings at the Millennium Review Summit 2005. Key messages from the Commons community declaration were included in the outcome document of the Millennium Review Summit, which called on states to recognize ‘that the sustainable development of indigenous peoples and their communities is crucial in our fight against hunger and poverty.’

Community Dorf
UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Conference of the Parties (COP) 9, Bonn, Germany, 2008

For the first time, an indigenous Equator Prize winner was invited to deliver a statement during the session that closed the conference. Juan Chávez Muñoz was elected by the Community Dorf participants to represent them on the High-Level Panel Discussion on Biodiversity for Development and Poverty Alleviation. Juan Chávez was joined on the panel by representatives from the CBD, GEF, and GTZ, as well as the President of Palau, French Ambassador for the Environment, and the Ministers of Environment from Tanzania and Madagascar.

Community Summit
Millennium Review Summit and 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2010

All Equator Prize 2010 winners attended the UN General Assembly Special Session on Biodiversity, with several representatives invited to join their countries’ official delegations. The Equator Initiative also secured an official seat for an Equator Prize winner to deliver an intervention on behalf of civil society organizations. Elected by the prize winning communities to represent them, Nnaemeka Ikegwuonu of the Smallholders Foundation, Nigeria, stressed that ‘our work can be supported and replicated by scaling-up initiatives such as the GEF Small Grants Programme and the Equator Initiative.’

Community Vilaj
UN International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action (BPoA) for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Port Louis, Mauritius, 2005

During the Community Vilaj, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited the dialogue space and engaged in a question and answer session with community participants.

Community Kraal
World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002

The first community dialogue set the benchmark for bringing community voices to the global level. The dialogue space was housed within the “Ubuntu Village” and won the award for “Best Conference Facility” from the conference organizers.

Community Commons
UN Millennium Review Summit, New York, 2005
A community dialogue runs the length of the international conference, ranging from one to two weeks. The days are structured to allow time for:

i) Community presentations: community participants present their work to the group through interactive media and visual aids;

ii) Invited representatives from the United Nations, civil society, and private sector to present their work or programmes, provide trainings on a topic of relevance, or lead a workshop on particular methodologies;

iii) Drafting the community statement or declaration: a document is prepared by the group outlining key issues that have been discussed, their policy implications and recommendations for ways forward;

iv) Press conferences; and

v) A Local-Global Leaders dialogue: an informal exchange between community participants and national and international policy makers.

The dialogues are led by a team of facilitators. One of the key roles of the team is to foster an atmosphere of trust, open dialogue, and mutual support among the participants. The facilitation team also benefits from the participation of previous Equator Prize winners, who play a mentoring role during the meeting. They share their experiences and offer helpful tips on how to benefit from the prestige of the prize and the connections made at the dialogue once the community members return home.

Simultaneous interpretation is available into English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

A “Community Declaration” or statement is drafted and agreed upon by the entire group. It highlights issues of concern to local communities and indigenous peoples, and includes policy and programme recommendations.

The statement is presented at a high-level session of the corresponding international conference or at an Equator Prize awards ceremony where representatives of governments, UN agencies, international CSOs, foundations, and the private sector are in attendance.

The statements have also informed UN processes, such as the outcome document of the 2005 Millennium Review Summit.

The Equator initiative community-dialogue model has been adopted by the UN Red Ribbon Award, which recognizes and advances the work of local practitioners in confronting the global HIV/AIDS challenge. Since 2006, seven dialogues have been held in Canada, Sri Lanka, Russia, Mexico, Indonesia, Austria, and Ethiopia, bringing together international leaders and local pioneers. In 2008, at the Community Tequio, held in Mexico City during the XVIIIth International AIDS Conference, winners of the 2008 Red Ribbon Award met UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. He told dialogue participants “I am here to thank you for the role you play in keeping the UN, governments, and other civil society groups accountable to the communities they serve.”

What are some of the community dialogues’ key results over the last ten years?

Learning Exchanges At the Community Vilaj (2005), funds were allocated to support four learning exchanges for local communities in Small Island Developing States. These exchanges aimed to share know-how and experience took place between communities from Jamaica and Trinidad; Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands; Saint Lucia and Samoa; and Seychelles and the Cook Islands.

Local-Global Linkages Community representatives have made personal connections with members of their countries’ official delegations to UN conferences. During the Community Dorf (2006), Woulimata Thiao, representing the Equator Prize 2006 finalist COPRONAT, and Donato Bumacas, of the Equator Prize 2004 finalist KAMYCIDI, were invited to become members of the official delegations of Senegal and the Philippines, respectively at the CBD COP 9.

Network Development A network on traditional medicine practices was established by representatives from Indian Equator Prize winners, led by the Medicinal Plants Conservation Centre from Maharashtra State and joined by partners from the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions. The idea for the network emerged during the Community Dorf (2006), where like-minded Indian medicinal plants initiatives committed to network development at the national level.

Media Coverage Exposure to the media through participation at formal press conferences and meetings with journalists during the community dialogues has helped to raise awareness of the value and achievements of community work, and has brought individual stories to the attention of global audience.
The Equator Initiative enters its second decade with a renewed mandate to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature and resilient communities. Equator Prize eligibility has expanded to include broader thematic and geographical focuses. Ten years on from the Community Kraal, the community dialogues model has also evolved to reflect these new themes and to capitalize on the knowledge and expertise of the 152 winners of the Equator Prize.

At future dialogues, attention will be given to:

- closer collaboration with the GEF Small Grants programme in skills training, such as participatory video training;
- funding opportunities for learning exchanges;
- increased reporting by engaging more media representatives;
- participation of international development NGOs on panels to reflect the Equator Initiative’s expanded mandate;
- increased participation of previous winners as trainers and facilitators; and
- knowledge products from community representatives, such as case studies and photo stories.

Future dialogues will also bring together community representatives along thematic or regional lines, increasing the potential for direct collaboration and network development. Countries with high concentrations of Equator Prize winners, such as Kenya, India, and Brazil, present an opportunity for national dialogues. These different forums will continue to share the same purpose, however: ensuring that local voices and interests are at the forefront of sustainable development policy concerns around the world.