



# Framing the future as 'just and regenerative': why and how

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## Background: why 'just and regenerative'?

At Forum for the Future, we have sought to tackle sustainability challenges and push the edge of ambition for over 25 years. In recent years, we have been concerned that the framing of 'sustainability' does not meet the challenges of our times. With our biosystems visibly starting to collapse and the consequences of gross inequality deepening, the functioning of our living systems is being destabilised.

Sustainability that is simply 'better practice than last year' is not going to secure the change we need. Like others in the field, we are exploring how to frame the challenge 'beyond sustainability' to support changemakers to stretch their ambition and realise the transformation of our systems – as the [Future of Sustainability 2021-2](#) called for, to look beyond incremental approaches and create true transformation.

After exploring what ambition looks like and what practitioners are saying across the field, we have chosen to frame our organisational vision as a 'just and regenerative future' and our mission being to accelerate that. In this article, we describe how we explored and updated our organisational vision and mission, and share the overarching framework that helps us – and we hope others – to work with these lenses.

We start by acknowledging that we are not the experts in either justice or regenerative concepts. We are drawing on the shared wisdom of many others and do not have definitive answers for what the terms mean. We felt a need to share the organisational statement of our vision and mission, along with the workings behind it and insights we have gained so far, which might be useful for other practitioners also grappling with similar questions.

## Our journey to this point

Ever since the Brundtland Commission propelled the terminology around sustainable development into the mainstream in 1987, the temporal and distributive elements of sustainability have been clear. Sustainability is not only about where we are now but also how we transform and work into the future, and whose needs are met.

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*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (Brundtland, 1987:45)*

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Forum has always understood sustainability as part of a dynamic process that allows all of society and nature to flourish. It is not just about protection, but potential and enhancement. To quote Forum of 1996, the year we were founded:

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*Sustainability is a dynamic process which enables all people to realise their potential and to improve the quality of life in ways that simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support system.”*  
([Forum for the Future, 1996](#))

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In 2019, we felt the need to set a stronger ambition as an organisation and as such defined our goal as ‘accelerating the transition to a just and regenerative future.’ We knew this marked a step-change in ambition from ‘sustainability’ while continuing to build on core principles: enabling all people to realise their potential, enhancing our living planet, working within nested systems, and addressing distribution now and over time.

Regenerative concepts and practice have a long history amongst indigenous societies, who are the original architects of the ideas. They have gained increasing attention in recent years for several compelling reasons. They reflect a harsh reality that we, as humans, have overshot our ability to sustain ourselves and we need to do more through restoring, replenishing and regenerating our systems – ecological and societal – in order to live within the earth's life support system. Simply avoiding harm is not enough, and a regenerative approach needs to be infused in all that we do.

Planetary boundaries for a livable planet may be fixed and resources finite, but the capacity of living systems and human ingenuity is not. As living organisms within wider natural ecosystems, we have the potential to grow, heal and thrive. This is a source of hope and driver of a regenerative viewpoint. This lens fundamentally shifts the focus from engineered physical solutions, such as technological innovations, towards enabling the capacity and health of those ecosystems and societies to adapt, evolve and flourish.

Regenerative principles emphasise the need to enable the potential of all living systems, human as well as natural. This framing is not just an environmental approach, although it draws on ideas from ecology. A regenerative approach applies equally to people, communities, and human systems. That said, in the face of the deep inequities and injustices that are degrading the well-being of people today, we felt that applying regenerative principles to human society was insufficient. Approaches that specifically address justice and universality, with a focus on rights – not just potential – are also needed. As such, we name the transformation that we seek as both just and regenerative.

