
FORUM FOR THE FUTURE
25 YEARS
THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY
Insights from our exploration of what the past can teach us about our future
November 2021 - May 2022

Contents

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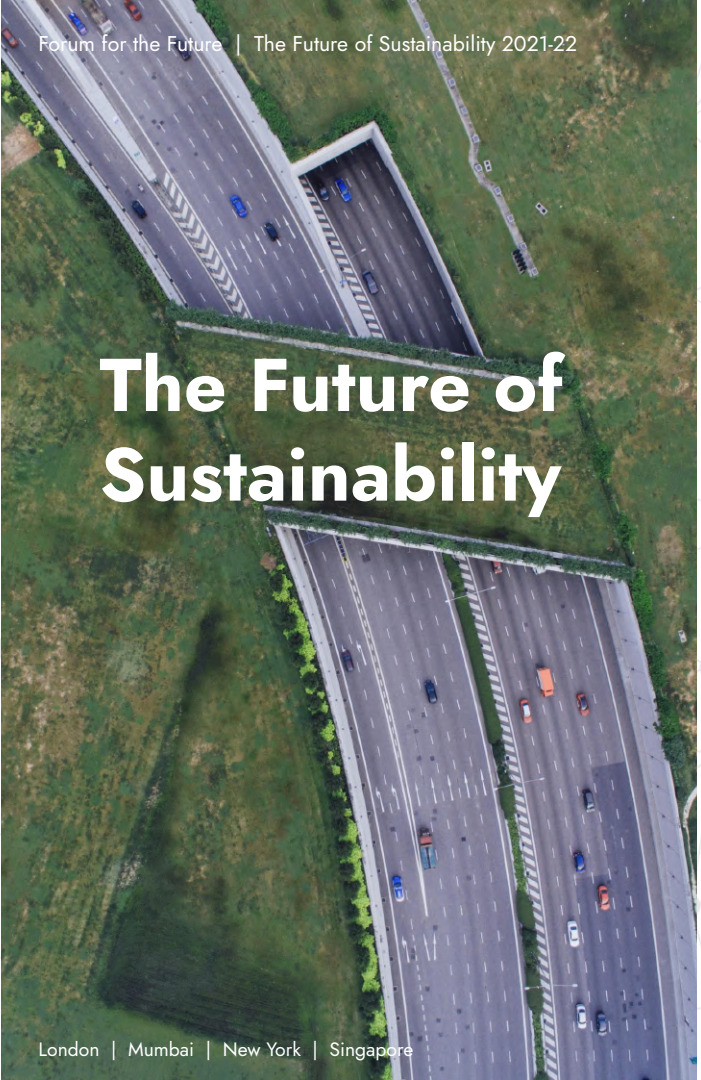


The Future of Sustainability

As humanity and the planet reach a critical inflection point, Forum for the Future's latest Future of Sustainability thinking reflects on what the past can teach us about what is needed now if we are to shape a more just and regenerative future.

This unique opinion and commentary series is set to:

- **explore lessons learned from the last 25 years in the sustainability movement;** where have we succeeded in creating real change and where have we failed? And what does that tell us about how we need to do things differently?
- **synthesise exclusive insights from diverse voices across the sustainability movement to examine how the world is responding** to today's multifaceted challenges and opportunities, and what pivots might be needed
- **consider what this all means going forward**. How can we drive greater change at pace and scale? And how can we encourage the adoption of new mindsets and approaches critical to creating what's really needed: a truly just and regenerative future?

From **November 2021 through to April 2022**, we published a series of new insights on an ongoing basis. As 2021 came to a close, Parts One and Two of the series scene-set and looked back. As 2022 began, Part Three explored today's response, before Part Four distilled everything we've heard into key takeaways and an overview of what's next.

Explore the insights from this fascinating journey taking stock of where we've been, and where we're going....

#FutureOfSustainability #LookBackGoForward

PHASE 1

Setting the stage

As global crises escalate, we arrive at a pivotal moment for the sustainability movement. The time is ripe for transformation. And in order to fully realise it we need to look back with humility, to learn from the past and fully acknowledge this harsh truth:

While significant progress has been made, more than three decades of 'sustainability' have not got us to where we need to be.

These scene-setters reflect on why now is the time to transform, and why it's as important to understand where we've come from as where we're going.

The Future of Sustainability: we're learning from the past to transform the future

Dr. Sally Uren and Jane Lawton

Forum for the Future's Chief Executive, Dr. Sally Uren, and former Chief Development and Communications Officer, Jane Lawton, launch a new campaign that explores why more than three decades of sustainability efforts haven't got us where we need to be, how we can actively shape the future by understanding lessons from the past, and what needs to happen now..

November 2021 – wouldn't it be amazing if this moment in time we are all living through was still talked about in 100 years, taught in schools, passed down from generation to generation? Not as the moment when we sealed our own fate as a species, but as the moment we woke up, realised what we needed to do to transform our relationship with each other and with the planet, and got on with the job?

As we emerge from the frenzy of COP 26, the jury is still out on whether this will be the outcome. Compared to the sluggish pace of climate progress over the last three decades, it was undoubtedly a relative success. The nature and climate agendas were explicitly linked, the just transition had greater prominence, and for the first time ever we saw reference in the text to moving beyond coal and ultimately fossil fuels.

But compared to what needs to happen, it fell far short. It postponed a lot of vital decisions, many people continued to be excluded from conversations that will deeply affect their future, and it was all 'too little, too late'. Meanwhile, it left many of the drivers of wider

environmental destruction and social injustice – such as ongoing exploitation of natural resources, consumption models and the increasing concentration of wealth, power and access to resources in the hands of the few – more or less untouched.

Pivotal moment for the sustainability movement

There is no question in our minds that we are at a pivotal moment for the sustainability movement. The world is recovering slowly from the COVID-19 crisis –

one of the most significant disruptions to global economic and social systems we have ever known. But our climate, biodiversity and equality crises continue to deepen around us. Our scientists are calling Code Red for the planet.

And there is no question the time is ripe for the sort of transformation we desperately need. Just as all the conversations and coverage around COP brought home to millions the threat of climate change, so the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has shown us just how quickly critical systems – food, health and governance among them – can be reconfigured when faced with a threat that is clear, immediate and existential.

We know that the decisions we make now will determine the future of the planet – and every living thing that calls Earth home – for hundreds of years. And there is great risk, but also great promise in that realisation.

At the same time, we believe this critical moment of transformation will only be realized if we can be clear about what has brought us here. We need to look back with humility, to learn from the past and fully acknowledge this harsh truth: ***While significant progress has been made, more than three decades of 'sustainability' have not got us to where we need to be.***

> **"The test for progressive companies over the next five years isn't going to be how good they get at CSR sustainability performance but how good they get at articulating the *minimum* required of governments to help transition to a more sustainable world."**
> **Jonathon Porritt, Co-Founder, Forum for the Future**

It is against this backdrop that we are launching our new ***Future of Sustainability: Looking Back to Go Forward*** series, which amplifies our belief that a more just and regenerative future is within our gift. This series is focused on harnessing lessons from the past to help us understand the future, drawing on diverse voices and perspectives to explore where we have succeeded in driving substantive change over the past few decades, and where we have failed. And, critically, it will set out what all this means for tomorrow.

Looking back to go forward

Forum was founded in 1996 to inspire positive action through our Green Futures publication, educate with the first Masters programme on sustainability, and work in partnership with the public and private sectors to catalyse change toward a more sustainable future.

25 years later, the world looks a little different. Considerable progress has been made – we have seen enthusiastic adoption by many leading businesses of new sustainability frameworks and approaches. Compared to 1996, when most businesses were still flat in denial over climate change, when barely a handful were publishing environmental reports, and when 'eco-efficiency' was just about the summit of corporate sustainability ambitions, much has changed. Previously unimaginable advances in technology have revolutionised energy systems, connected the world, given voice to young people. We have also seen extraordinary progress in lifting millions of people out of poverty.

So why haven't we achieved more as a movement? Why are we still teetering on the brink? And why is it all so easily written off as "blah, blah, blah"?

"The great change happens when people decide what they want, within the realm of the plausible, and then start taking concrete action to deal with it."
Singaporean civil servant, poet and futurist Aaron Maniam

Our view is that this is because **we haven't changed the fundamentals**. We have been trying to solve social and environmental crises within current systems and processes – where profit and growth are dominant drivers and power is hugely unequal. Where people and sectors work in silos, drawing up solutions to separate problems which are in reality all part of a wider, more profound challenge, and which require collective approaches. And we have relied far too heavily on voluntarism and free-market principles as the key levers for change, neglecting the critical role of enlightened regulation and social purpose in the system.

Not only has this not worked, it has led to a dangerous sense of complacency for many – a sense that incremental change on a 'business as usual' basis can get us where we need to go.

The elephant in the room

As a movement, we have become expert at not noticing a certain looming elephant in the room: our elephantine economic system.

It's time to face up to the fact that our current version of capitalism – with its light regulation, reliance on voluntarism and fractured multilateral governance – is making it much harder to drive change, and that we need to consider some creative alternative models – and fast. We don't have all the answers to what those new models look like. But we do know that ultimately we're looking for one that is underpinned by a fundamental shift in the goals of the system. A shift that means we **judge the economic system's success not by profit alone, but by whether it drives everyone's well-being while also regenerating planetary health.** It is as simple, and as complicated, as that. Doing so will require a different mindset, a shift in our fundamental assumptions about how the world works. If we unlock this, we will be able to design the new approaches, incentives and rules which will drive a system that delivers social and environmental value.

"I am 100 percent certain that we have the winning narrative."
Prof. Dr. Johan Rockstrom, Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research

Perspectives on our past and on our future

Changing our systems won't be easy. Our societies, technologies, cultures, ideologies, political leanings, governance structures, economic goals and more have all been shaped by our past.

Which begs the question: just what can our past teach us about our future?

As an organisation, Forum specialises in futures thinking – we are convinced that multiple futures are still open to us. But we also believe that lessons from the past can be enormously helpful in shaping that future.

So over the next few months, we're going to dive deep into these lessons by sharing a wide diversity of views on the experience of the past 25 years and what it all means for the future. We'll be hearing from the leading European scientist on our planetary boundaries, a Singaporean futurist, an African stateswoman, an Indian youth activist, and from figures who were at the forefront of coining business sustainability, way back at the start.

Between them, they share how important it is to take stock of this moment in time, and to seize it as a pivot for change. There is no simple answer and no single voice: we hear diverse views with different priorities, but all emphasising the level of disruption we face and the scale of the transformation we need.

They also share their points of light – the things that make them fundamentally believe it is in our gift to create a future we want to live in.

Will this point in time be remembered as the moment we woke up to what we needed to do? We're not sure. But we do know that listening to some of these extraordinarily insightful thinkers has given us hope that the solutions are out there, just waiting to be acted on. ■

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

What can history teach us about the future?

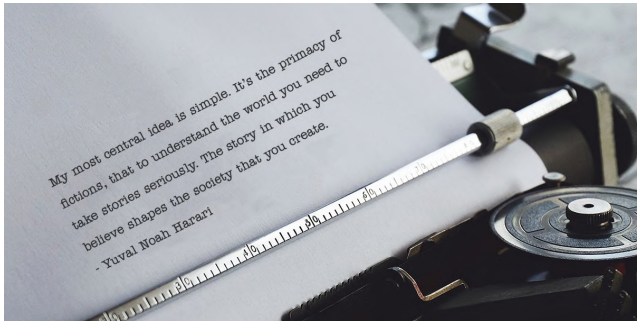
Alisha Bhagat in conversation with Dr. Nandini Pandey and Nour Batyne

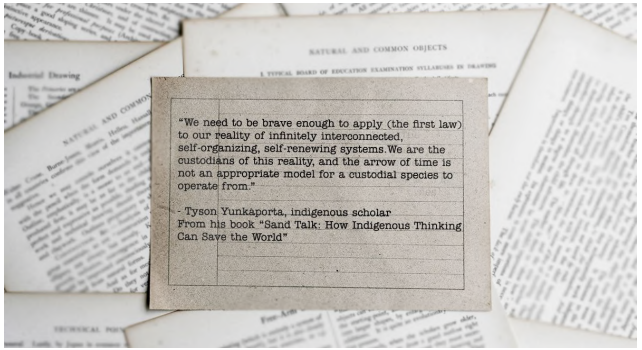
Alisha Bhagat
Futures Lead
Forum for the Future

Yesterday shaped today just as today will shape tomorrow. Our world right now is a product of decisions and actions from previous generations that continue to set the tone for where we're heading.

