



FUTURE  
EARTH OPEN  
NETWORK  
DESIGN  
DOCUMENT

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A collaboration and discussion  
platform for research and solutions  
for global sustainability

# 1. DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

It should be easy for anyone involved in sustainability research and practice to get involved and participate in Future Earth. The Future Earth Open Network (ON) was developed for this very purpose. It provides a user-friendly online platform to enable collaboration and discussion across traditional areas of expertise. It will allow horizontal, transdisciplinary networking across Future Earth towards the common goal of fostering transformations to sustainability.

The Open Network is a working tool for Future Earth to catalyze more actions and impacts from the great combined knowledge of the research and stakeholder communities. It will support joint scoping, reviews, assessments, syntheses and many other processes. It will make it possible for the Sustainability community to self-organize in a way that is dynamic, versatile and resource-effective. It will support openness and transparency in Future Earth's implementation processes.

The Open Network is modern and dynamic, based on the best available social networking tools. The design, functionality, moderation and content on the Open Network is aimed for excellence, so that it is attractive, practical and user-friendly enough to gather the critical mass to be of significant impact. It is designed to be light and mobile-friendly, so that it can be used in places where internet speeds are low. Developing the Open Network requires a very adaptive approach and responsiveness to the community.

# 2. GOALS

**The Open Network is designed to be:**

**1. A way to organize and mobilise the individual and institutional members of Future Earth**

The Open Network will provide the process through which Future Earth gathers its members - current and new - to integrate and track interest, and structure communication. The network provides a working tool for Core Projects, Knowledge-Action Networks and other initiatives.

**2. A place for virtual meetings, for sharing ideas and knowledge, and for keeping up to date and in contact**

The Open Network is open to all (though rules of conduct will be established, see 3.3.) allowing sustainability researchers and practitioners working towards sustainable development to meet in one place. People will go to the Open Network because it facilitates the exchange of information and accelerates the rate of innovation and network-building for sustainability in a highly cost- and time-efficient manner. The network makes it possible to find new peers for cooperation or exchange, across expertises and disciplinary boundaries. It offers news from Future Earth, sharing of events and discussions on topics specific for the target communities.

**3. A place to engage the wider Future Earth community**

Gathering all that are focused on the Future Earth challenges, a digital system makes it possible for Future Earth to interact with a wide community and provide a platform for engagement. It enables large and diverse groups to gather around the Knowledge-Action Networks (KANs), Fast-Track Initiatives (FTIs) and other initiatives. The Future Earth community can expand by partnering with new programs and institutes through a community vetting system. Partners can be endorsed through privileges in the network. The Open Network will offer a process to invite, solicit or identify proposals for new projects and activities.

**4. A place for co-design and co-creation of knowledge and action around key societal challenges**

The Open Network should enable practical co-design and co-creation, and be a space where experience is shared on successful examples of co-design and co-creation from other projects.

## 3. STRATEGY

### 3.1. An Open Network that gives new tools to the community

The tools are presented based on which of the three goals they will contribute to.

#### **3.1.1. Tools for meetings, for ideas and knowledge sharing, and for staying up to date and in contact**

##### **At launch**

- Public network, possible for anyone to join and log into
- Personal profile pages
- Search other members by topic

- Direct messages and chat
- Latest news feed from Future Earth (blog or featured post option)
- News feed posted by members and moderated by network
- Overarching thematic topics which can be used to help cluster and group discussions
- Topics should be engaging and allow branched discussions
- Shared events calendar (featured events from Future Earth + users can add their own events).
- Live chat while events are going on, for user discussions and feeding comments back to event.
- Hashtagging events, topics
- Sharing funding opportunities
- Anyone can start their own private group

#### **Later:**

- Event pages within the Open Network, microsites
- Webinar function (built in or integrated) - *flagged as a tool requested by Core Projects*
- @-mentions of people in texts

### **3.1.2. Tools for organizing and engaging the Future Earth community**

#### **At launch**

- Have groups for core projects, endorsed projects, regional offices and KANs
- Possibility to create nested sub-groups
- Support the webinars in the internal and external consultation phases for KANs, FTIs and CAs by providing a place for discussion around these events
- Core Project-Future Earth relations are, to some degree, managed through the network
- Core Projects, KANs, FTIs etc have a space to engage with their own members
- The KAN scoping processes can be done jointly through the Open Network and conferences, of which some may be online
- Partnering and endorsement with new programs and institutes through a community vetting system: applications are placed on the Future Earth Website for 2-4 weeks. Supply a link to the Open Network where concerns can be raised and discussions take place.
- Have a system for file sharing, voting and commenting around specific proposals (part of initial implementation plan)
- Capacity to allow people who sign up to contribute financially (allow folks to become a supporting member of the Anthropocene, for example, or potentially contribute to a core project, or a KAN, or a fund focused on a specific region).

