

Equitable Futures: from Foresight to Insight to Action

A memo from a week of globally distributed
social reimagining

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Equitable Futures Lab at IFTF

In this time of unprecedented economic inequality, persistent racial disadvantage, disintegrating social safety net, and deteriorating job quality, IFTF's Equitable Futures Lab combines expertise in social science, quantitative research, policy analysis, and public engagement with proven foresight methodologies to develop and prototype innovative solutions for an equitable future.

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To overcome poverty,
we have to free our mind,
imagine what has never happened before,
and write social fiction.

We need to imagine things to make them happen.
If you don't imagine, it will never happen.”

— MUHAMMAD YUNUS

Welcome to a More Equitable Future

A more equitable future begins with more equitable participation in imagining the future. To engage people worldwide in imagining equitable futures, IFTF's Equitable Futures Lab, with support from the Blue Shield of California Foundation, launched its first Equitable Futures Week, April 1–7, 2019. The goal of the week was to introduce an Equitable Futures Toolkit to groups around the world and pilot a process for seeding a global participatory network of on-the-ground activists committed to tackling the super-wicked problem of global inequality.

The first Equitable Futures Week also introduced a cohort of six IFTF Future for Good Fellows. This cohort was chosen for the fellows' focus on various aspects of equity, from designing an ecosystem of financial institutions that are aligned in the public interest to helping young people, immigrants, and others who are marginalized to participate more fully in democracy.

This memo is an introduction to these fellows, to the toolkit, and most importantly to the groups that launched their own equitable futures conversations in multiple locations around the world.



The Future for Good Fellows

Any plan to create more equitable futures through social reimagining must connect the dots between the inspirational visions that emerge from systematic explorations of the future and on-the-ground organizing capacity. At IFTF, the Future for Good Fellows connect these dots. They are people who have an instinct for visioning but also have real skills for inspiring others and making things happen in the real world. In 2018, IFTF selected its sixth cohort of Fellows to focus specifically on equitable futures—and to amplify their collective imaginations about equitable futures across their networks. These fellows provided the inspiration for Equitable Futures Week. Here, then, is a quick introduction to the equitable futures cohort and their visions and strategies for creating a more equitable future:

KENNETH BAILEY

A movement of smaller is better, robust is better...



Bailey is the co-founder of the Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si). His interests focus on the research and development of design tools for marginalized communities to address complex social issues.

With over three decades of experience in community practice, Bailey brings a unique perspective on the ethics of design in relation to community engagement, the arts, and cultural action..

HODARI B. DAVIS

More women making leadership decisions...



Davis is the Artistic Director of the award-winning youth performance ensemble Young Gifted and Black and a senior partner at Edutainment for Equity. Davis served as the National Program Director for Youth Speaks for over

11 years, including as the Executive Producer and Key Organizer of the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Festival and Network. He was also the executive producer and creative director of the Life is Living campaign and the Bigger Picture Project.

BEN GANSKY

A different kind of culture, a different outlook on the relationship between technology and society, between the very wealthy and those who are without wealth...



Gansky is the executive director of Free Machine, a nonprofit incubator for public policy and creative programs shaping a high-tech future that is equitable, sustainable, and abundant.

Drawing on his background in community organizing, game design, theater, critical theory, and media production, Gansky conceives, designs, and operates projects and programs that vivify the intersection of emerging technologies, progressive politics, and culture.

“

It takes people all over the world to envision a better future.”

— HODARI B. DAVIS

EMMA GUTTMAN-SLATER

An ecosystem of financial institutions that are aligned in the public interest... so that we have the general public really holding our financial systems accountable...



Guttman-Slater is a financial justice advocate who has worked across the U.S. for nonprofits advancing economic and racial equity. As Beneficial State Foundation's strategic communications director,

Guttman-Slater established a new core department that runs advocacy initiatives to promote banking systems change. A convener and organizer, she is currently deeply involved in CreativeMornings Oakland, coalition-building around divestment/investment, and political work through Bend the Arc.

ALICIA OLIVAREZ

Young people, immigrants, folks who are marginalized can more fully participate in democracy...