Alisha Bhagat, Forum's Futures Lead, explores the importance of understanding where we've been and how we got here if we're to create the future we want.

Many of us have spent lifetimes listening to the same repetitive growth-oriented stories: the rise of empires; the American dream; the gospel of prosperity. Each of these points to a dominant narrative that we are all on an upward trajectory that will lead us to greater happiness. Yet, in this moment of great disruption in which the pandemic, inequality, and climate crises continue to expose deep-rooted faultlines in the way we currently live, work and interact, we are becoming very aware that this set of stories and frameworks quite simply no longer serves.





As a futurist, when I work with groups on visioning for the future, I often start with discussing present-day systems that seem as if they have existed forever. Systemic and cyclical inequality, diminishing biodiversity and disposable, high-waste consumer culture and more all seem an inevitable part of growth.

Yet a look backwards shows us that not only are these relatively new developments in human history, but that we believed in them because of larger structural forces that arguably continue to shape the way we think and act within the world. Most importantly, thinking about these flawed systems as historical human constructs –

created by a subgroup of people for specific aims – can help us **understand and change them.**

Just as our actions and decisions shaped the past, so too will they impact the future. **We have a moral imperative to stop passively experiencing the future, and to deeply understand it so that we can better act.** To be able to create a better future together, we need to start with examining who we are and how we got to the crises we are currently in.

That's why the ***Future of Sustainability*** **series is set to look back**: armed with lessons learned and candid ownership of where we have previously succeeded, failed and why, we can better prepare and upskill ourselves to make more informed decisions about what's really needed.

To quote the writer and philosopher George Santayana: *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."* A terrifying prospect given more than three decades of institutionalized sustainability efforts have not taken us to where we need to be. It is important that we not only remember the past, but as futures thinkers search for patterns and examine alternative worldviews. **It's becoming increasingly clear that we cannot solve current and future challenges with systems unquestioningly inherited.**

Exploring past lessons – good and bad – is how we learn, and learn quickly. After all, time is not on our side if we're to tackle multifaceted challenges from escalating climate and biodiversity issues to growing inequality, a global health crisis and an urgent need for economic reform. A global system that relentlessly pursues profit at the cost of living creatures and our beloved planet Earth, cannot continue indefinitely.

Our societies, technologies, cultures, ideologies – the very systems we're trying to change – have all been shaped by history. Appreciating what has and has not worked is vital as we look to innovate, inspire and drive change.

To explore this further and to better understand the ways in which we shape and are shaped by the past and future, I sat down with two 'time travellers': Dr. Nandini Pandey, Associate Professor of Classics at Johns Hopkins University; and Nour Batyne, Creative Producer, Facilitator and Artist whose work lies at the intersection of immersive storytelling, futures thinking and social innovation

While Nandini studies the ancient past and Nour tells stories about the near future, both think about the entanglement of different temporalities and the ways that diverse stories help us understand how to be and act today.

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In conversation with… Time Travellers

Alisha

Given everything that is going on today – from the climate crisis to the need for racial justice, I find it interesting that so much of modern Western society right now is extremely fixated on the future. Most depictions of the future in the media are of dystopias and extreme collapse. Given our fears of the future and anxiety around the present, why look to the past?

Nandini

The past is all around us. It shapes the institutions that we work in, the societies that we live in, and the language that we use to conceptualise our problems. The past is part of who we are and how we understand the present and future that we face. I often start my syllabi with a quote from Cicero that says, “to be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” Because if we deprived ourselves of the benefit of the experience of our billions of ancestors across the world, we would be so poverty-stricken. And we can see patterns and solutions more clearly when we look back to the past. It’s harder to understand problems when you’re stuck in the middle of them.

Nour

I have realised that the mess we are currently in is because of our inability to truly acknowledge the past and to stop the unfortunate events in history that occur over and over and over again. I have learned from spending a lot of time imagining alternative futures—that really there's so much work to do in uncovering the past and challenging the narratives we are told about the past so that we can move forward.

Nandini

I’d add that history has a different shape in different cultures—that type of linear thinking about the past is partially culturally determined. The teleological narrative that things are progressing … is an invention of the Enlightenment.

Alisha

In futures spaces we often talk about the need to decolonise the future and not repeat the mistakes of the past, particularly those that center oppressive settler colonial narratives.It seems that given current crises, many of which stem from exploiting land or labour, come from a history that needs to be decolonised as well.

Nour

History is taught through a very European-centric lens and perspective. All the things that are to be celebrated about ancient civilisations – from their knowledge and respect of nature and their extreme intelligence and managing water, for example, is not a story that is ever told or celebrated.

Nandini

Herodotus, the so-called “father of history,” used the word historia to mean “inquiry”. It does not mean a body of truth about the past, it means the active, living practice of inquiry—talking to people and figuring things out. We need to decolonise the past, but this embeds the assumption that the past already belongs to European white men, which makes me sad. Our most ancient languages and literary and archaeological records are from “non-white” cultures from the Near East. The implicit assumption that the past doesn’t belong to us [minorities] is something that we should be fixing.

Alisha

So perhaps we need to reclaim our own past so that we can better understand and shape our own future?

Nandini

Yes! I think that we need to tell better stories about the past that are centered around diverse people and that different people can can own and take forward. We can't be full protagonists in the story unless we understand the memories that shape our identity and the set of experiences that shaped the people who brought us into the world, whether you want to take that literally or metaphorically. So I think that the idea of “narrative” actually gives us another organising concept when it comes to thinking about the future.

Nour

I would love to also explore how storytelling can be part of the way that those studying history and engaging with it as students can take agency over the way these stories are told.

Nandini

The time machine has to be able to go in both directions.So we can't really travel forward if we don't know how to travel backwards. And both need the same kind of skills.The Greeks might think of both as ways of understanding causality. There's always a push, a purpose, that puts any character, agent, or futurist into motion and that pushes a problem that was made by the past into the present.

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Considering the future as 'historia' – a place of living inquiry

Having spoken with Nour and Nandini, I've been left with a radical thought: how can we think about our past and future as *historia* – a place of *living* inquiry. Understanding both past and future requires perpetual talking and questioning. We are not headed down a fixed path. We have the potential to unearth new stories, ones that make room for multiple layered futures, that are able to hold different and diverse perspectives at the same time, and that repeat, regenerate, and renew.

The past is an intriguing place full of lessons for all of us. Not just in respect to discrete events, but in the systems, worldviews and cultures that have emerged from the way our ancestors saw and shaped our world. It's now time for us to deliberately examine where we are right now, where we've been – and where we're heading if we're to fulfill our duty to future generations.

This transition must revive traditional practices while also discovering new ways of being. It must shift away from systems that no longer serve our fragile planet and the people who call it home. We need to fundamentally move from being a consumptive species to, as Tyson Yunkaporta so beautifully captures, a "*custodial*" one – and in doing so, intentionally leave no one behind. Why not start sharing your lessons right now?

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

About Dr Nandini Pandey

An associate professor of classics trained at Swarthmore, Oxford, Cambridge, and Berkeley, Dr Nandini Pandey is author of The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome (Cambridge, 2018) and numerous articles in academic journals and public-facing venues from Eidolon to Hyperallergic. She is currently writing a book on Roman diversity and helping build a new consortium called Pasts Imperfect that connects diverse modern views on global antiquities with a wider public.

About Nour Batyne

Nour Batyne is a creative producer, facilitator, and artist whose work lies at the intersection of immersive storytelling, futures thinking, and social innovation. With a global portfolio of work, she is currently based in New York and serves as an Associate Instructor in the M.S. in Nonprofit Management program at Columbia University. Nour is a Next Generation Foresight Practitioner Fellow at the School of International Futures and a member of the Wide Awakes, an open-source network who radically reimagine the future through creative collaboration.

Further reading on the importance of history to futures

- *Eidolon*: an online journal (2015-2020) voicing diverse modern perspectives on Greco-Roman antiquity and its future study
- *Pasts Imperfect*: a network publishing fresh views on global antiquities and their contemporary relevance through a weekly Substack newsletter, a monthly column in the *LA Review of Books*, and more.

PHASE 2

Looking back

Lessons learned from 25 years in sustainability: Diverse voices share their personal stories and reflections on the biggest shifts in sustainability over the last 25 years; where we have succeeded and fallen short; unique lessons learned along the way, and what they feel is coming next.

Featuring reflections from **Jonathon Porritt, Johan Rockström, Archana Soreng, Aaron Maniam, Dr. Agnes Kalibata, Stephanie Lamma Ewi, and John Elkington.**

The changing role of business and governments, and the powerhouse that is youth

Reflections from Jonathon Porritt

Jonathon Porritt
Environmental Activist, Author & Co-Founder, Forum for the Future

Jonathon Porritt in conversation with Ivana Gazibara, former Director of the Futures Centre, as part of Forum for the Future's ongoing Future of Sustainability: Looking Back to Go Forward, through which we're exploring what the past can teach us about our future...

What have been the most significant shifts for the sustainability movement in the last 25 years? Where have we succeeded and failed? What lessons have we learned along the way? How can we transform 'business as usual'? And what surprises might be lurking around the corner?

In this special edition of the Futuring Podcast, Ivana Gazibara, the former Director of the Futures Centre, talks to Jonathon Porritt, environmentalist, author, campaigner, and founder of international sustainability nonprofit Forum for the Future, to understand what has changed since Forum was founded 25 years ago, and what this means for the future.

About Jonathon Porritt

Jonathon Porritt is a writer and broadcaster who has been on the front line of environmental campaigning for more than 45 years. He's been a member of the Green Party throughout that time and has worked tirelessly to promote the solutions to today's converging environmental crises.

His work as an author and broadcaster has had a huge impact over the years.

Among other themes, this provocative interview explores how some of the key underlying tenets of the sustainability movement – including the belief that voluntary action by progressive corporations would save the world – may have done more harm than good. Jonathon also shares his unique take on what critical shifts in mindset and approach are needed moving forward.

Please note: All opinions expressed by interviewees are their own and do not necessarily reflect the position of Forum for the Future.

Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Irreversible tipping points, winning narratives and whether transformation will be too late

Reflections from Johan Rockström

Johan Rockström
Director, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research

Forum's Co-Founder, environmental activist and author, Jonathon Porritt, in conversation with Johan Rockström, Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, and former Director of the Stockholm Environment Institute and Stockholm Resilience Centre.

As one of the world's leading climatologists, Johan Rockström has witnessed the evolution of climate science over the last three decades. Here he tells Jonathon Porritt how over that period the evidence for anthropogenic climate change has moved from hypothesis to hard-edged, observable fact. He reflects on the stark reality of the irreversibility of some climate impacts, such as sea-level rise, and warns that we now have a very narrow window for action to secure a 'safe operating space' for humanity.

While political leaders are starting to respond to the crisis, Rockström says, they are still for the most part wedded to existing economic models, which cannot hope to drive the speed or scale of the response required. He is skeptical of current strategies around net zero, arguing that they place a dangerous reliance on the unproven capacity of natural ecosystems such as soil and forests to absorb vast amounts of carbon dioxide.

Rockström takes heart from the passion of youth activists such as Greta Thunberg, and the Fridays for Future movement, and their commitment to following climate science. And he is also heartened by a growing confidence that those acting to keep the world within a 'safe operating space' have "the winning narrative", thanks to the multiple human benefits which such action entails.