**Later:**

- Mentor matching (new arrivals are mentored by users experienced in the community, through a matching function in the system).
- Core Projects, regional offices and KANs have exclusive microsites.
- SC, EC and other central persons have special accounts.
- Monetary metrics on the sums that are raised in the community, to track performance of fundraising etc

**3.1.2. Tools for co-design and co-creation****At launch:**

- Uploading documents/files and commenting.
- Discussion groups to share best practice in co-x.
- Synthesis work can be supported by a global community through synthesis process leaders inviting inputs and comments from all members.
- Invite, solicit or identify proposals for new projects and activities through the network by means of voting up, seeing what's trending, and/or using polls.

**Later:**

- Possibility to work in real time on documents (like google docs).
- Live chat and sketch functions.
- Researcher-stakeholder interaction through an ask-a-researcher system (open for those not logged in)

**3.2. An Open Network that is attractive**

A community does not necessarily start by itself. Effort is usually required to make it gain momentum and build a critical mass, before it can take off by itself. This requires a well-built system, good content, active moderation and facilitation (see 3.3), adding the right content and getting the right people on the network.

Key to making a successful Open Network is a combination of attractive, functional and intuitive design and structure. This is done with the help of the Future Earth communication team and possibly an external design contractor. It requires significant beta-testing before launch.

The Open Network must be able to operate on all platforms, both web browsers and mobile.

Which niche is the Open Network filling? We can identify three groups of other platforms that can offer similar services:

- Generic, popular and highly used platforms like facebook and twitter.

- Professional spaces like ResearchGate, LinkedIn, academia.edu etc.
- Systems started by similar organizations like AAAS (Trellis), UN SDSN etc

The added value and attractiveness of Future Earth Open Network should be that it attracts a very specific community (centered around research for sustainable development), provides unique and high quality content for these groups and the tools needed for all the interactions this community needs. Users can find what they need without the “noise” on the other channels, and without sacrificing functionality.

To further add value to the users, the Open Network should have sections about grants, job postings and other opportunities. These can come both from the Future Earth community managers and (increasingly over time) from users themselves. One way to provide unique opportunities on the Open Network is to give researchers the ability to connect to funding bodies and early information about upcoming calls. This could prove valuable for the funders and invaluable for the researchers.

Several proposals on how to engage (early) users on the Open Network should be sought. One is to use “gamification”, that people who are very active get recognition through points and exposure on the page. Another is to use an “xPrize” system where a prize is given for groups who solve specific tasks through the network.

### 3.3. An Open Network with good community management

A paramount issue for the Open Network is that it's staffed appropriately to initiate, facilitate, engage and moderate discussions. Particularly in the early adoption phase, significant effort is needed to create the volume and quality of content on the platform for users to actively engage. As the network develops, day-to-day moderation to keep the system “clean” from disruptive use will require increasing resources.

In the first phase, community management requires at least 0.5-1 full time equivalent. Future Earth can make use of the distributed secretariat to have presence of staff more or less 24 hours per day.

Some strategies for moderation:

- Community managers should be trained in moderation techniques.
- Soft-touch moderation should be preferred in many cases, rather than policing.
- A code of conduct should be imposed to limit trolls, people who deliberately derail discussions, commercial vendors etc.
- Users should be able to flag content (from other users) that they deem inappropriate, call for moderator's attention.
- The KAN liaisons can administer the KAN spaces, IPOs the Core Project discussions etc. KAN leaders could to some degree be selected from those driving discussions and getting much positive response on the network.

### 3.4. An Open Network that is improved on continuously

A tool like the Open Network must avoid being outdated and quickly solve persistent problems for users. This is a specific task for the Open Network team, particularly the IT capacity in Colorado. The team should work closely with Higher Logic to make sure that the system and tailored solutions are continuously improved to meet the users' needs.

A critical issue is that the community must be able to ask questions and input comments, suggestions and critique directly to the community managers. This can be done through:

- A clearly visible Q&A section for how to use the ON
- A troubleshooting/feedback forum with high ON team presence
- A specific email address to contact for support

As the general makeup of the platform plus mobile app are quite traditional, we have to identify early on the additional resources we will want to implement to allow for a creative design of certain pages of the network and whether we want to source a third party to develop a separate mobile app for us. This will be especially important for us as we aim to broaden outreach to developing countries who are coming online at an ever increasing rate, but mainly on mobile. Maybe this is something that can be related to the capacity building function.



We welcome ideas and input to the process of creating the Open Network, please add them [HERE](#).