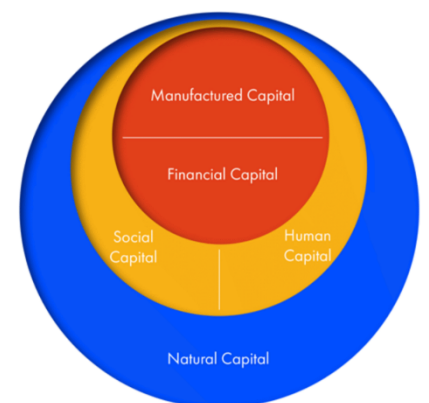
When we chose this vision in late 2019, we knew we needed to go deeper to explore these concepts, their implications for our theory and practice of change, and for enabling change with our partners. Internal inquiries helped us delve into the concepts of power, regeneration, and social justice. In exploring regenerative approaches, we drew on past and current thinking such as [Daniel Christian Wahl's thinking on regeneration](#), [Regenesis Group](#), and more recent work by Indigenous thinkers, such as Braiding Sweetgrass, Sand Talk and Turtle Island's work on relational systemic thinking (see references on the last page). On social justice we drew, for example, on the multiple meanings of justice, as outlined by the [Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership](#), and on principles – such as universal and inalienable – that underpin the field of [human rights](#), as well as indigenous knowledge, (Yunkaporta 2019; Goodchild, 2021; Kimmer, 2013).

Throughout 2021, we started to pull together these and other inquiries, exploring how the concepts can work together, and how our 'just and regenerative' vision can inform our approach to transformation and change. We looked for patterns across definitions and mapped out where they were complementary. In some cases different words were inferring similar, deeper concepts, such as that of capacity of living systems and social systems.

By mid-2021, we already started adapting and using these ideas in our work, testing their usability with partners in, for example, work on a [Business Transformation Compass](#) and on the [protein system in Southeast Asia](#). In 2022, we used our knowledge of different systems frameworks to help organise and represent just and regenerative concepts together in a framework. We know that frameworks risk reductionism; however we also value them because they support practitioners and change-makers to structure their thinking and navigate complexity in practice. As an organisation that works with systems change, we acknowledge that the way we see the world also informs how we act. We also believe a framework can help to navigate concepts and complexity in practice while bringing and maintaining a systemic lens.

This framework is not entirely new; instead it is a combination of others' thinking, pulled together through a different lens for use in our work. Indeed we drew heavily on existing frameworks and their principles:

- **Three horizons as a temporal approach:** [Three Horizons](#), developed by Bill Sharpe at the International Futures Forum, is a framework for exploring how we might shift from today to a viable future. Using a three horizons approach means acknowledging the current state of the situation – our first horizon that we are currently a part of – and also stating the future (or third horizon) we need or are working towards. Most importantly, it also means identifying the transformation and transition pathways (or Horizon 2) which will enable us work towards this aspiration and future, distinguishing between those that are incremental and prolonging Horizon 1 and those that are truly transformative that will reach Horizon 3.
- **Nested systems thinking:** a whole systems view of sustainability invites us to recognise that ourselves and our society are nested as part of our living planet. This principle has been important to Forum for many years. Our popular [Five Capitals](#) model from 2005 framed our economy within our society, which is in turn within our wider ecology. This continues to underpin our perspective on the world and change. If we explore sustainability through the lens of nested wholes, the challenge of sustainability can be characterised as the failure of humans and the social systems we create (such as the economy) to recognise they are subsystems of, and embedded within, the larger ecological system (Meadows 1972; Daly 1996).