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Jonathon Porritt in conversation with…
Johan Rockström

On science and certainty:

Jonathon

As we think back over the past 25 years, one of the things we're looking at is the degree to which the whole scientific endeavour on climate has changed, and has made such a massive contribution to the way politics has moved forward and decisions are taken today. In your mind, how would you characterise how different it is now to think about the underpinning science than it was back then?

Johan

The journey since the early 1990s until today has been, and continues to be, dramatic. Remember that in 1996, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was basically just establishing itself. It's not until 2001 that we have the IPCC's third assessment report, which is the first really, really major conclusion on the unequivocal human cause behind climate change. So it's almost been like a Copernican moment.

If we go back earlier, to the 80s and 90s, we'd seen the birth of the global environmental change research programmes, like the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP), the World Climate Research Programme, which basically provided the science behind the IPCC, Diversitas [later Future Earth], and the International Human Dimensions Programme… They all pursued their own disciplines and made tremendous advances in our understanding of how the physics of the earth system works – of biology, ecology, hydrology, and also social sciences. But it's not until we come to 2006, 2007, that for the first time a synthesis of all these insights were put together by the IGBP, which concluded that we have entered a whole new geological epoch, the Anthropocene.

So during these 25 years, we've seen extraordinary advances in our understanding of how our planet is a self-regulating system, where the living systems – the biology, the biosphere –interact with the chemistry and physics of ice sheets, of atmosphere, of oceans. And at the same time, we've seen this dramatic, exponential rise in unsustainable pressures on the planet – and that has occurred right in this period, right in the last three decades.

I always get quite frustrated by the way some people say 'Oh, you scientists, you're always warning [about catastrophe], always shouting, all the way back to the time of Limits to Growth [1972] – but then nothing really happens'. Well, that's not true. Back in the 70s and 80s, we had some really insightful early warnings, but we did not have the hard evidence in place. Today we do. We're sitting on this mountain of observations, of analytics, of modelling data, which gives us a completely different confidence level that we've never had before.

Jonathon

Yes, I think we've seen an extraordinary shift during that time. As a layperson, I think back to the ways in which so much of the debate in those early days was speculative and in some respects, contaminated, by that lack of really hard-edge data.

Johan

The science is clear. The [international goal of a maximum temperature rise of] 1.5°C is not some kind of political compromise with low-lying island states. It's a physically based planetary boundary. It's a temperature way outside anything experienced in the Holocene era. It's actually the warmest temperature on earth over the last 100,000 years. And we've been saying that for a long time. Paleoclimatic research has been saying it for decades. It shows that right across the last three million years, we've not passed a 2°C rise.

On irreversibility:

Jonathon

When the whole planetary boundaries framework was launched back in 2009, you and colleagues then were using language about the risk of irreversible and abrupt environmental change, and I can remember that word, 'irreversible', having a really significant, symbolic meaning at that time. But there was some pushback, with people saying these systems are much more flexible really, and what makes one system irreversible one moment, may change, and so on. So it was pretty shocking to see the latest IPCC report talking about some changes, such as sea-level rise, being irreversible over hundreds or even thousands of years.

Johan

Yes, and that's a very carefully crafted document, reflecting consensus across the entire scientific community, so it's a very conservative baseline. And yet it says that there's a very high likelihood – meaning that there's strong scientific confidence around it – that even if we keep to 1.5 degrees, we will be committing all future generations to at least two metres sea-level rise. I mean, it won't happen this century. It will take probably 2,000 years, but it's unstoppable. So from a moral perspective, if you think of intergenerational justice, you have to say it's time to hit the brakes! And yet no media has picked it up.

Jonathon

Yes, it's an absolutely shocking moment in the climate change story which just doesn't seem to have got the attention that it should have done.

Johan

You're absolutely right. The latest IPCC report basically confirms our planetary boundary assessment back in 2009: that tipping points are not only real risks, but cross them, and we commit all future generations to irreversible changes. For too long, we've allowed these questions to be seen as environmental issues when in fact they're not. They're about security, wealth and development. They're about our human future.

On science and politics:

Jonathon

I've never seen you as a political animal, Johan. But I wonder, do you spend quite a lot of time trying to bring politicians and civil servants up to speed with the reality of climate change?

Johan

Well, I'm walking a fine line. I personally have taken the decision that the biggest value I can offer the world is to give independent advice as a scholar, as a trusted source, to policymakers, to business, to civil society, schoolkids in school – whoever wants to listen. And over the years, I've become more and more pulled into the corridors of power, and also increasingly the boardrooms of big companies, to provide scientific advice. I do that out of a sense of obligation, as a public servant.

But it is a balancing act. I can tell you one little anecdote. We had the elections here in Germany just a week ago [September 2021] – the most decisive climate elections in our history. And one of the Chancellor candidates was Olaf Scholz of the Social Democrats. He said he wanted to come to the Potsdam Institute as part of his election campaign. And I said yes, you're welcome – but we will also immediately invite [the other leading Chancellor candidates] Armin Laschet [leader of the Christian Democratic Union) and Annalena Baerbock [leader of the Greens], so that we are not being preferential to any camp.

Jonathon

But do you think politicians really understand the severity of the crisis?

Johan

Yes and no…. ‘Yes’, in that I really think it has sunk in with citizens, politicians and business leaders that our current economic paradigm and the development pathways we’re following have risks associated with them and are causing negative impacts: that we have a problem, basically. And we can see this confirmed in opinion polls. That base understanding is much higher than ever before. And that’s why we see political initiatives like [the EU’s] Fit for 55 [targeting a 55% emission reduction by 2030], the Green Deal, and the Biden Administration making courageous decisions around Net Zero. So all that is good.

The ‘No’ is more problematic, in that I literally don’t see any signs of political leadership anywhere in the world understanding that we face a real crisis; that we’re talking of tipping points that could push the planet irreversibly towards leaving all future generations with less and less liveable conditions.

So in some ways [world leaders] have understood [that we have a problem], but at the same time still think that somehow we can muddle through along incremental, linear pathways that don’t in any way rock the boat of our current wealth creation models… That there are some quick fixes such as ‘green growth’ – decoupling [growth from environmental impact] – and if we just try to recycle better and reduce waste and stop eating meat, we’ll save the planet, basically! That I think is the symptom of failing to understand what the science has shown us: that this is a systems problem – that we’re hitting the ceiling of the entire planet’s capacity to be stable enough to support humanity.

“World leaders have understood that we have a problem, but at the same time still think that somehow we can muddle through along incremental, linear pathways that don’t in any way rock the boat of our current wealth creation models.”

So politically, it’s a mixed picture. There’s a lot of positives, but it hasn’t really sunk in properly that this is such a decisive moment.

On net zero:

Jonathon

The difficulty is people love to just simplify all this into black and white, which doesn’t really help anybody very much at all.And one of the areas where a lot of this controversy resides now is this notion of net zero carbon and what the hell ‘net’ means?! In particular, the degree to which the whole ‘net zero by 2050’ movement is taking...

Jonathon

comfort from the suggestion that we will be able to remove billions of tonnes of CO2 from the atmosphere to maintain some kind of stable climate, even having gone over the planetary limit. So, given in particular your work on the land-use side of things, I wondered where are you now on that whole notion of net zero?

Johan

Well, first, I always try to talk about catastrophic risk very clearly – because I'm afraid that sometimes climate science communication can have too much of a relaxed, feel-good air to it, to the extent that we underplay the risks. And that could come back to hit us very hard! You can imagine the disappointment among people in the future, when they say, 'Oh my God, if you knew all this, why didn't you tell us clearly that we were completely ruining the system?' And one of those areas where I feel that we have not been very honest with the world is on net zero.

The only reason why we have a remaining carbon budget is that we assume that forests, soils, and all the natural ecosystems and oceans, will just continue to absorb carbon dioxide. So we have factored into all the climate models massive negative emissions from mid-century onwards. We even assume that agriculture and forestry will go from what it is today, the single largest emissions source in the world, to becoming a sink. And we don't have solid evidence that we can deliver that. If forests and soils and natural ecosystems [continue to be a major emissions source], we have no carbon budget remaining. Then we have to shut down the fossil fuel-driven world economy today! So it worries me that we have built into the scenarios so many assumptions on negative emissions.

I would love to have avoided any discussion around 'net', and just moved to absolute zero as soon as possible. But it's just not realistic. Even if we are very, very successful in reducing emissions from natural gas, oil, and coal, there will be a residual remaining by 2050. We will have roughly five gigatonnes of carbon dioxide per year from aviation, from shipping, from steel industry, from all the difficult to abate industries, and that will have to be compensated through a net negative. So we have to accept the idea of 'net' zero whether we like it or not. Now that will hopefully be achieved in a 'like for like' fashion – for example, capturing the CO2 emitted through fossil fuel burning with CCS (carbon capture and storage) technologies, which I think could work if scaled up.

But net zero as applied today is too often misused as an offsetting strategy. As in, 'I'm not really able...

Johan

to reduce my emissions at the pace science dictates, so I'll plant some trees and I'll call that offsetting to help me become a net reducer of emissions.' That is complete greenwashing and it doesn't work, and it's simply violating both the policy and the science and the reality.

It should be used only for the final, final residual [emissions]. You know, you try to clean your house and there will always be one little dust portion in a corner that you can't get rid of. That's the net part. It shouldn't be allowed to grow to become this massive buffer.

On the emotional burden of climate science:

Jonathon

In the last 18 months, I've had some incredible personal encounters with scientists who have been emotionally distraught…as they themselves are beginning to wonder just how awful this is going to be for humankind. Even while, of course, maintaining everything that you might expect in terms of scientific balance. So just thinking of you, Johan, personally, sitting there with your colleagues in the Potsdam Institute reflecting on all of this, how do you cope?

Johan

I must admit it's challenging. And it's causing more and more concern across the scientific community. On the one hand, we as academics have to be very careful, because we have to continuously ensure that society sees us as trusted sources of objective information. So we cannot risk becoming too deeply embedded in political ideologies and activist movements. On the other hand, we cannot just sit and publish our papers. So what do we do? How do we act best as scientists to accelerate the pace of change? We have to find the right balance.

And I think we have a nice balance today. I myself am providing all the support I can for the youth climate movement, behind the scenes, informally, under the radar, being as active as I can. And many scientists are similarly engaged in 'science for the future'. But yes, many of us also undoubtedly feel a sense of frustration. I've just published a paper by social science colleagues at the Potsdam Institute, showing how the world's current coal power plant plans would eat up its remaining carbon budget. And you know, findings like that just make you...

Johan

...well, things just go black. I mean, it's really, really bad. So then you have to have a sort of therapy session with colleagues, just walking through how we should act at this stage? And increasingly many of us feel the need to step out and engage more actively – in demonstrations, in policy engagements, in ways of having broader societal impact.

Berlin has been quite a centre of the youth climate movement, of 'Fridays for Future' and so on. And immediately after one demonstration, I had a little electric car pick up Greta Thunberg and [German climate activist] Luisa Neubauer, because they really wanted to come up to the Potsdam Institute and meet the scientists. And I said, you're more than welcome. And the only purpose for that was – typical Greta Thunberg! – just to fill up with the latest science… Which is quite fantastic.

So in general, I'd say that the climate science community's [response to the crisis] now is characterised by a willingness to fight, rather than run the risk of falling into a kind of passive, depressive mode.

On hope:

Jonathon

Is there a taboo among scientists on saying 'It's too late'?

Johan

It's not taboo. There are scientists saying that, but only a few, and not in the mainstream of the scientific community. [At the Institute], we've said that the window [for action] is still open, even though it's shutting very fast.

Jonathon

Thinking about the prospects for young people to be able to thrive in a 'safe operating space' for humankind, what is the thing that allows you personally to keep hope alive, as you contemplate the next decade?

Johan

It's a really important question.

