

Integral Ecology in Practice

Reflections on its key pillars



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In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis uses the term 'integral ecology', especially when referring to practical applications, to highlight *both* a concern for the poor and the earth (that is, the interconnectedness of all the dimensions of human life), *and also* the embeddedness and complex interactions between social systems and Earth systems.

In the first LSRI Briefing Note, we set the scene for our understanding of integral ecology. We conceived it as 'the practical expression of a theological and philosophical commitment to the value of all life' and thus as focusing 'special attention to the most vulnerable creatures on earth [...] giving priority to those who are living in extreme poverty and living creatures under threat of extinction'.

We suggested this generates a dynamic for 'transdisciplinary research that joins academic work with policy and practice'.² And we argued that it has overlapping origins, which serve to highlight complementary points of emphasis. The first origin is found in the historical growth of the concept of integral human development that the Catholic Church put forward in 1967 during the United Nations First Development Decade, subsequently developed in its social teachings. The second origin is more theological, inspired by work in ecotheology, and often responding to environmental policy discourses and ecological movements which have emerged globally since the 1960s.

In this fourth Briefing Note, we explore the meaning and implications of the integral ecology paradigm for policy and practice. What does it mean in practical

terms to pay attention to those who are most vulnerable, whether human and non-human, and to recognise the inter-connectedness of all life? Our aim is to offer some orientating guidelines for two audiences: those involved in post-graduate research on the one hand, and civil society and development organisations on the other.

The note is structured as follows. First, we critically review existing initiatives seeking to put integral ecology into practice in Catholic contexts.

Second, we discuss similar initiatives in academic and policy circles, albeit these often take place under other guises, and argue that the distinctiveness of integral ecology lies in its manner of proceeding.

Third, we outline some orientation guidelines for an academic context.

Current initiatives in Catholic contexts

In 2008, the international NGO Catholic Relief Services published a document entitled *A User's Guide to Integral Human Development*. This was based on the *Livelihoods Assessment Framework*, which was widely used at the time in international development circles for development project

Key Points

- Integral ecology in practice spotlights initiatives methodologically focused on applying:
- A deep awareness to the most vulnerable creatures on our planet.
- A renewed focus on the interconnectedness of life, including its spiritual dimension.
- An integration of different forms knowledge.

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implementation and assessment.³ The UK Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) also undertook a long-term process applying the insights of *Laudato Si'* and its integral ecology paradigm to all levels of its organisation. In policy advocacy work, this led to a critical appraisal of the relationship between *Laudato Si'* and the Sustainable Development Goals.⁴ In its work ethos, its staff relations and its partnerships with overseas organisations, an emphasis was placed on being present to the other.⁵ CAFOD's reading of *Laudato Si'* also led to the restructuring of their overall strategic plan, with care for our common home now being stipulated as its overarching objective.⁶ Elsewhere, Caritas Argentina has done work

on putting the integral human development/ integral ecology paradigm in its impact evaluation work, using the capability approach by Amartya Sen as its conceptual anchor.⁷

One of the most significant initiatives to put integral ecology in practice at the level of the Catholic Church is the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform and the *Laudato Si'* Goals, which mirror the Sustainable Development Goals.⁸ The aim of the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform is to invite every Catholic organisation in the world, including parishes, universities, schools, hospitals and religious communities, as well as families and businesses, to establish a set of goals and measurable targets

within seven areas, which they commit to achieve within seven years.

Despite being target-oriented, the *Laudato Si'* Goals (LSGs) are not vulnerable to the criticisms made of the Sustainable Development Goals that doing policy through goal-setting and measurable targets risks the neglect of systemic transformation.⁹ For example, they include ecological spirituality; they are holistic; and the different areas support each other, such as creation-centred liturgies leading to the adopting of more sustainable lifestyles. They are aimed at systemic change as well as at individual change, from the way a family makes decisions about food and energy,



to the catering arrangements and energy use of a university, to doing policy advocacy. The LSGs also have a strong participatory and deliberative component, in that every community and organisation is asked to set their own goals and targets in their own contexts. In addition, these goals have a processual aspect.

As an academic research institute within a Permanent Private Hall at the University of Oxford, there are specific ways in which the Laudato Si Goals can be interpreted for the Laudato Si' Research Institute, although not all of them are readily applicable. The LSRI actively seeks to collaborate with academics from across the University's departments in order to embed some of the core integral ecology principles into different post-graduate curricula, and into ways of working and operating, for example with respect to conference travel, event catering, food and energy consumption.