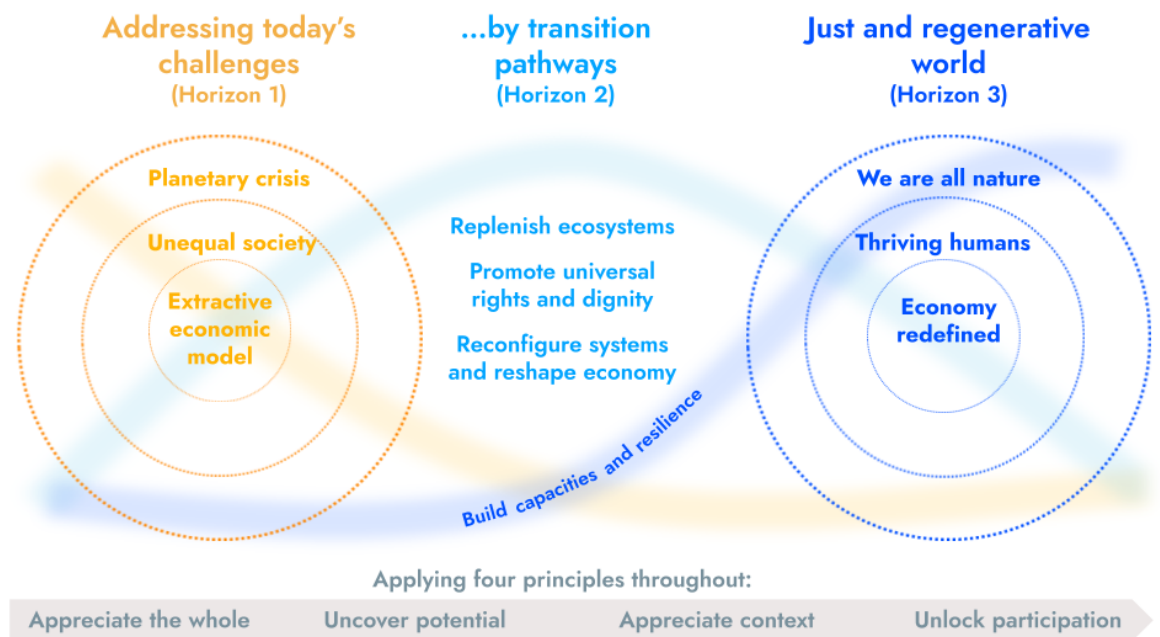


- **Working with emergence:** living systems constantly evolve. Working with change and potential means continually working with the process of emergence. Any definition of a vision needs to be one where we are not setting a fixed destination, but rather one where the outcome is the continual process and practice of re-creating the systems – this applies to just and regenerative practices.

## A Framework for Just and Regenerative Future

The framework comprises:

- The vision of the future (the third horizon);
- Today, or the first horizon—the problems we have and root causes that need to be tackled;
- The transition pathways between the two, or ‘second horizon’; and,
- Principles of the approach to change.



**Figure 1: Shifting from today to a just and regenerative third horizon.** *Forum for the Future's vision of a more just and regenerative future ('horizon 3' or H3), in which we have tackled today's challenges ('horizon 1' / H1: a planet in crisis; an unequal society; an economic model based on short-termism) by following three 'transition pathways' ('horizon 2' / H2: replenishing ecosystems; promoting universal rights and dignity; reconfiguring systems and reshaping the economy).*

**Today, Horizon 1 is deeply problematic.** We do not see ourselves as indigenous, or nested as part of planet earth, so we are driven by an economic model that extracts and degrades systems, undermining the capacity of the planet and human societies to support us into the future. This has resulted in:

- Overheating of the planet, a climate emergency, degrading ecosystems and nature in crisis;
- Structural causes of mounting inequality with huge human costs; and
- An economic model which puts natural resources and people at the service of economic growth, rather than the economy serving people and the planet.

### Horizon 3: Our vision of a just and regenerative future

In a just and regenerative future, we have transformed our understanding of the relationships between the economy, society and planet, and enabling the capacity of all living beings to thrive is fundamental. Key features of this world are:

- **Everything is nature:** humans, and the economy and society we have created, are part of nature;

- **Thriving people:** systems and ways of living support everyone's universal rights and potential to thrive;
- **Redefined economy:** the economy creates and distributes value fairly, with economic models that prioritise human well-being and ecosystem health; and
- **Capacity:** social and environmental systems are resilient, with capacity to adapt to future challenges.

**Horizon 2** provides the **transition pathways**. Of course there will be many – and many yet to be discovered – but we highlight pathways that:

- Stabilise climate and **restore and replenish** our ecosystems.
- Promote dignity, fulfilment and **equity for everyone**, which includes:
  - Ensuring fairness, resilience and vitality across generations and geographies
  - Respecting the universality of human rights and addressing structural barriers in each context, so that people claim and enjoy their full rights.
- **Develop capacities for resilience.**
- **Reconfigure** multiple systems we are part of (from economy, energy, health, food etc.) and how they are transitioning.
- Unleash new, **fairer ways to recognise, create and distribute value** and new economic models that prioritise human wellbeing and ecosystem health over economic growth or short-term profit maximisation.

The Horizon 2 pathways will **take an approach to change that works with these principles:**

- **Appreciate the greater whole:** focus on the overall health of the greater whole we are part of, and not just on a narrow set of specific outcomes.
- **Uncover potential:** start with potential not problems. Instead of only honing in on what is wrong or lacking, begin with a broad view of the latent possibility in the system you are considering to evolve and recognise its greater potential, while not ignoring any problems you find.
- **Value context:** value the conditions, history and lived experience that have shaped your context, and design your interventions based on a deep understanding of this.
- **Unlock participation:** take an authentically participatory approach: truly value the potential and dignity of all by finding meaningful ways to co-create interventions.