And the thing that gives me hope, every day, is that I feel 100% certain that we have the winning narrative. Because we have so much evidence that keeping the planet within a safe operating space gives multiple human benefits.

Benefits such as jobs, the economy, security, health, and human dignity and justice. We're seeing such a rapid rise in scalable solutions, like solar and wind power, and other sustainable options, which can help put us back in that safe operating space, and they're increasingly able to survive even in the misconstructed markets which subsidise systemic destruction.

So I sometimes tell my students that I'm absolutely convinced that the question is not whether we'll be able to decarbonise the world economy, and come back within a safe operating space. The question is only will we do it in time? Will we be too late?

I think the journey we're on towards a more sustainable, equitable, prosperous future…is essentially inevitable. And that's something I pick up very often to remind myself that in all these uphill battles, with sceptics and denialists and inertia, we have the winning story.

Even if we are not able to arrive at the dead centre of a safe operating space, we know that every tenth of a degree counts. We know that every species counts. We know that every hectare of land counts. We know that even having an overshoot period, so that we fail before we succeed, means that the impact on our children and their children will be reduced. So it's all worth it. I've never, never seen any justification for giving up.

Jonathon

And that's a brilliant place to end. I have an image in my mind now of you with your students, talking to them about why they need to be true to their life mission and to their prospects for the contribution they'll make to this world. I just love that idea of empowering them through the winning narrative – because that is what we have available to us, and that's fantastic.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

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Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

Differing worldviews, indigenous people and the frontlines of climate action

Reflections from Archana Soreng

Archana Soreng
Member of the UN Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, Climate Activist

Forum's Director of Global Programmes, Caroline Ashley, is in conversation with Archana Soreng. As a young woman activist from an indigenous community, Archana Soreng is on the front line of the fight against climate change.

Here she reflects on the contrast between the indigenous world view she grew up with, which sees people as part of nature, dependent on it and with an obligation to protect it, and a developed world view of nature as a commodity, to be harvested at a profit.

She emphasises the importance of drawing on the wisdom of indigenous elders, and of bringing an indigenous perspective to climate policy making and action, particularly youth activism. And she argues that women, who both bear the brunt of climate impacts but are also in the forefront of addressing it, should be seen not as hapless victims, but as resilient advocates for climate justice.

Despite the challenges, Soreng is optimistic that change is possible. She takes some comfort from a growing recognition of the value of indigenous knowledge, but insists that more needs to be done to recognise the rights of indigenous communities over their traditional lands. There is a lot of work still to be done, she concludes—and there is no time to waste.

About Archana Soreng

Archana Soreng, 26, is a leading Indian youth climate activist and UN adviser. Hailing from an Adivasi (tribal) background among the Kharia people in the state of Odisha, she is descended from indigenous healers and community leaders. Her grandfather was a pioneer in community forest protection, and both her parents were active in the struggle for her people's rights. This heritage inspired her to study environmental regulatory governance for her Masters degree, as a means of bringing her community's perspective to policy making.

She is one of seven members of the Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, established by the Secretary-General of the UN, and national convenor of the Adivasi Yuva ChetnaManch, or 'tribal commission', established by the India Catholic University Federation. A former President of the Students' Union at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Soreng is currently Research Officer at the NGO Vasundhara Odisha, which works on natural resources governance, conservation and sustainable livelihoods.

While participating in COP 26 in Glasgow, in her UN capacity, she spoke to Caroline Ashley, Director of Global Programmes at Forum for the Future.

Caroline Ashley in conversation with… Archana Soreng

On community identity and the climate summit:

Caroline

I'd like to start by asking what your normal working life looks like – and what you've been doing at COP?

Archana

My day-to-day work is focused on indigenous rights and climate justice, and in particular on preserving and promoting traditional knowledge. Before COVID, much of my work involved field visits, and I miss those a lot: I miss the chance to learn from the elders.

And I must say that COP has been a huge learning experience for me, too. I'm only able to come to a place like this because of the struggles of my ancestors, and so it feels very important to be here, to speak for my community. You know, we indigenous people have been in the front lines of climate action, so it's really important to be part of the discussion and decision-making process on it.

I'd like to stress that we are all different, we all bring different interests, capabilities and expertise, but as indigenous peoples we all share a deep relationship with nature. For me, nature is my source of identity; it's my culture, my tradition, my language and my livelihood.

We are not merely a part of nature – we are nature.

Just take my name. For us in the Kharia tribe, Soreng means 'rock'. Others have names meaning 'fish' or 'bird' or 'wild plant'. It all reminds us that nature is not a commercial commodity, but something of which we are a part, and so it's really important for us to be a part of the process of protecting it.

On inheriting and protecting an indigenous world view:

Caroline

You often speak about your family's involvement in protecting and nurturing the earth. Could you give a sense of how you have seen our relationship between society and the land and its resources change, and do you think it's getting better – or worse?

Archana

That's a really important question. My grandfather was a pioneer of community-led forest protection practices in my village and in the region. He was a firm believer that we need to have a sustainable relationship with nature. My father was an indigenous health care practitioner, and he and my mother were both active in indigenous rights issues. They told me that if you really want to contribute back to society, you need to enter into the policy making space. So I studied political science, and took a Masters in regulatory governance. As part of this, I studied environmental regulations – and realised that [regulating the environment] was something which I have grown up with, and seen in my own communities.

But the sad part is that [these regulations] are not written by our communities – they're written by someone else. And we are not able to access the decision-making process.

While studying, I lost my father, and that made me realise that our elders will not always be with us. So it's really important for my generation to go back and learn from them.It's crucial to make a bridge from the elders to the youth, because if we lose their wisdom now, we have nothing for our upcoming generation.

That said, it's important to stress that indigenous people are not homogenous. Some have been displaced from their traditional homelands, and forced to migrate, and may have taken on a different view from those that have stayed in their villages.

I was talking to one indigenous leader who told me she was struck by all the migration she saw during COVID, with people walking home from the cities. By contrast, she said that, "In the village, we were protected...

Archana

because the forest provided us food, the forest provided us shelter and the forest provided us medicine.”
In this time of crisis, in other words, it was nature, and their relationship with nature, which kept them safe.
So yes, we are preserving our traditional knowledge and practices, but there is more to it than that.

It is not just about what indigenous people do – it’s about what indigenous people are. Our whole world view is different from the developed world view.

Our whole world view is different from the developed world view. I come from a place where, in the past, we were constantly being made to feel inferior, that our knowledge and practices were inferior, and we were called ‘savage’ and ‘backward’. Nowadays, our traditional knowledge and practices are more acknowledged, but we still have to constantly push against this [dominant] developed world view.

On the difference between dominant and indigenous worldviews:

Caroline

Do you think that the prevalence of this particular worldview, along with the exclusion of indigenous voices, is the major obstacle [to climate justice]. Are there other key factors?

Archana

I would say it is the worldview, because that is where the problems start.

There is such a difference between those who prioritise the health of nature, and those who are focused on so-called development. When people speak of development, it is really important to ask: ‘Development by whom, for whom, and for what?’

If you take my land, and take my forest, then it is not sustainable development – even if you give me money, or jobs, or compensation. The money will not last, the jobs may not be fitting for local people. Yes, there are

Archana

compensation programmes, but these are often not implemented on the ground. And what are we compensating? Can you compensate for the loss of identity and culture; of traditional knowledge? Once those are lost, they are lost forever.

This is very important when it comes to sustainability. If people are there, living with the land and forest and nature, then they are sustainable. If they are evicted, then that is not sustainability.

It all comes down to how you are treating the earth, and how you are treating the people.

So yes, for us indigenous people, it is the dominant world view, with its focus on profit and gain and development [which is the biggest obstacle].

On cross generations:

Caroline

You speak really strongly of having a world view rooted in your indigenous culture, inherited from your ancestors. But you are also a young person in a space dominated by people who not so young. Do you think you have a different perspective because of your youth, or is it part of your culture that actually age is not the issue, and in fact you feel in a similar way to your elders and to previous generations?

Archana

Hmmm, I think my perspective is different, in that I'm an indigenous person first, and then a young woman. I may not be young tomorrow, but I am definitely indigenous tomorrow [laughs]. It is the indigenous perspective that is so missing in this discourse. And given how active the youth climate movement is, it's very important that there are indigenous youth involved in it. I strongly believe that it was my ancestors who advocated a lot for the perspective [we need to address climate change], and I think it's really important for indigenous youth to keep advocating for it.

On women as leaders:

Caroline

Yes, and you mention being not only indigenous, but a woman as well, and we know that for a long time women have been bearing the brunt of both climate change and climate management. Do you see that changing?

Archana

Yes, I think it's changing, people are slowly recognising how much indigenous women have contributed, but there's a lot more that needs to be done. We still don't have enough women in the decision making spaces and public speaking spaces [on climate]. It is genuinely difficult for us women to act, as the space is all filled by men. When we try to access those spaces, we meet with a lot of prejudices, so just [doing so] is a journey of assertion.

Women still get put in boxes when it comes to career choices: there is the idea that women should 'do this, do that', when we should be able to choose what we want to do and where we want to be. Even in my own work, it can be hard to travel to learn everything, since field research is seen as not being safe for a woman, and people ask 'what is this researcher thing roaming around?'

This is why it is so important to see women in positions of [climate] leadership, as they are often doing the real work, in the front line, bearing the brunt. We need to see them not as victims, but as resilient advocates.
There is a lot of talk of loss and damage in the climate action discourse, but it's important that we take into consideration the loss and damage suffered by indigenous women, and women in general. Because they have lost so much, sometimes their lives, sometimes their livelihoods, and they are risking so much, too.

On priorities - rights and voices:

Caroline

And now, looking forward: what would you most like to see happen over the next 25 years, say? What would make your dreams come true?

Archana

Ha ha! Yes… One of the most important things that I would like to see is a lot more countries committing to recognise the rights of indigenous people over their land, their forests, their territories, recognising the value of their traditional knowledge and practices, of their worldview.

And the second thing I would like to see is more indigenous people, particularly women and young people, in leadership positions among the international community, able to shape international commitments and plans to make a real difference.

On the long journey ahead:

Caroline

We hear a lot more now about regenerative approaches, and we hear a lot more recognition, at least in words, of the wisdom of indigenous people. So are you optimistic that your worldview is beginning to be more accepted – that real change is on the way?

Archana

I am optimistic – yes! I am optimistic because I see things are changing. I know it has taken a lot of time, and it will take a lot more time, because it takes time for things to change. We need to remember that this is not a 100 metre sprint; it's a long run, and that means I need to be happy with small achievements along the way, because I may not be alive to see the difference that my work makes in the long term.

This is a long chain of struggle, in which every contribution matters. But because it is a long run, we need to look after our mental and physical health, we need to take care of ourselves and work together. But we have to keep pushing forward, because we don't have time on our side.

That's why it is so important to act now!

I'm also optimistic because of the growing number of reports recognising indigenous peoples' rights over their land and their forests, and their contribution to climate action. I am willing to speak up, and our communities are...

Archana

willing to speak up. But we need to know that we won't just be listened to – that there will be action as well.

And that brings me on to the fact that, although there has been progress, there was hardly any mention of indigenous people in the COP negotiating process and opening remarks. That makes me feel that we are still fighting for our basic rights, and to be recognised for our contributions. We need to be seen as leaders of climate action, and not victims of climate policies.

So we need international solidarity. We need support, we need people to keep advocating for indigenous people. There is a lot of work still to be done.

Meanwhile, it's really important to do our own part of the work as best we can. We can't control what others do, but we can hold them accountable. And we can tell them, 'we are watching you!'

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

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Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

Policy, game-changers and how change happens

Reflections from Aaron Maniam

Aaron Maniam
Deputy Secretary (Industry and Information), Ministry of Communications and Information, Government of Singapore

Forum's Principal Sustainability Strategist, Madhumitha Ardhanari, in conversation with Aaron Maniam. As a civil servant, academic and futurist, Singaporean Aaron Maniam spans the worlds of government, teaching and research, with a strong personal interest in progress towards a sustainable future.