The LSRI's academic research is designed so as to be concretely informed by situations 'on the ground'. For example, it is currently involved in a decarbonisation project with the Catholic Diocese of Salford researching the most effective ways to bring about decarbonisation in the Jesuit community, and in the Catholic Church more broadly. It has contributed to the policy advocacy of Catholic organisations at the

COP 15 biodiversity summit through research on biodiversity loss and possible responses from the perspective of the Catholic social tradition.¹⁰

As a research institute, the LSRI seeks to illuminate the work of organisations at the grassroots and policy level through better understanding the dynamics of

environmental activism in Qatar;¹² and it is leading a research project on public perceptions of gene drive technologies in South America.¹³

Evidently, there is a close connection between the integral ecology paradigm and Catholic Social Teaching. These two are not, however, synonymous.



socio-ecological change. Through our seminars, conferences, publications and global partnerships, we gather researchers from across the world who are able to critically analyse these dynamics. To cite a few, research is currently being conducted on the Pan-Amazonian ecclesial network and its role as an agent of social change in the Amazon territory;¹¹ the LSRI is editing a publication which includes research on Islamic

First, integral ecology can travel to other religious traditions and beyond. One does not need to adhere to beliefs about the existence of God to endorse the core principles of integral ecology, which (as we have seen) entail attention to the most vulnerable creatures, human and non-human, and recognition of the inter-connectedness of all life dimensions.

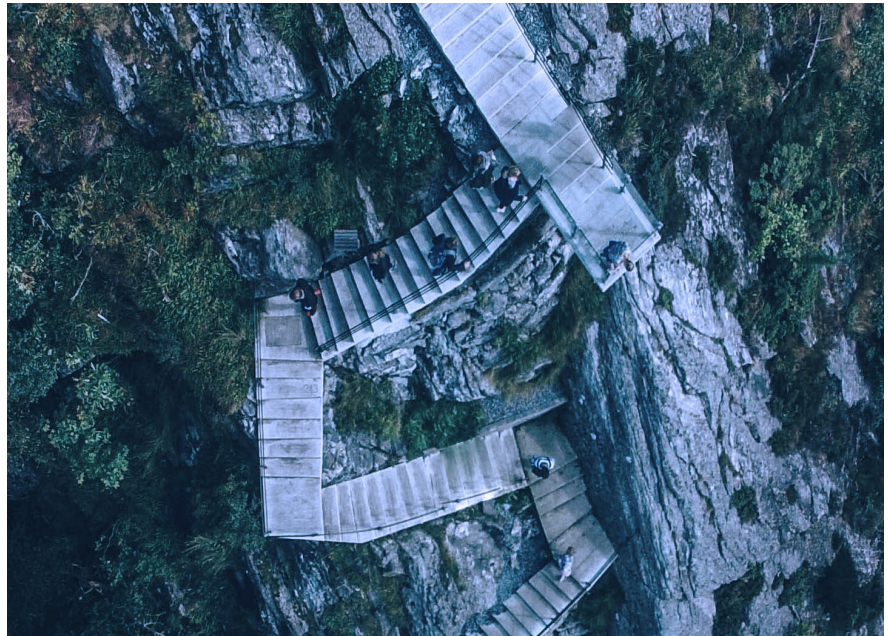
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Second, the practice of integral ecology initiatives 'in the real world' allows for a constructive feedback process with respect to the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, making space for a dialectical process of development and refinement for the latter. For example, the act of paying attention to the most vulnerable, such as women who bear the greatest burden of climate change, may entail critical reflection on the consideration previously offered to this group in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition.

2. Existing frameworks akin to integral ecology in policy and practice

Putting integral ecology into practice, and seeking to understand the dynamics of socio-ecological change through which this will be enacted, will also entail dialogue with related frameworks that are already in place in the social and policy sciences.

For in academia and policy circles it is certainly the case that interesting new frameworks have arisen in recent decades to address the challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change. The debunking of the myth of endless economic growth had been discussed well before the publication of *Laudato Si'*. The degrowth and ecological economics movements appeared in the wake of the pioneering 1972 Club of Rome report entitled *Limits to Growth*.¹⁴ More recently in the UK, Oxford-based economist



Kate Raworth has proposed a 'doughnut economics'¹⁵ that is able to integrate social and planetary boundaries.