Of course, there are a great many valuable principles that underpin regenerative and social justice approaches, with the shared assumption that how you approach change matters. We have focused on these four, borrowed from Carol Sandford and Regenesys, because they complement our living systems approach, and our ambition to ensure that regeneration and justice concepts are intertwined.

Forum for the Future's vision is a just and regenerative future in which:

- **Everything is nature:** humans recognise our economy and society as part of nature, embracing the power of nature to renew;
- **Resilience:** social and environmental systems are resilient, with capacity to adapt to future challenges;
- **Everyone thrives:** systems and ways of living support vitality so that everyone can thrive, today and in the future. Human rights are universally respected and structural barriers in each context have been addressed so that everyone, regardless of who or where they are, can claim their full rights;
- **Planetary health:** the climate is stable and ecosystems revitalised;
- **Redefined economy:** the economy creates and distributes value fairly, with economic models that prioritise human well-being and ecosystem health.

## Critical reflections on our process and framework

There are several issues that we wrestled with when pulling together this framework and that continue to be live discussions.

## 1. How we position the relationship between society and environment

There was a concern that by placing society within nature, we are valuing the environment above and beyond social needs and therefore not addressing these as an integral part of the change making process. This concern stems from wider critiques that much work on sustainability is seen as only environmental or even environmental supremacy.

Our position is that society cannot thrive if we do not work within our living support system. The framework is one that is nested rather than one of hierarchy, so the relationship is trying to articulate the nature of our reality rather than the priority of our change efforts. As Capra, a living systems practitioner and theorist explains, he dislikes the world hierarchy as it is a human projection of better or more important as *'in nature there is no above nor below, there are only networks nestling within other networks'* (Capra, 1997:35). Our aim is to reset or rediscover the relationship we have across all three systems: economy, society and nature.

## 2. Joining 'just' with 'regenerative'

These terms are not the same but they are also not mutually exclusive. Delving deeply into them, we found root ideas that were similar, though framed in different terminology: for example, universal respect, building on capacity, and empowering or enabling all people and systems to meet their potential and thrive.

It could be argued that adopting the term 'regenerative' does not need an addition of 'justice' because it is embedded within. However, there are elements of social justice thinking, such as the absolute nature of universal human rights, or the more confrontational need for power analysis and power shifts, that are not as explicit with framings of regenerative. The regenerative worldview is inherently process driven. While social justice concepts do embrace process (the need for voice and equal power in processes), they also emphasise concrete actions and distributive justice in outcomes. It felt important to state categorically that resilience, vitality, the chance to thrive and reach potential and to shape processes apply equally to everyone, across geographies and generations.

## 3. Naming a vision that goes beyond decarbonisation

For many current change actors, the ultimate ambition is decarbonisation for net zero. It is not always clear to them where decarbonisation sits in our framing. Our vision in fact includes and also goes beyond decarbonisation. While we recognise that decarbonisation is ambitious, we name stabilising the climate as a Horizon 2 pathway to our Horizon 3, rather than as our ultimate vision. It is necessary – although insufficient – for a just and regenerative future. Thus a transition to a decarbonised economy and society has to be a priority in our work. It is not only essential for ecosystem regeneration, but also an urgent [social justice issue](#), given that those who will suffer most and are suffering first from climate breakdown are those with least power and resources.

But a just and regenerative approach goes much further than decarbonisation. A technical transition to a net zero economy could be achieved in ways that exacerbate inequalities and increase other vulnerabilities among both communities and ecosystems. A just and regenerative approach embraces a mindset that implies a different approach to decarbonisation – exploring potential, centring people's rights, looking to replenish not just meet specific targets – and means a much greater ambition than stabilising climate alone.

## 4. Working across levels and across time horizons

We cannot just talk about what future we want without acknowledging that it needs to address the root causes of today's problems. So action addressing challenges today (Horizon 1) and taking us through the process of transition (Horizon 2) is essential. At the same time, we should not address those without also acknowledging and pursuing the greater potential and vision. This follows an approach in the 'levels of paradigm' from the [Regenesis](#) framework that Forum has replicated in our [Business Transformation Compass](#): pursuing a just and regenerative approach is not separate from more short-term approaches, but is nested.