Here he explores some of the emerging trends that are shaping the prospects for such a future. He highlights two potential levers for progress, in the form of sub-national units such as cities, and digital technology. While acknowledging some of the challenges around the latter, he asserts his belief that technology itself is neutral, but can and should be harnessed more dynamically to achieve game-changing progress in areas such as climate mitigation and the potential for carbon taxes.

He sees government as playing a key role in providing technological infrastructure, but other actors – including business and the academic world – taking the lead in exploiting it to maximum benefit. As someone who pioneered participatory policy-making in Singapore, Maniam is a strong believer in collaborative government to tackle complex challenges, and in the potential of distributed models of leadership.

He argues for an appreciation that change can occur at different speeds, and that faster doesn't necessarily mean better. Similarly, there is value in a diversity of change strategies, from tightly structured, to ones that embrace openness, even "potential disorder".

As a futurist, he rejects the idea that futures work should be limited to analysis, arguing in favour of it having an activist and normative bent – creating a world we want to live in. Progress may come in fits and starts, he says, but believes that, to quote Martin Luther King, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice". Meanwhile, we should "work as if we live in the early days of a better nation." to paraphrase Scottish writer and artist Alasdair Gray.

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Madhumitha Ardhanari in conversation with… Aaron Maniam

Madhumitha

Looking back over the last 25 years or so, what for you are some of the most significant developments in the sustainability movement?

Aaron

Well, I wouldn't consider myself a sustainability expert: I play in the policies space, although of course that has some connections to the sustainability domain. We've obviously seen climate change take centre stage over that time, and the scientific evidence around it really firm up.

But for me what's really interesting has been the increasing inclusion of a broader range of actors [beyond just government] in this space. I don't just mean civil society groups, either. The two that really come to mind are cities and technology firms.

On the first, I think we're realising that a lot of the biggest game-changers can come from sub-national units such as cities, [and also] provinces and municipalities, because that's where some of the most needle-moving progress can happen in terms of traffic congestion and greenhouse gas consumption.
I hope we'll see a lot more activity among cities, and greater complementarity between them and national governments. That will be very helpful.

On taming tech:

Aaron

When it comes to tech firms, we're realising that a broad range of digital technology is going to help us on the sustainability front. A friend of mine and I were talking about the Singapore Green Plan, and they said, 'Oh, but I guess you don't have to do very much on that because you're in the Ministry of Comms and Info?' And I'm like, 'Well, we're in charge of digitalisation technology, and that's one of the greatest enablers of more green-related progress, so actually we have a lot to do with sustainability!'

I think that we – and when I say 'we', I mean the international community – really haven't harnessed technology enough.

The discussions around things like carbon abatement and mitigation, or even issues like carbon taxes, have not taken into account the fact that we can change the path we're on if we use technology in a more sophisticated way. A lot of our existing assumptions could get overturned if we do so.

Aaron

We've seen it [with the pandemic]. There were assumptions about how much travel people needed to do in a normal life, and therefore how much carbon emissions [were inevitable]. And none of that has proved to be a given. I've only travelled once in the last two years, and I don't think my international network has suffered for it. I don't think social capital [more widely] has suffered, yet the environmental effects have been quite profound. So I'd love to see us use technology in more creative ways. That said, there are aspects of tech which are still highly carbon-intensive, so we will have to get better at managing those.

Madhumitha

I was born into a world where I think the internet was just coming about, and it was so exciting to grow up in! It felt there was once upon a time when the internet was nice – you know, all trees and dinosaurs! Now it's become a much more complex ecosystem, with concerns about everything from the dark web to what we used to call the digital divide, but which has expanded to a whole other set of inequity and access issues. There's quite a conundrum around questions like where technology goes, who controls it, who uses it, how it's used and for what purpose. What's your take on this?

Aaron

Any technology is always going to have its hopeful as well as dysfunctional elements.

Wheels helped plough fields but also moved cannons into war. Technology itself will always be neutral: it's a question of how we end up using it.

So in government, we need to figure out what we regulate to minimise the harm, while at the same time not stymying the innovative potential. And part of the challenge is that stuff happens so fast that nobody can fully keep up. It took time for the full effect of things like wheels and fires to be realised. But when it comes to digital tech, the development cycle is a lot more compressed than it ever has been.

People yearn for simple answers on all this. But the reality is that we can't have them. There will be no single watermark that is applicable to all technology.

Madhumitha

So given the sheer pace of change, what do you think are some of the principles for ensuring we have a ‘net positive’ outcome for technology?

Aaron

I think you have to start from the [premise] that governments have a responsibility to provide at least some basic infrastructure for public goods, and [that extends to] the digital sphere. Because no entity [other than government] is going to have [sufficient] incentives to provide [things like] 4G, fibre or 5G.

Government has to adopt things in an agile and evolutionary manner, and realise that today’s standards may not apply to tomorrow’s technology.

And you want to make sure government doesn’t micro-manage. You want to create space for enterprises to undertake the most interesting applications of a particular technology. You want others involved, too, because I don’t think these decisions should ever be purely about businesses. You want universities to do new research and try new things, and you want local governments to do some of this work as well.

On the pleasures of partnership:

Madhumitha

What would you say has shifted in terms of your own worldview over the last 25 years?

Aaron

I’d always wanted to join the public sector, because I believed that governments have the power to do a world of good if they want to, and [if they] can exercise their power well. I still believe that, but where my worldview has shifted is that I have realised you can’t do everything on your own. And that’s a hard realisation! It’s always…

Aaron

easier to say, ‘Oh, I’ll just do this by myself.’

Given the complexities of the tasks we face, we can’t achieve the richest outcomes we want on our own, and we shouldn’t even try. We need one another. And that is where agency lies.

We have to approach these [tasks] as communities and as networks and as composites of individuals, rather than operating in a siloed way.

We’ve got a more educated population now than we’ve ever had. We should be tapping into that for ideas and insights, rather than assuming that government must do everything on its own.

So we need partners, we need businesses, we need civil society organisations, we need researchers and academics. It’s part of why I teach, just to stay connected to that world.

Personally, I started to see where I could create more participatory policy-making structures here in 2012, with the Singapore Conversation [which involved 47,000 Singaporeans participating in over 660 dialogue sessions island-wide]. And since then, it’s grown. The faith in government in these sorts of process has, I think, evolved over time. Governments are saying, yes, we can’t do this by ourselves, we need new ways of operating. And there are all sorts of academic names for this movement like ‘collaborative government’ or ‘networked government’, but the core theme in all of it is much greater interlinkage amongst actors, [to tackle] the complexity of the work which we all have to do.

So I think all governments, even the most powerful, will end up needing other entities. Even in China, I suspect if we dig deep we will find really interesting collaborative arrangements between government – not just at the centre, but at the provincial and city level – and other entities, whether it’s community groups or businesses.

On analysis to action:

Aaron

A second shift in my own worldview has been from the purely analytical perspective to a more activist one...

Aaron

By analytical, I mean one that says, ‘the information is out there; how do I understand and process it?’ And you need some of that. But I also think we need to decide for ourselves what we want to achieve.

No great change happens when people just analyse information. It happens when people decide what they want, within the realm of the plausible, and then start taking concrete action to deal with it.

I think that’s really important, and not just around sustainability. Those of us who do futures work, in general, need to know what are the things we want to create.

If we just take the world as it is and assume that we have to adjust to it or adapt to it, then we end up with a very impoverished set of solutions.

On pacing change:

Madhumitha

But there is another conversation, isn’t there, about the pace of change? Because sometimes the faster we go, the less we actually get things accomplished. I personally grapple with the question of what is the right speed to move at in order to achieve the kind of world we want…

Aaron

We always assume that everything tends to move at the same speed, and so if I want to move stuff faster I just accelerate.

But there are naturally different clock speeds for stuff that we want to do. Tech development cycles move at one speed, while healing moves at quite another. When an individual is wounded, you can’t pour on twice as much antiseptic and expect it to get better twice as fast.

And when a society has been through a massive dislocation [as with the pandemic], healing takes time. It’s not linear, either. There are certain things which will just take a certain amount of time.

Aaron

Take education. If you teach a child twice as fast, they're not going to learn twice as much. Yes, you can probably speed up teaching of things like maths, technical stuff, but you can't teach the humanities much faster. This is why you have child prodigies in maths in universities, but you never have a history or a literature prodigy, because those things work at a different clock speed.

I think it's not just about [the pace of] change, it's also about how you structure [the change process] as well. Some things benefit from having a clear blueprint or template as to how to take action, while others benefit from keeping an openness to serendipity and to potential disorder. Sometimes you can have a very structured process within which there can be openness. I was chatting with a friend the other day who researches what he calls temporal rhythms in organisations. Among the things he studied were video game producers. And he found that they had very agile processes, but they applied them in a very routine fashion. For example, every day without fail there would be a 15-minute scrum meeting. That's the structure bit. But what you do in the 15-minute scrum is open, and what you do after that also changes because you're evolving in response to the task at hand.

Organisational time is not uniform, in other words. Sometimes you want to speed it up and structure it, and other times you want to slow it down and leave it unstructured, or speed it up, but keep it unstructured. And sometimes it will be slow and very structured. So [when it comes to achieving change], that combination of speed and structure will be a very interesting one to explore.

On hope and inspiration:

Madhumitha

A final question, Aaron: what brings you most hope and what connects you to that hope?

Aaron

I'll go back to the comments I made earlier about governments not being able to do everything. Everywhere in the world we've seen examples [during the pandemic] of communities taking on vital work, whether it's neighbours helping neighbours, or people organising food runs to help some of our migrant workers here in Singapore, or people coming…

Aaron

and saying, ‘I notice that more and more of us need mental health help. We can’t meet but I’m here, I’m going to always be here on Zoom, from 2pm to 4pm on Fridays, please come talk with me if you need to’.

It’s about people saying, ‘I’m not going to wait for the structure to be created for me – I’m going to get on and do stuff that I know is ethical. And sure, it’ll be untidy, but it’s there. Later on, if the public sector wants to organise it a bit more, fine, but it’s there as an option.’For me, those sorts of distributed models of leadership – agency-driven, from the ground up – are the greatest source of inspiration, because they remind me that we’re not always going to be reliant on brittle and overly structured solutions. That, I think, is super critical. And the more we can harness that for sustainability, both individual, planetary and organisational, then the stronger we will become.

There will be fits and starts, sure, but there are fits and starts in everything. Governments have fits and starts, businesses go through cycles. So civil society and community groups will do that as well. The fits and starts will sometimes come from hitting natural setbacks, such as not finding funding, or from discovering, for example, that leaders who were inspiring and charismatic turn out to be abusive. There can be all sorts of setbacks, but if you look at a longer time horizon, you’ll find there will be recoveries as well.

This is where I go back to two quotations that always keep me going. One is from Martin Luther King, who said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”. It bends towards the right sorts of outcomes, in other words, even if it doesn’t move there in a neat and linear way, and we have to accept that.
The other line that always gives me great comfort is from the Jewish Ethics Of The Fathers, in which Rabbi Tarfon says that it’s not for us to complete the task, but neither are we at liberty to desist from it. We have to accept that we will, we hope, leave the world a little bit better than it was, and then someone else will take the task and carry it on.

It conveys a sense of stewardship, rather than trying to do everything ourselves. And sorry, I said it was two but it’s actually three.

The third one that gives me a lot of inspiration is the line [popularised by] Scottish [writer and nationalist] Alasdair Grey: “Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation.” [Editor’s note: Originally coined by Canadian poet Dennis Lee, this line was engraved in the wall of the Scottish Parliament Building in Edinburgh…

Aaron

when it opened in 2004.]