In the discipline of politics, the field of political ecology analyses the interconnectedness of social and ecological change, paying special attention to power and political relations which underpin them.¹⁶ The inter-disciplinary field of development studies could also be seen as moving into the direction of integral ecology, with an increasing assimilation of the hard sciences and a growing integration of multiple forms of knowledge, including from indigenous traditions.¹⁷

The 2020 UNDP report entitled *Human Development and the Anthropocene* could be regarded as a further example of integral ecology in practice. Its analysis borrows from earth sciences and from indigenous, religious and

philosophical traditions. It cites the Māori notion of *whakapapa*, or genealogy, according to which to be human is to be in a network of relationships with others, humans and non-humans, as well as with human and non-human ancestors. It borrows from the Quranic concept of *tawheed* (oneness), which points to the unity of all creation, and of past and future generations, and from the *Laudato Si'* encyclical itself, with its emphasis on the unity of all creation and human embeddedness in nature.¹⁸ By integrating earth sciences and religious and indigenous traditions in its understanding of what counts as development or progress, and by proposing a Planetary-Adjusted Human Development Index to measure how well societies are progressing in *both* promoting the flourishing of their people and in caring for the Earth, the Human Development Report models



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the transdisciplinary dynamic of integral ecology. It also shares its concern for human freedom, and for the voices of the marginalized to be heard.¹⁹

These sister frameworks seek to analyse social realities from a concern to respond to “the cry of the earth” and “the cry of the poor”, just as Pope Francis suggests. One may wonder, then, what is distinctive about putting integral ecology into practice from a distinctively Catholic perspective?

We argue that what is distinctive is the way it gives priority to the earth and to those who live in situations of poverty and exclusion, and the way research itself is conducted. In other words, we argue that it is in *the manner of proceeding* that the distinctiveness of putting integral ecology into practice lies. Its roots are grounded in a belief in the natural world as being “creaturely”, that is, created by God. This in turn drives a holistic vision of cultural transformation that can proceed in opposition to the dominant technological and instrumentalising paradigm of modern life. Integral ecology in practice is thus grounded on more than transdisciplinarity, for it is founded in the belief in the goodness of the world as created

by God and humanity’s divinely-mandated place in it.²⁰

3. Harnessing integral ecology for change

There is no pre-conceived recipe or blueprint for putting integral ecology in practice. There are as many user-friendly integral ecology methodologies as there are users, whether one is a research student, a civil society organisation or an ecclesial organisation. As mentioned above, CAFOD went through a long internal reflective process seeking to apply the insights of *Laudato Si’* to its operations and to its organisational structures. Catholic Relief Services used the Livelihoods Assessment Framework and Caritas Argentina used the capability approach. Any attempt at putting integral ecology into practice is thus likely to need other toolkits or conceptual frameworks that can be tailored to the particular organisation or application in view.

For example, if an integral ecology paradigm is to be used for project impact evaluation, one would need to use analytical tools relevant to that aim. In order to conduct research on the impact of a clean-up operation of a polluted river in Buenos Aires and to assess whether it has

decreased environmental risks for the most marginalized, one would need to borrow tools from the social sciences, such as poverty and inequality measurement, or qualitative research methods.²¹ Or in order to conduct research on the gender impacts of mining and contamination, and on how civil society organisations can better support women who are defending the lives of their children and their rivers, one would need to borrow analytical tools from political ecology and gender studies.²²

There are however some general orientation lines for putting integral ecology in practice, which derive from the theological foundations of the paradigm itself.

We highlight the following:

Attention to the most vulnerable creatures on earth: this involves conducting research with a priority concern for those who are most marginalized *and* for the territorial contexts in which they live.

Attention to interconnectedness: this involves paying attention to how the different dimensions of life are interconnected, including the spiritual dimension. In research conducted by the LSRI on women, mining and toxic contamination, for example, an attempt was made to consider the



interconnection between national and local levels of governance, the power of multinational companies in government decision-making, children's health, health care provision, gender and family relations, gender social norms, and other aspects.

Integrating different forms of knowledge: different forms of knowledge need to be mobilized to analyse the interconnectedness and understand the complexity of situations and possible remedial actions. As noted in the first LSRI Briefing Note, this integration of different forms of knowledge is not done for its own sake but for the specific purpose of *reconciliation* grounded in a specific context.

Listening to the people's voices and enabling them to become authors of their own lives: putting integral ecology into practice involves deep listening to the communities in which

one is carrying out research, and conducting oneself in a position of genuine partnership with them. For example, when conducting research on the impact of illegal gold mining on deforestation in the Peruvian Amazon, putting integral ecology in practice will involve listening to the gold miners themselves. Action to change the dynamics of deforestation need to be informed by the voices of the people in these territories.