Olivarez is a sister, daughter, movement-builder and strategist based in Fresno, CA. Her experiences as a first-generation, working class Xicana have been her motivation to serve communities of color fighting for

liberation. Olivarez brings 10 years of experience in program development, organizing, and collaboration management. In her day job as the strategy director of 99Rootz, a youth organizing hub in the Central Valley, she works to create leadership pathways and opportunities for young people to step into their power across the Central Valley. In her free time, Olivarez co-manages an arts and culture space, Fres/co, in Fresno that centers people of color and working class narratives and art.

RACHEL WEIDINGER

Organize. Get secure. Build places of refuge. And do not slip into depression. Never work alone.



Weidinger is an artist, researcher, and organizer. She labors to illustrate what is possible, and to build equitable uses of power. In 2011, Rachel founded Upwell. The ocean was her client. She led the development of Big Listening

practices, coupled with campaigning across a distributed network of influencers. The project aggregated power for movements and immediately redistributed that power through networks. Upwell's work was grounded in both offline community organizing and online community management.

As Olivarez said about her experience in the equitable futures cohort, "Being a part of a cohort of folks who actually just focused entirely on possibility, entirely focused on hope and what's possible, that's important." Gansky emphasized the importance of collective social reimagining when he said, "The power that comes from thinking about the future and having conversations about the future really comes down to: Do you digest the existing narratives out there or do you want to make some of your own?"

And finally, Davis issued what amounts to a call to action: "It takes people all over the world to envision a better future." And that was the strategy of Equitable Futures Week—to seed nodes of a network where people can come together to envision a more equitable future.

Local Nodes in a Global Network

Equitable Futures Week was a call to build local “nodes” in a global action network—to develop local images of a more equitable future, creating the building blocks that can lead to real change. Around the world, social inventors responded by launching equitable futures nodes: conversations that explored local possibilities using face-to-face encounters and social media to create a network of equitable futures visionaries and activists. Here’s a quick peek at some of the nodes that self-organized to answer the call:

ACCENTURE LABS

Vision of an equitable future: The EU required all companies involved in food production, distribution, and retail to become benefit corporations by 2030.

San Francisco, California, United States:

Accenture Labs takes on applied research and development projects so that their clients across different industries can leverage innovations to improve their business across the world. Bill Lesieur—who leads Accenture Lab’s Shaping the Future program—organized a brainstorming session and happy hour with his colleagues using the Equitable Futures Card Game (described below) and then turned the best ideas into headlines from the future, including: “Accenture partners with Netflix to make political crimes extinct.”

ATL SPECULATIVE FUTURES

Topics of greatest concern: Violence, destitution, hunger, deceit, and irrelevance

Vision of an equitable future: Pathways toward more fair, just, and equitable societies in the unique context of Atlanta, a city with some of the most significant income inequality in the nation.

Atlanta, Georgia, United States: The Equitable Futures Week in Atlanta brought together 13 individuals at an Equitable Futures Workshop, using the Meetup platform to attract people interested in using the Equitable Futures Toolkit to develop social fictions and explore “how creating a futures literate society might lead to more equitable futures.” In particular, the conversation focused on ways that imagining the future might help overcome “undesirable presents” in Atlanta.

BIG OAKLAND

Topic of greatest concern: Net zero income growth for Black Americans in 2030?

Vision of an equitable future: Socioeconomic disparity no more. America’s middle class is the largest, wealthiest, and most diverse in history.

Oakland, California, United States:

BIG Oakland is a special kind of co-working space for small companies in the architecture, engineering, and construction industries. By banding together, these small businesses can get the benefits that large firms enjoy. In addition, BIG Oakland aspires to be a center for innovation and collaboration in the AEC industry.

CENTRO DE IMAGINACIÓN OAXACA

Topics of greatest concern: Quality humanistic educational system, traffic jams, women’s safety

Vision of an equitable future: A collective mechanism of communication and participation that goes beyond the structures proposed by governments, occasioning a major tone-shift that focuses on cutting the forces that drive human underdevelopment.

Oaxaca, Mexico: The Centro de Imagenación Oaxaca is a creative laboratory that uses a collaborative approach to train people with digital, entrepreneurial skills to develop projects that positively impact the world, and always in favor of those who need it most. The center seeks to imagine creative ways to deal with the problems of contemporary reality, creating dialogue and interventions to build futures they imagine for Oaxaca, while connecting with those who have the capabilities, interests, networks, and resources to apply that imagination.

COOK ALLIANCE

Topics of greatest concern: Future of food and gig work

Vision of an equitable future: Home cooks across the United States will again be able to legally and safely sell meals to their neighbors. Neighborhood food sharing can also help us rebuild networks of local relationships, mutual understanding, and non-financial support.