This chimes with the Rabbi Tarfon quote. If I try to do everything [myself], that won't work. But if I believe that I'm working in the early days of a better nation then I [will lay] foundations, I will steward, and I will put in place structures that others will come and build on, and hopefully stand on the shoulders of multiple giants. And if we put all those things together, then actually time becomes less of an obstacle. It becomes a friend and an ally.

* * *

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

Empowering women and inspiring youth

Reflections from Ewi Stephanie Lamma

Ewi Stephanie Lamma
Environmental and Climate Justice Advocate
Forests Resources and People (FOREP)
Limbe, Cameroon

Forum's Associate Director – Americas, Samantha Veide, in conversation with Ewi Stephanie Lamma. *As a leading environmental activist and grassroots mobiliser in Cameroon, Lamma is a powerful advocate for bringing women and youth into the heart of decision-making on these issues.*

Lamma is at the forefront of environmental change. In November, she should have been harvesting her maize. Instead, she was planting it, as climate change has turned agricultural calendars upside down.

Lamma calls out failure where she sees it – a REDD+ project that excluded uneducated local women, NGOs that produce reports but not action, and Cameroonian policies that are well articulated but undermined by corruption.

Here, she explains her own approach to creating change: empowering women, educating youth, and opening up spaces among leaders.

Lamma works directly with women who rely on forests, and speaks movingly of their breakthroughs as women find their voice and gain positions on local councils, traditionally the preserve of men.

She stresses the benefits of women's environmental leadership to the wider community, quoting the Cameroonian proverb: "If you train a man, you have just trained one person. If you train a woman, you have trained a nation."

Lamma explains her inspirational approach to engaging young people. She holds out great hope that, with the right education and empowerment, Cameroon's emerging generation will set the country on a path to a sustainable future.

When Lamma shared how she works with cultural norms and at the same time disrupts them, whether regarding the voices of women or whether schoolchildren may call her by her name, it made us smile and think. We hope her wisdom makes you do both too.

About Ewi Stephanie Lamma

Ewi Stephanie Lamma holds a Master's Degree in Natural Resource and Environmental Management from the University of Buea, and over the past eight years has specialised in working with rural communities, particularly women, on climate and the environment. She has trained 5,440 women in over 160 forest communities in Cameroon on livelihood development

projects, and succeeded in increasing women's participation in rural community councils. Her work has prompted over 20 councils to set out local forest management policies, with 30 nurseries growing over 110,000 indigenous trees to restore degraded land. She recently developed a climate change curriculum for schools across Cameroon, and she has established climate change clubs in schools around her home city of Limbe. She hosts a weekly radio program, 'Eco-Voice', on Eternity Gospel Radio and Eden Radio Limbe.

Samantha Veide in conversation with… Ewi Stephanie Lamma

Samantha

I'm so excited to be talking with you today, Lamma! Let's start with just a quick introduction from yourself – who you are, where you sit today, and a little bit about your work…

Lamma

Thank you so much, Samantha! It's such a pleasure to be here and I'm glad to be joining you. I'm Lamma Ewi and I'm from Cameroon. I live in Limbe, which is one of the most beautiful cities in Cameroon. We have sandy beaches beside the beautiful Atlantic ocean, we have a beautiful volcanic mountain [Mount Cameroon] nearby, and we're bordered by the Bimbia Bonadikombo community forest.So that's where I'm coming from.

I hold a Master's Degree in Natural Resources and Environmental Management, and I've spent over eight years working in environmental and climate justice. My particular interest is in women's advocacy, and in building the capacities of young people in climate change programmes.

Climate change is our reality

Samantha

When we met earlier you were telling me that you'd just been planting out maize…

Lamma

Yes, two weeks ago I helped plant my own maize, and that was strange because at this time of year, we are supposed to be harvesting maize instead of planting it.

This is supposed to be the start of the dry season, but we are having so much rain instead. It is like the calendars have changed.We no longer know when is the rainy season and when is the dry season. We cannot plan as we did. We have to do our farm work and plant our crops just as the weather shows, we have to remake our agricultural calendars based on these new climate conditions [which are always changing].

Samantha

It's such a strong example of how the climate crisis is impacting people on a daily basis, right?

Lamma

Oh yes, that is our reality.

Samantha

Yes… So please tell me a little more about your work, particularly with women…

Engaging women

Lamma

During my early years of work I became aware that women were constantly excluded from decision-making in climate and

Lamma

rainforest programmes.

Yet women are the people who are most directly connected to nature and the forest in their daily activities. They forage, they go into the forest for medicine, food, water, for their income… So by excluding them from [decisions] on forest management and on climate change, you're excluding the people who are most vulnerable to its impact. So when I looked into that, I was like, OK, there is a need for someone to stand up and speak up for the inclusion of women in decision-making programmes. So I decided to carry out my Master's research in this area.

There was a REDD+ project underway in the Bimbia-Bonadikombo community forest, which is just a 20-30 minutes' ride from where I live. This project claimed to have taken gender inclusion into consideration, so I wanted to know if it was [really doing so]. And when I looked deep into it, I realised that gender considerations were actually missing: the women were not involved in decision-making, even though it concerned the management of the resources [on which they depend].

One of the reasons given for their absence was because they were considered to be uneducated.
But education shouldn't determine someone's involvement in leadership. It should be participation.
So I began working with these women to empower them in creative leadership.

Then these women were like: 'Oh my goodness! there is something here we're missing out on. We thought we needed to go to school to be involved in these decisions. But we are just learning that we don't need formal education. We can make decisions on these issues based on what we see.' That gave me such joy.
I realised these women are beginning to step out. They are losing their low self-esteem, and their voices are being heard.

And so, aside from empowering them on leadership, I also trained them on livelihood development projects, such as mushroom cultivation, beekeeping, and agroforestry. A few of them got involved in snail farming. We grouped them together as a team and provided them with some start-up capital for their first snail farms. This was something new for them and they were very, very impressed!

Bringing women into council decisions

Samantha

Can you give me an example of how you achieved a real shift in bringing women into decision-making? How it happened, and how it changed the outcomes of the work?

Lamma

I recall this moment when I was in a focus group meeting with the women and I was asking them, ‘how many of you are involved in the local council?’ And they were saying, ‘No, as a woman you cannot be in the local council’. And I asked them, ‘Why? What is the reason?’

The women told me, ‘leadership is only for the men. We are supposed to take care of our homes, we are supposed to take care of the kitchen.’

That took me by surprise! So I asked them, ‘What is the reason you think leadership is only for the men?’ And they stood and they said, ‘The reason is that we, the women, have been given our own place, which is a kitchen and the home.’

So I worked to ensure these women were given the opportunity to learn about leadership and participation. Later one of them stood up and said, ‘How I wish I had known this when I was younger! This would have helped me to be able to stand and raise my voice, and maybe today I would have been part of the local council’.I was really moved by that statement. It drove me to sit with the council of elders in the community. Now, this was made up only of men. And not every man in the village, either, but only the wealthy men, those who were having huge cocoa farms, large plantations, who had children abroad.

So I asked the men, ‘Don’t you think your women, who have been managing the forest for a long time, will make great input if they are involved in your council decisions [on its future]? They are the mothers of your community and they will better understand the needs of your children’.

Lamma

There is this mentality that the communities have grown up with that says, ‘When you empower a woman, you make her a lioness, and she will become a terror in our home.’ And that’s because of the way many people have taken the idea of advocacy for women and made it look more like a power struggle. But it need not be like that.
Rather it is just an opening for participatory decision making, so that everyone can be heard and everyone can understand that they are valuable when it comes to the management of their resources and of their communities. Then everyone will benefit.

And after my conversations with the council, women [have now become involved], and now around 20% [of participants] are women. So that was huge progress. We are still working to make it up to 40%, 50%, and why not 70%?!

Samantha

I love that, and what’s interesting to me is the idea that involving women is not just right for the women, it’s not just addressing their exclusion, but it sounds like the community saw the benefits of better decision making, too.

Lamma

Yes, when I spoke with these women [who had come onto the council], one of them mentioned something. She said her husband thought she was going to be a terror at home if she went! And some men said, ‘Oh, you are [just] a young girl, what do you know, what can you tell us?’ But she was able to talk about her child’s future, and [argue the case for a new road to come into the village], saying this will help her child go to a better school in a nearby town [and so bring benefits to the whole community].

As a result, the new road was established, and the reason for that was because she stood up and represented her community in a meeting. And when she told me that, I was so happy for her! That was a great one for me!

If you train a woman, you train the nation

Samantha

I love the simplicity of something as straightforward as the road enabling people to access different resources. It's kind of a metaphor too, right? We're building roads – pathways – for people so that they can access new ways of thinking…

So you talk about some of the things that you've helped to change in your community. Let's dig into that a little bit. What would you say are some of the most significant shifts in your area of expertise, natural resources and environmental management, in the last 25 years or so?

Lamma

One of the most important shifts in the sustainability movement over my lifetime is the fact that women – women, women, women are now taking their place in it. And it is very important for the community that they do so. Even until 2018, women represented just 2% of those involved in environmental work in Cameroon. And this saddened me, because, across the globe, women are much more connected to nature than men. Even though it is men who tend to be taught to be in [fields like] forestry and environmental protection.

But it is changing. Now the divisional delegates of the ministries of environmental protection and of forestry and wildlife are women.

We have a proverb in Cameroon which says, 'If you train a man, you have just trained one person. If you train a woman, you have trained a nation'.

This to me is so true, because if you train a woman, she's going to engage her children too.

As the years go by, more and more women are becoming involved in environmental programmes, and at the pace we are moving, I think by 2025 they will occupy 20% of leadership positions.

Working with culture while going outside the box

Samantha

Thinking about what you've learned in these last 25 years, what do we have to take forward for the next 25?

Lamma

First, we need institutions which focus on educating women in environmental protection, and [ideally these would be] single sex. When I go into rural communities, I hold meetings with the women separate from the men. Why? Because when we bring the men and the women together, the women will become quiet. They will not be able to speak because our cultures in Africa don't permit women to speak when the men are talking. So that is why we need single sex institutions to educate local Cameroonian women.

Then, once their morale, their self-esteem, and their knowledge about environmental stewardship is built up, they will be ready to sit together with the men and talk with all confidence, knowing fully well that what they are saying is right. They will not be limited by their traditional culture. This does not destroy the most cherished local Cameroonian cultures, it's just that it gives the woman a place. A place for her to be able to think out of the box without [also thinking], 'Let me not say something wrong, my husband might shut me down, [or] my father might shut me down.' She can express herself to her full capacity, without feeling psychologically restrained from being the best she can be.

Beautiful NGO reports but the work isn't being done

Lamma

We have so many [environmental] NGOs and civil society organisations in Cameroon who are [very good] at making wonderful speeches, and writing exciting and intriguing [project] proposals. And there are these funding organisations that load them with so much money to carry out the projects. But what happens is these [NGOs] then

Lamma

fabricate reports; they fabricate programmes. They might say, ‘we are going to be doing this in six communities, or in 10 communities’, and at the end of the day they might work in only one. But they will write a very beautiful report and send it back [to the funder]. And then sometimes they will not work [at all]. They will [just] sit at their desk and send wonderful reports, and have no impact on the ground.

It pains me to see these organisations receive huge amounts of funds for the same projects in the same area, and yet the work is not being done. We can see the reports online, but [when we look on the ground] how come we can’t see the work? How come we can’t find success stories in these areas? So if resources are being made available – financial, institutional or material – there should be a clear follow-up.

There should be clear monitoring and auditing processes, to make sure they’re being properly managed and [delivering the] project objectives, so that real impact is being created.

A beautiful land, with beautiful policies, but...

Samantha

So why is all this important? Why is environmental stewardship important for the people of Cameroon?

Lamma

Environmental stewardship is important for all the people of Cameroon because we have such great natural resources. We have a great quantity of forests. We have such a beautiful diverse mix of plant and animal species – including gorillas.Every child in Cameroon encounters these resources in one way or another. It’s not just something in the books, it’s not just something in the papers. It’s a reality. We have over 260 traditional dishes in Cameroon...