Within these orientation guidelines, each researcher will have the task of discerning how best to assimilate integral ecology in their own context. Putting integral ecology into practice when doing research on an invasive insect species in Latin America will be different from when doing research on river contamination and urban inequality, but both can be united by their similar way of proceeding: paying attention to the most

vulnerable creatures on earth and to the interconnectedness of all life dimensions, integrating various forms of knowledge in a transdisciplinary way, and engaging in deep listening to the reality one is researching.





Endnotes

- 1 We thank Celia Deane-Drummond and Tim Howles for comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 Celia Deane-Drummond and Séverine Deneulin. 'Integral Ecology: Discovering its Meaning and Depth'. *LSRI Briefing Note 1*, January 2022. See LSRI Briefing Note 5 for a discussion on transdisciplinarity.
- 3 See <https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/users-guide-to-integral-human-development.pdf>
- 4 See Graham Gordon and Diego Martinez-Schutt, *Engaging in the 2030 Agenda through the lens of Laudato Si'*, London, CAFOD, 2018, <https://cafod.org.uk/About-us/Policy-and-research/SDGs-policy-reports>
- 5 Grey, Carmody. 2020. "Time and Measures of Success: Interpreting and Implementing Laudato Si'," *New Blackfriars* 101(1091): 5-28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12498>
- 6 <https://cafod.org.uk/About-us/How-we-work/Our-Common-Home-vision>
- 7 Ann Mitchell and Séverine Deneulin. 'Spirituality and impact evaluation design', *HTS Theological Studies*, 75(4), a5482, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5482>. Ann Mitchell. *Evaluación de Impacto integral de los centros barriales del Hogar de Cristo* (Caritas Argentina, Buenos Aires, 2021), <https://caritas.org.ar/evaluacion-de-impacto-integral-de-los-centros-barriales-del-hogar-de-cristo-2/>
- 8 See <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org>
- 9 Wolfgang Sachs. 'The Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si': Varieties of Post-Development?', *Third World Quarterly* 38(12): 2573-87, 2017.
- 10 See *The Wailing of God's Creatures – Catholic Social Teaching, Human Activity, and the Collapse of Biological Diversity*, March 2021, <https://lsri.campion.ox.ac.uk/news/lsri-publishes-new-report-current-biodiversity-crisis>
- 11 This is a collaboration with the Centre for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development at the University of Sussex, with the research assistance of Adrian Beling. Mariz Tadros and Séverine Deneulin, 'Beyond religion and development: New inroads for understanding agency and inequality', paper in preparation.
- 12 Naiyerah Kolkailah, 'The Qur'anic Botanic Garden: An Example of Islamic Environmentalism in Qatar', in Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano (eds), *Care for the Poor, Care for the Earth: Catholic-Muslim Dialogues on Development*, special issue of *Religion and Development*, in preparation.
- 13 <https://lsri.campion.ox.ac.uk/news/lsri-awarded-john-templeton-foundation-grant>
- 14 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/>; <http://www.isecoeco.org/>; <https://www.clubofrome.org/publication/the-limits-to-growth/>
- 15 <http://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>
- 16 See for example, Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd edition (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).
- 17 E. Basile, T. Kontinen, S. von Itter (eds), *Building Development Studies for the New Millennium*. New York: Palgrave, 2019. The UK Development Studies Association defines development studies as an inter-disciplinary field of study concerned with 'the global challenge of combatting poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation', see <https://www.devstud.org.uk/about/what-is-development-studies>.
- 18 United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development in the Anthropocene* (UNDP: New York, 2020), pp. 88-91, see <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-report>.
- 19 For a further discussion on Laudato Si's integral ecology and the UNDP's human development, see Séverine Deneulin. *Human Development and the Catholic Social Tradition* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2021).
- 20 We are grateful to Celia Deane-Drummond for these last two sentences. For a further exploration of this point, See Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Living Narratives: Defiant Earth or Integral Ecology in the Age of Humans?' *Heythrop Journal*, LIX (2018), 914-928; Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Pope Francis' Integral Ecology Paradigm - An Exploration of Its Theological Foundations and Ethical Implications', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, in preparation.
- 21 This is research in progress by Ann Mitchell and Mariano Rabassa as part of a project on 'Social equity and care for the Earth: Tensions and synergies in Latin America and beyond' coordinated by Séverine Deneulin.
- 22 See Hilda Koster and Celia Deane-Drummond (eds), *In Solidarity with the Earth: A Multi-Disciplinary Theological Engagement with Gender, Mining and Toxic Contamination* (Bloomsbury: T & T Clark, 2023, in preparation).