Oakland, California, United States: The COOK (Creating Opportunities, Opening Kitchens) Alliance describes itself as the leading voice for home cooking, working to give home cooks the economic opportunity, power, and agency to pursue dignified work from their homes. With a focus on cook support, policy leadership, and labor organizing, the Alliance has recently created a new permit for Microenterprise Home Kitchens, making California the first U.S. state where home cooks can sell all types of prepared foods to the public.

ESTRATEK

Topics of greatest concern: Education, women's role, work, and entrepreneurship

Vision of an equitable future: A more equitable future will be a place where people can reinvent themselves and improve their skills to adapt to new work conditions...Overall, the most important thing for the equitable future will be that society will create jobs to work on our Sustainable Development Goals. For example, the number of start-ups focused on resolving problems like water scarcity, energy supply, or food waste will increase, and through them, people will increase their willingness to contribute to the construction of a more sustainable world.

Medellin, Antioquia, Colombia: Estrategik is a company that sees itself as a "startup service," helping corporations create internal startups by overcoming their own corporate rules, restrictions, and paradigms. The company uses a combination of design thinking, lean startup practices, and scaling strategies to build internal entrepreneurship that is "less corporate, more collaborative."

SUDANESE EQUITABLE FUTURES NETWORK

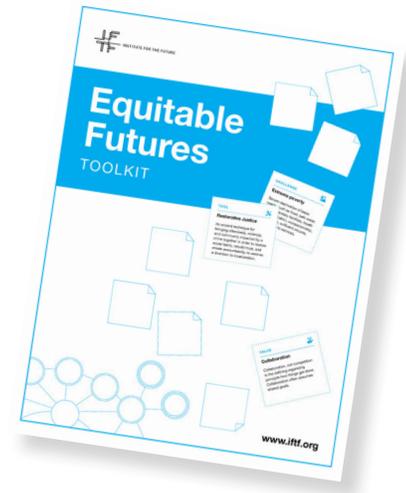
Topics of greatest concern: Freedom, peace, and justice

Vision of an equitable future: An equitable future will be a nomad girl who stays in school and scores first place in the national university entrance exam. A young man from Dafu recalls his childhood in Kalma camp as he stands in front of a monument commemorating lives lost in the 16 years of civil war. A woman in the Nuba Mountains is no longer "a water tap, a tractor, or a mill."

Sudan: The Sudanese Equitable Futures Network is a digital grassroots community that is actively engaged in current civil society protests that have been happening since December. Their mission is to change the national government. Gada Kadoda, the network organizer, used Facebook to ask people to develop headlines from 2030 that explore what an equitable Sudan could look like. Later in the week, she included a follow-up post asking people to explore what actions they are willing to take today to move Sudan toward that equitable future.

The Equitable Futures Toolkit

The future isn't preordained. It's what we humans together make it. But we need skills, commitment, and cooperation to make the futures we want. The Equitable Futures Toolkit is designed to help us build those skills, commitments, and cooperative opportunities. The Equitable Futures Toolkit is a set of tools, processes, and facilitation guidelines that build on 50 years of foresight practice at Institute for the Future. It lays out two paths for groups who want to quickly launch important conversations about equitable futures:



PATH 1: IFTF FORESIGHT TRAINING

Take this path if:

You have a group of people with a well-defined mission and are comfortable with creative approaches to discovery, complexity, uncertainty, focused work, and cause-and-effect details.

Output:

A map of the long-term implications of a specific strategy and a headline story of what the future world will look like if your strategy is successful at creating a more equitable future.

The first path uses four tools from IFTF's flagship foresight training toolkit. They can guide groups through the following steps:

1. Look Back to Look Forward:

This tool helps groups map moments from the past that have created positive change toward equity. Use this tool to create a sense that radical change has happened in the past and can happen in the future.

2. Pull of the Future:

This tool is based on the Futures Triangle, developed by Sohail Inayatullah, and can help develop a more nuanced understanding of the forces from the past, present, and future that are either helping or hindering our transformation toward a more equitable world.

3. Draw Out Consequences:

This tool uses the Futures Wheel, designed by Jerome C. Glenn, as a non-linear template for identifying first, second, and third order consequences of new decisions and actions to build a complex map of a possible future.