Lamma

thanks to the variety of plants we have.

Cameroon is called Africa in miniature. Why? Because everything in Africa that you're looking for, whether it comes through music, the natural environment, language, even people, you will find bits of every one of these things in Cameroon.

And of all the African countries, Cameroon has some of the best environmental policies. But you know the challenge? We have beautiful policies, but they are weak in implementation.And that is because of a high rate of corruption and embezzlement. This has meant that policies which should be implemented are swept under a rug, and nothing is being done about it.

Bring policies to the people

Lamma

We need to expose environmental policies [to the layperson]. One of the greatest challenges faced by rural women, and by rural societies in general, in Cameroon, is that they don't know or understand the policies which govern their resources [such as forests]. They don't know what the constitution says about their resources, and their own place in their management.

When you are ignorant of a thing, you become a victim of the repercussions that come with that ignorance
So we need to educate people about these policies, and about their rights under the laws and the constitution.
You know, it doesn't take very huge things to make our environment sustainable. It doesn't need very huge concepts, very huge ideas. It just takes the small things in our communities: raising awareness, getting people involved, doing participatory work, monitoring how work is being done – and then being truthful.

Of youth, and hope

Samantha

What gives you hope for the next generation – for the future of environmental stewardship in Cameroon?

Lamma

The first day we started with our Acorn club in the schools, we realised that talking to children was very difficult. One aspect of our culture means that the Cameroonian child grows up unable to express herself, to speak up. When someone talks to you, you should just accept it and stay quiet. So that first day, when I told the children, 'Hey, just call me by my name', they were like, 'oh my goodness, how can we just call you by your name?' [laughs] It was like a taboo…

We made sure these children felt free in class, and when they are answering a question, we [assure them] that there is no wrong answer. Nothing that they say makes them wrong. They might not be very close to the answer, but they are not wrong. And their teachers came to us [later] and asked, 'Madam, how were you able to pass [all this] climate change knowledge to these children in [just] one month?'.

We changed the traditional classroom environment, and made these children feel free.

So if we can put more resources into training and empowering the children, building their capacities, then the future of sustainability in Cameroon has to be great. And the younger generation, their minds are open. In school, we asked them to write a letter to their future.

I have some beautiful letters here on my desk with me. Some of them said, 'When I grow up, I am going to go to university, I am going to study climate change. I will be a climate ambassador, and I will go to America, I will go to Canada, I will go to France, to Britain, to these beautiful places, to learn more, and then I will come home and teach other children in my community about climate change.'

So that is the future we are talking about. Those are the children we are looking out for.

* * *

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

Intensive globalisation, recalling the triple bottom line and changing capitalism

Reflections from John Elkington

Forum's Co-Founder, Jonathon Porritt, *in conversation with* John Elkington*, Founder and Chief Pollinator at Volans and one of the original founders of the sustainability movement in Europe.*

Here, John reflects on some of the shifts he has witnessed in the last 25 years, starting with the rise and more recent decline of globalisation, and the sense that the current incarnation of the capitalist system might be entering a period of 'decomposition'. Bringing his historical perspective and in-depth knowledge of dynamic trends today, John outlines the 'existential crisis' for capitalism and how he sees elements of a 'new order' emerging.

He looks back further to consider the influence of green consumerism and the concept of the 'triple bottom line' – both of which he gave birth to – and of the need to move beyond them into a new, ambitious form of business responsibility for resilience, regeneration and systemic change.

Elkington considers the possibility that society might be moving towards a period of growing conflict, with military tensions rising, and populism and autocracy gaining ground at the expense of democracy. He acknowledges that, while climate change will exacerbate these trends, they also have potential to galvanise the reinvention of capitalism, drawing on new business models and technologies based on regenerative principles.

Such rebirth, he argues, will only be possible if supported by a 'pan-generational compact', bringing young people and elders together in a shared endeavour to tackle this century's challenges.

This is a longer read than many in our series in order to capture the rich conversation during which many wide-ranging topics were covered: the history of business sustainability, whether capitalism can be reinvented, and the roles of consumers, young and old citizens, and even sustainability gurus themselves in driving change.

About John Elkington

John Elkington has worked in sustainability for a little short of half a century, playing a central and hugely influential role in influencing business to take environmental issues seriously. In 1978, he co-founded

Environmental Data Services (ENDS), and went on to launch SustainAbility – the first consultancy to work directly with business on environmental issues. He coined the term 'green consumer' and co-wrote *The Green Consumer Guide* (1988). Six years later, he invented the concept of the 'triple bottom line', which formed the basis for many companies' engagement with sustainability. In 2008, he founded Volans, an advisory company now specialising in "making business sense of regeneration".

He has addressed over 1,000 conferences, served on 70 boards or advisory boards and won numerous awards. In 2009, a CSR International survey of the Top 100 CSR leaders placed John Elkington fourth: after Al Gore, Barack Obama and the late Anita Roddick of the Body Shop, and alongside Muhammad Yunus of the Grameen Bank.

Jonathon Porritt in conversation with… John Elkington

The dawn of deglobalisation

Jonathon

Our starting point for all these conversations is to look back over the last quarter century or so, and reflect on what have been the major changes. So if I ask you that question, what would you say have been the really striking developments…?

John

Well, the late 90s was a period of very intensive globalisation. That was after the collapse of communism, when capitalism was on a roll, and thought that the future was its to control. Now that was contested, certainly, but it felt that globalisation was the future.

And now we're in a period where the geopolitical and macroeconomic orders we've got used to, and in some cases grown up with, are all wobbling.

They're showing very serious signs of coming apart, including in the UK. We could even be witnessing the start of a period of 'deglobalisation'.

John

We're also seeing the fragmenting of the generational compact, if it ever existed: the sense that older people will do the best for younger people and vice versa. Add the climate emergency into the mix, and I think there is a very real and growing risk that we'll see some aggravated intergenerational tension.

So is this just simply a temporary glitch? Or is it, as I believe, [evidence laid out in Green Swans] that we're going through a U-bend in our history, where an old order decomposes much faster than we might have imagined, and other orders start to self-assemble? A period where the challenge for people like us is very different from simply advising individual companies and government departments to tweak the system?

Instead, as the system starts to break up around us, [we have to ask] now what? What are we now trying to build? And I find that both exciting and terrifying in equal measure.

Jonathon

Was there a point when the momentum for globalisation began to slow? Was it the financial crisis in 2008? Or was it only brought home to us all with COVID?

John

There's no question that COVID brought it clearly into view, but it had been building for a while. People with extended supply chains, into China for example, had become a little bit agitated about what was happening in that part of the world. I think the pandemic has been the moment where people just woke up and thought, 'Oh, this isn't working terribly well…'.

Jonathon

Yes, but we did say that after the financial crash; we did say, 'That brings this phase of capitalism to an end – we can't possibly go back to what it was like before'. And yet unerringly we did go back to it. The powers that be made such a concerted effort to take us back to some of those false securities that we were left wondering whether we'd learnt anything at all.

John

Yes, I think there was a pernicious effect of the bail out of financial institutions, [leading people to feel], ‘It’s OK, we can take idiotic risks and at some point the government will wade in and save us’...

But I think for many younger people, that was the moment they just felt betrayed by the system. They didn’t feel that they could trust the politicians in bed with capitalists. That feeling could be the springboard for the next round of change, or it could undermine those prospects because people may say, ‘Oh, it’s just not worth trying – this is a corrupt system and it’s dying’… I don’t know which way it’s going to go.

Jonathon

So I love this word ‘decomposition’. I’m fascinated to see it in those terms, that bits of the system are just sort of falling apart or putrefying in front of our eyes… And if so, how do you track that? Are you able to measure it, or is it more a generic sense that this is just what the current reality looks and feels like?

John

Well, the simple answer is, no, we can’t exactly measure any of this. It’s not a science. Some of this is intuition. It’s based on a study of history, which was always my favourite subject at school, and a sense that there are [historical] cycles; there are rhythms shaping what we do as human beings. And in terms of evidence, I listen to what people are saying in boardrooms and C-suites in different parts of the world. But ultimately it is intuitive: a sense that there is something deeply broken in the current system, and therefore it’s only a matter of time before it does indeed decompose in front of our eyes. Then the question is: can we really steer this in the right direction, even shape the process? I think we can.

The triple bottom line - and after

Jonathon

Let’s talk about your idea of the triple bottom line [1], and how that evolved. Because in the early days of Forum for the Future, we were its beneficiaries.We could talk about sustainability to our very new and nervous partners through the lens of the triple bottom line. It worked really well, and led to elaboration of a business case for sustainable development – a bottom line based approach…

John

…and multiple forms of capital [2], too.

Jonathon

…multiple forms of capital, yes, and so on and so forth. It was great. There was a lot of real intellectual commitment to make a framework for companies that was properly coherent and operational. And working through that business case with them, [pointing out] how many ways they would benefit from getting good at all of this – it was incredibly powerful, and Forum was definitely able to use all of that to good effect.

And now you've issued your 'recall notice'[3]… So now that you are in the business of urging people not to use the triple bottom line anymore, and even getting a tiny bit grumpy…

John

[laughs] Grumpy? Me?

Jonathon

Yeah, you, [laughs]…grumpy with people who are still basing their thinking on pretty primitive triple bottom line type stuff – now that's happened, can you just give me a sense [of how the concept evolved] from 1994 to that recall moment, which must have been quite a big, symbolic moment for you.

John

Well, when I came up with the original idea, it started off as the triple win-win-win-win – and it had an astounding impact for quite a period of time, so I do think it was useful. Particularly when you compare it to what was there beforehand [in sustainable business concepts], such as eco-efficiency. There was nothing wrong with that, but it was just simply the idea that you can save or make money by doing the right thing on energy, resources, pollution or whatever.

John

Then the triple bottom line came along, and it said, it's not just the financial savings and it's not just the direct environmental impacts that you have, but it's [about the wider] economy, so that's a bigger story, and it's [about] social impact too. Plus it's much bigger than just your local footprint – it's about the biosphere, about life on earth. So it was a slightly different framing, to put it mildly.

And I'm not giving up on it. Anyone who understands business knows that a product recall is not saying, 'this particular product is completely useless'. It's saying, there is a dysfunction, it's been called to our attention, and now we're going to correct it and then put it back out into the market. So just to be clear, I'm totally happy that, for example, B-corporation companies are being audited against the triple bottom line.
One of the things that happened when it first launched was that everyone and their donkey was suddenly coming up with quadruple bottom lines and quintuple ones and, you know, where do we go after that?! And when the multiple capitals thing came along, I welcomed them as well. But – I don't know about you – I can only really remember three things. Ten commandments I just screw up routinely because I just can't remember a whole list of things you're not meant to be doing!

Anyway, the main issue [with the triple bottom line] is a framing problem. People have seen it as being about responsibility… But if you're in [that] frame, then in a sense you're trying to ensure that everything you do is responsible, and that very, very quickly gets you into trade-offs – not into integrated solutions.
[After 'recalling' the triple bottom line, I've started to talk about] Responsibility, Resilience and Regeneration.

If you listened to politicians, city mayors and CEOs, over the last two or three years, they're all talking resilience because everything they're dealing with is wobbling – their economies, their societies, their communities, their supply chains. And you can't build back resilience into these systems without regenerating them, without investing in their health, wellbeing and productivity over the course of time.

When we set up Volans[4] back in 2008, [one of the things we were talking about] was system change. And back then, I don't think they had a clue what we were talking about. Yet now you find business leaders routinely talking about the need for system change.

The ground is shifting. The question is, will it go far enough, fast enough, and in the right direction? And I think a lot of that depends on the rest of us – and on governments as well. God help us!

Jonathon

One rare area where you and I have had less alignment over the years is the role of the consumer. As well as the various green consumer guides that you did early on, you have stuck to a premise that the consumer is a critical part of the total change story, and without factoring in the role of the consumer, it's quite difficult to factor in the role of companies, because companies are those who are addressing consumers. Where are you now on that one?