That is to say that we need to simultaneously work to do less harm, heal our current systems, ensure resilience, become net positive, and work towards transformation. We work towards aspirational outcomes of just and regenerative while applying the just and regenerative mindset to tackling today's harms and building new ways of working.

## 5. Relevance and realism in a world of discontinuity

In the face of ongoing wars globally, declining living standards in many parts of the world, and resistance to the most basic carbon-mitigating actions we can get reactions that question our realism, and indeed whether it is appropriate or sensitive to be calling for a regenerative approach when that is so far out of reach for many people. We also know that the terminology around justice and regeneration translate and land differently in different cultures and geographies.

These challenges reinforce our intent to work across time horizons, addressing today's problems with a just and regenerative lens. They also reinforce our focus on capacity for resilience: enabling the capacity of people and systems to adapt and evolve is central to a just and regenerative approach. It is also an increasingly practical and urgent response to the crises people face around the world. The growing focus on climate adaptation and resilience may indeed be an entry point for others to embrace core ideas of the just and regenerative approach.

## 6. Integrity and pragmatism

As we inquired into this work, one of the deep tensions we faced was keeping to the integrity of the concepts deployed while also bringing pragmatism for use and understanding. We feel we cannot quite remain true to either regenerative or social justice concepts in ways that might fully satisfy their origins, and yet we add value by bringing the two together. We also acknowledge that these concepts are deeply rooted in historical sources of wisdom and indigenous, and are difficult to reference from current texts and authors in our prevailing knowledge systems. This creates risks of appropriation and awareness that we need to be careful how we use and attribute these ideas.

## 7. Challenges with the language

In particular, we faced tensions between language that is process-oriented, thus using verbs as opposed to nouns that articulate specific outcomes. The dominant worldview is one that values what is seen, known and understood—our scientific objectivity. We live in a world that puts more emphasis on outcomes that can be articulated in their concrete nature. For example, 'climate stabilised', 'human rights respected' are more tangible and resonate more strongly with many decision-makers than 'living in harmony with nature', 'working with vitality' or 'thriving systems'. However, taking a systemic view invites us to also look at the world through a process-driven orientation: that we are constantly in change and movement, and that understanding the world needs full appreciation of dynamic relationships. We continue to have debates about how we need to both speak to the dominant worldview – to make something tangible to support understanding – while also ensuring it has the integrity of this systemic view.

## 8. Engaging different audiences

The challenge in finding the right language also affects which audiences we can engage. The concepts and terminology of just and regenerative are challenging for many players. Indeed Forum's business partners have told us as much. They are deep, emotional, and imply a fundamentally different way of structuring society. Some terminology can be seen as jargon that is off-putting. We don't want jargon to be a barrier to shifting hearts or minds. So, it is important to be able to use language to reach new players, such as funder audiences. But it is also easy to stray from some core principles when compromising on wording: for example, putting everything as a specific tangible outcome undermines the message that the approach and continual regeneration matters. In the [Business Transformation Compass](#), we seek a blend: more business tone, plenty of examples, but still unpacking key concepts of just and

regenerative, to allow for engagement and stretch and challenge. We continue to explore how we might use language to stretch and challenge but not to stop engagement.

## Acknowledgements

Our personal views shared here have been informed by our deliberation when working with our colleagues and supporting the organisational inquiries. We would also like to acknowledge that these are still live dialogues and active tensions.

It is essential to acknowledge and thank all the “real” framework developers, those who have done the deeper thinking around just, regenerative and how we frame systems and systemic change. We particularly acknowledge the wisdom of many indigenous peoples, who have not only shaped the ideas but lived the practice of regeneration over generations. We are just standing on the shoulders of others' work, trying to pull these ideas together. Of more recent heritage, we draw particularly on the thinking of Carol Sandford and Regenesis. Our approach is not comprehensive in reflecting this full rich legacy. We have been drawn to elements that fit with our living systems approach, and our ambition to ensure regeneration and justice are intertwined. Internally, many staff have been driving and improving our thinking on just and regenerative, and would particularly like to acknowledge and thank Sumi Dhanarajan, Daniel Ford, Roberta Iley, James Payne, Hansika Singh, Laura Winn.

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