4. Headline the Future:

This tool can bring your vision of the future to life by distilling complexity into crisp, evocative, shareable messages in a familiar news article style.

Futures thinking isn't simply imagining new possibilities. To build a more equitable future, we have to create bold, provocative, and pragmatic images and then commit to action. The final step on Path 1 is to commit to action with a personal letter of commitment.

PATH 2: THE EQUITABLE FUTURES CARD GAME

Take this path if:

You have a group that doesn't have a common mission or language for talking about the future but is open to a fun, creative, exploratory, and even competitive process to build more equitable futures.

Output:

Many different social fictions—stories about the future—in the form of ideas for new products, services, or systems that could build a more equitable society.

The **Equitable Futures Card Game** is a fast and fun way to get a group to confront challenges to equitable futures and invent solutions. The game uses four different kinds of cards:

Persona cards give players a chance to think about the future from the perspective of different personas: CEOs or farmers, artists or legislators. You can also add your own personas.

Value cards identify organizing principles for society that often determine the direction solutions will take. They can include everything from accountability to love—and any specific value your group might want to explore.

Challenge cards define a set of challenges to equitable futures—for example, political corruption, the digital divide, health disparities, and hunger, among others. Again, the group can add challenges.

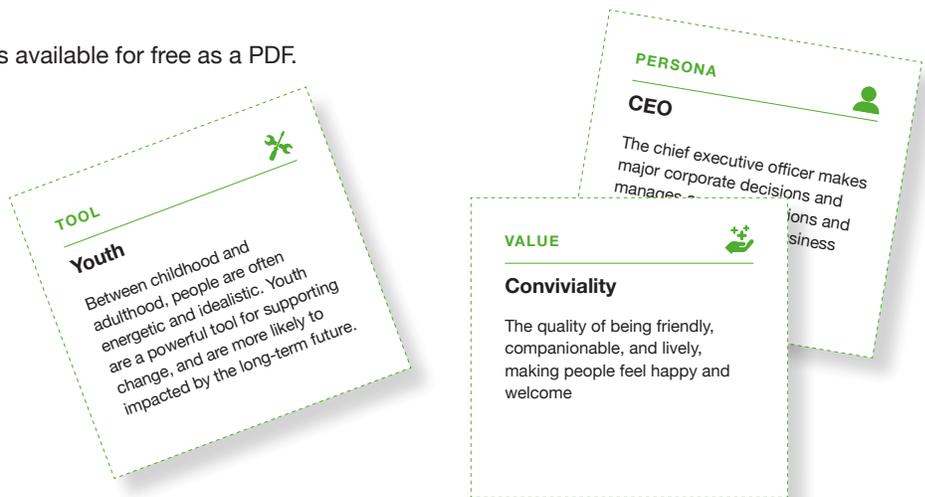
Tool cards are social and technological resources that might be used to address the challenge. They can vary from technologies like robots to business models like cooperatives.

The **Persona cards are dealt first** so each player can have a role. Then the players lay down a sequence of Challenge, Value, and Tool cards to create a prompt that will read like this:

“By 2030, we'll have built a more equitable world by overcoming _____ (**challenge**). Society will be organized around _____ (**value**), and _____ (**tool**) will be a commonplace tool used to combat or control _____ (**original challenge card**).”

Building from this prompt, each player draws on the perspective of their persona to imagine a solution. The dealer chooses their favorite solution, and the author of that winning solution becomes the dealer of the next round. The result is a lively discussion of actionable solutions to the problems of inequality.

The complete **Equitable Futures Toolkit** is available for free as a PDF.



Reflections on Building an Equitable Futures Network

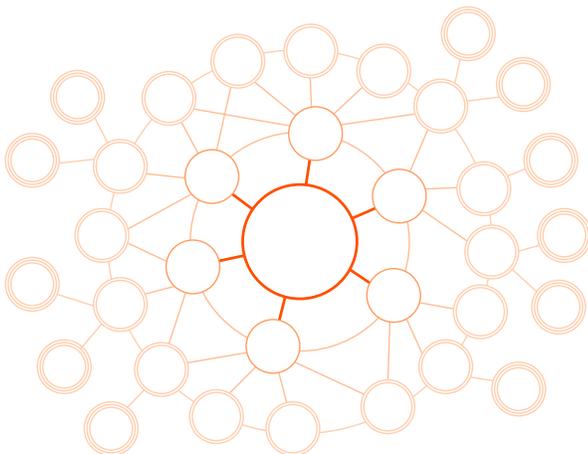
One thing is clear: having a chance to think systematically about possible futures for your community, especially when guided by expert facilitators, is invigorating, inspiring, and motivating for changemakers. The events of Equitable Futures Week, alongside decades of collective experience, suggest that such gatherings can provide momentum for big shifts. People want a space to imagine, to play with possibilities, and to do so in a community. Participatory futures workshops are a communal experience, and the process, regardless of immediate outcome, can provide fuel for the rest of what changemakers take on daily. People who have the chance to spend a day imagining different futures find the experience provocative, challenging, and creative. It often leads to personal insights about new ways to do things in order to continue fighting for a more equitable future.

FROM FORESIGHT TO ACTION: A LONGER EXPERIMENT

The question is:

How do we build on this momentum to create a long-term distributed network of on-the-ground change agents working to create more equitable futures—changemakers who can turn foresight into action?

At least part of the answer to this question is continuity of engagement. If there is a chance to bring communities together over an extended period of time—perhaps multiple days, possibly spread over a period of six months to a year—new partnerships, friendships, and even social enterprises or community initiatives are likely to emerge. A distributed equitable futures network of foresight-oriented changemakers calls for sustained communication, inspiration, feedback, and facilitation.



NASCENT COMMUNITIES OF CHANGE: WORKING FROM THE MARGINS

The next question is:

How do we determine who should participate in this network?

In addition to the Equitable Futures Week, IFTF and Blue Shield of California Foundation undertook two other experiments in foresight-based community building for equitable futures: a Future of Gender Norms workshop and an AfroFutures Festival. These two events demonstrate a growing traction and considerable activity in support of Afrofutures and queer futures. They suggest the time may be right to leverage these already growing communities of people who, by virtue of being marginalized, bring a lens of equity into their work. Focusing on these nascent futures groups may allow for smart scaling of foresight tools and methodologies in an equitable futures network.

However, in order to create a more equitable society, the network needs to bring different cultural and socioeconomic groups into the same conversation, and even the same possible futures. Is the network a chance to support and grow multiple isolated communities to develop and amplify their futures voice? Is the network a chance to bring together segments of society that are often moving in different circles?

**BEYOND IMAGINATION:
SUPPORTING THE BEST IDEAS**

While participants in futures workshops and network-based gatherings gain a valuable experience simply by participating, the equitable futures network should create clear pathways to finding the individuals with energy and excitement to realize the new opportunities and ideas that emerge from the workshops. One path is to offer grants or seed funding to community-level projects that emerge from a participatory futures workshop. Another is to support individuals with passion and energy that typically get sidelined by the need to earn a living.

This is a push-pull process: changemakers need to know how and where to seek equitable futures funds, and managers of the network need to be able to find individuals who may have exciting ideas and energy but feel as though they don't have the ability or rights to apply for grant funding. The process of moving from imagining possible futures to developing new ideas needs to be a partnership between the organizers of foresight events, a community manager for the equitable futures network, and the broader base of participating changemakers.

A highly impactful outcome from this network could be the discovery of local individuals who are natural visionaries, with a lot of social capital, but are unable to work towards social change because they are focused on putting food on the table for themselves and their family.

**EQUITABLE FUTURES METHODOLOGIES:
TRAINING FORESIGHT FACILITATORS**

The launch of the Equitable Futures Network, together with the companion AfroFutures and Future of Gender Norms events, demonstrate a spectrum of methodologies for engaging changemakers in foresight and futures thinking. They range from processes that require highly trained facilitators to those that motivated individuals can bring to life. They also sit on a spectrum from highly organized strategic planning and visioning for a social change organization to more informal activities that use pure imagination for the benefit of storytelling and unlocking new ideas about what might be possible. Each methodology has its own strengths and weaknesses depending on which communities are being engaged and under what circumstances.

In an ideal world, providing experienced facilitators who can guide groups through a more complex process (a luxury that paying clients can afford) would likely yield the most impactful and sustainable results. Thus, even though an Equitable Futures Network could and should continue to innovate the tools and processes for foresight, it may make sense to identify a singular methodology, or menu of methodologies, and train a core group of community facilitators to run local workshops throughout the network geography. Such a strategy might ultimately be the fastest way to grow strong local equitable futures communities.