John

I've sometimes described myself as strategically opportunistic. And the prime focus of much of what I've done since we founded Environmental Data Services back in 1978 was to try and break into the world of business, and then to influence how business thought about all this sort of stuff. The green consumer idea came to me in 1986. I did an exhibition at the Design Centre in London, called The Green Designer, with all sorts of products that were designed with environmental performance in mind… And in the exhibition booklet I included ten questions that designers should ask themselves, and the last one was: [will it] appeal to the green consumer? This was the first time I'd ever used the phrase. Then came The Green Consumer Guide[5]. It sold something like a million copies in 18 months, and it had a ferocious impact on the Unilevers and Procter & Gambles and so on of this world. They were basically in business to serve the consumer, so this was a challenge from an angle they hadn't expected and weren't used to dealing with. The consumer hadn't shown any great interest, and then – Boom! And I think that spike of interest lasted about three to four years, and the NGOs managed it quite effectively.

But I came to recognise that consumers are shock troops. You can mobilise them for short periods, but you exhaust them very quickly if you require too much of them.

So we played that game for as long as we could, and then more or less dropped it. Do I now believe consumers aren't important? No, because they are the pumping heart of our modern economies. And unless we can periodically mobilise them in the right way, I don't think the capitalist system is going to be remotely as responsive as we would wish.

John

Jonathon

I think consumers are best at being mobilised to stop the things they have decided are bad. But sustaining their commitment to do the good thing, the right thing, over a longer period of time, that is a much harder trick, and one that brands are still struggling with today.

John

I think the ones that were successful were the early brands in that space, like Ben and Jerry's, Patagonia, Body Shop and so on. But in the end, none of them were really big enough, and quite a number were bought out. And I don't think it's an accident that big companies haven't been a success in driving [green consumerism] because they have so much else that doesn't fit with that particular bill.

Jonathon

There are a lot of divergent views within the sustainability movement about the degree to which capitalism can be sufficiently transformed to enable it to deliver a sustainable future… But if you look at the decomposition we've just flagged, is capitalism itself likely to be one of the victims? Will its key elements be questioned to the point where it no longer exists in a recognisable form? Do you see it as big and bold as that?

John

I don't think so, because this is what capitalism periodically does: it falls flat on its face and then it goes through some sort of metamorphosis and it comes back stronger than ever.Now, nothing about that is guaranteed. But if I look at the sort of technological thinking [and] business models that are emerging, at the way values [are shifting] in the wider business world, I think there's a strong chance that we could actually rebuild capitalism in a very, very different configuration.

Jonathon

I couldn't agree with you more. Genuinely I think the potential is there. But it's so problematic that this coincides with [rising populism] and burgeoning autocracy in many parts of the world, and the near implosion in US democracy. All of these forces are cumulatively speaking incredibly disturbing, and make it harder to see how a capitalist system could be reborn with a lot more of the benign characteristics that we're going to ask of it.

John

I agree… Let me go dark now, and then we can go a bit brighter. You think, why did Bretton Woods in 1944 get us to the point where we could actually think really long-term and create a system that, within its own terms, worked for so long? And the reason was people had been through was an existential crisis. They'd been through the war, with tens of millions killed. When you go through these periods of an old order declining, decomposing, whatever we call it, there's always a war in the midst of that.

John

Somebody once described wars as the human species thinking out loud, very loudly. And often at the end of a war, a new order emerges. Today I think we're much closer to a major [military] exchange of some sort than we might like to think – it may be China and Taiwan, there's no shortage of candidates … Now, I'm not remotely prescribing warfare.

But my intuition, again, is that we're moving towards something deeply, deeply unsettling and painful. The question is, will leaders be able to sense that and move fast enough to head it off? History suggests no, but – rather stupidly perhaps – I believe that maybe – maybe – we can actually do something here.

But again it goes back to the intergenerational contract, because if we can't persuade younger people that these are societies worth investing their time and their effort in, democracy will, as you say, shrivel away…

Jonathon

Indeed. One of the most disturbing data sets to emerge from young people in the USA is [the one that shows] how many have lost faith in democracy as a way of providing the security and frameworks in which to prosper as individuals and communities. That's a very chilling consequence of the dysfunctionality of the American system. And in a way, America's got to [work through] its institutional and political civil war before it can be party to the resurgence of more progressive ideas in the way capitalism is shaped.

John

I've called it an undeclared civil war and I think it's going to get a lot worse before it gets any better, if indeed it does…And yet, it's really striking that some of the leading thinking and experimenting on the regenerative economy is happening in America.

Jonathon

Meanwhile we're facing the climate emergency, which hangs over so many other challenges that we're trying to deal with and which may well cut short the amount of time that we have to do so. How are you positioning now around the climate emergency in itself?

John

I wrote a report on climate change back in 1978, and since then, some of the scientific predictions which have emerged – like the way in which the Gulf Stream might fail and push northern Europe back to Siberian conditions – are truly scary. So you can't be totally detached. But at the same time, looking at our capacity as a species to understand that sort of level of crisis and respond to it in a semi-intelligent way, there is some part of me that is still hopeful.

You know how in The Sun Also Rises, [Ernest] Hemingway talks of one of his characters going bankrupt "gradually, then suddenly"? And now the Silicon Valley folk talk about a 'gradually then suddenly' world. Well I think we are in one of those. But the question is, does that take us completely off the rails, or does it help to put us on a very, very different track?

I genuinely believe that if we can sort the intergenerational compact issue, and can engage with the new economy people, the people driving these new technologies and business models, then we can have a radically greater influence [for the good] than if we were just looking backwards, trying to deal with oil, coal and automobiles. We've got to deal with that as well, but let's see fossil fuels as a dying sector [and engage with what's emerging]. Meanwhile, I do feel existentially challenged. I look at younger people and I see the extent to which they are increasingly suffering from eco-anxiety. And I remember the nuclear terror in the 50s and 60s – my father was flying missions over Christmas Island monitoring the impact of nuclear testing. So even at seven or eight, I had a sense of this imminent existential threat. And I think the climate challenge is beginning to feel really imminent for people. I've got two friends in different parts of the world – one in Australia and one in California – who had their houses burned down.

Jonathon

But have you constructed a series of defensive redoubts to stop you from fully absorbing just how far things have gone? I ask because sometimes there is a suggestion that because our work is all about seeking out solutions and synergies and ways forward, we don't allow ourselves to be as open to the depth of that grief and fear of the future. Do you ever play with the possibility that you are protecting yourself in order to carry on doing the work that you do?

John

Maybe this is self-serving, but I actually think the worst thing that people like us could do is to take our hands off the wheel and say, this isn't going to work. Because then you get a very different set of political dynamics, and your concerns about democracy start to go off the curve because people lose hope.

And I genuinely still believe that if we can crack some of this stuff, progress is still achievable. I don't think we'll get there without having some pretty major reverses along the way… But I was born an optimist, and in any case, if you're going to influence people in top teams in business and so on, you can't just go in there and do an existential howl…

Jonathon

For my last question I want to come back to something you've referred to on a couple of occasions, which is the idea of a new intergenerational compact. It's a big idea, and one that I entirely subscribe to myself. But are there practical steps along the way to building it?

John

I think we should be working on it very actively, paying a lot more attention to it than perhaps we do. When Extinction Rebellion erupted, I did a certain amount trying to support that group of young activists. It became a little bit problematic at times, but nonetheless I think they've had a useful influence overall.

I see people of my age – I'm 72 – saying they're going into retirement, arguing, 'We'll hand over to the younger people to sort this out – we tried and we failed.' And I think that is so dangerous. I think we've really got to work out this pan-generational compact and work really intensively together.

And I don't think we can simply wait for the younger generation to reach out to older people and say, we want a compact. We've got to create a process where that compact is in play and we're inviting them into that process. But then [you have to ask], who are the young people who come into that sort of process? There is a risk that they're [just] from high net worth families, or certainly those who have had an education.

So how do we do this so that it's really legitimate? Maybe it has to be an open-source approach, iterated over a period of time… Interestingly I'm doing some work [with a client] who are pulling in young people from around the

world and [asking] what it is like in the Democratic Republic of Congo to be dealing with these sorts of issues? What is it like in Pakistan? Do you have any agency? Do you have any sort of voice?

I think we need to do some of that exploratory work, but beyond that, we need to have a political process. And as you know, I've always been slightly gun shy of politics with a capital P – or even a lower case one. But now, this is political.

Jonathon

It is, yes.

John

And it is absolutely up to us… I think we're right on the cusp of things potentially changing. But the question is, do they go in our direction – or somewhere else?

* * *

Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

Notes

[1] This was a phrase coined by Elkington in 1994, expressing the then novel concept of accounting for the social and environmental as well as purely financial, aspects of a company's performance.
[2] Typically expressed as consisting of natural, human, social, manufactured and financial capitals, sometimes with the addition of intellectual capital.
[3] In 2018, Elkington published an article in the Harvard Business Review, announcing "a strategic recall" of the concept "to do some fine tuning".
[4] A specialist sustainability advisory founded by Elkington.
[5] Co-written with Julia Hailes and first published in 1988, the Guide offered consumers advice on how to make greener choices across a wide range of products, "from shampoo to champagne".

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Global collaboration, ticking clocks and food as the great unlock

Reflections from Dr Agnes Kalibata

Dr. Agnes Kalibata
UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy

Forum's Director of Global Programmes, Caroline Ashley, in conversation with Dr Agnes Kalibata, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for the 2021 Food Systems Summit.

A scientist by training, a former Rwandan Minister of Agriculture, and now President of AGRA, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, Dr Kalibata is a leading authority on food systems reform. Here she reflects on the way debates around food, poverty and sustainability have evolved over the last 25 years, with shifting focus back and forth between feeding people and the ecological risks created by our industrial food system.

She shares her passion for action on food to be central to addressing climate change, and fears that quick wins may be at the price of farmers' livelihoods if sound transition plans are not in place.

Diplomatic with her language, she points out that farm subsidies need to be repurposed, that richer countries have transition plans in place – such as for car industries – which poor farmers need too, and the world has plentiful resources that are needed for tackling climate change in Africa – which is a global challenge, not just an African challenge.

The avocado provides an example of action that can hurt livelihoods, yet where rapid action is being seen compared to some 'hard' issues such as coal.

Dr Kalibata directly rejects criticisms that the Food System Summit was captured by corporate interests and makes a strong case for engaging with private actors as the 'elephant in the room' – critical to progress. She doesn't hesitate to call out how post-war food science turned food into an industry, a big business, with huge environmental costs.

A strong believer in engaging all sectors involved in the food system, she calls for strong leadership and looks forward to a COP 27 which tackles the 30% of global emissions driven by the food sector.

About Dr Agnes Kalibata

Dr Agnes Kalibata is one of Africa's leading agricultural scientists, policymakers and thought leaders. As the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, she played a leading role in organising the ground-breaking Food Systems

Summit. Since 2014, she has been President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Born in Rwanda to smallholder farmers displaced during the struggle for independence in the early 1960s, Dr Kalibata was raised in a refugee camp in Uganda, where her parents grew beans and maize, and kept cows. Her education was funded through the family's income from agriculture, ultimately allowing her to study entomology and biochemistry at Makerere University before earning her PhD from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Caroline Ashley in conversation with… Dr Agnes Kalibata

From Millenium to Sustainable

Caroline

We're starting all these conversations by looking back 25 years, when Forum for the Future was launched. So I'd like to open by asking, what were you doing 25 years ago?

Dr. Kalibata

That would be 1996…1997… I was in between finishing my MSc and settling into a job and defining my career. I was keen to understand the challenges of the agricultural sector, and how these can be addressed by scientific solutions, and since then, I've sought to bring science into the heart of policy making on agricultural issues.

Caroline

So if we take the progress you've seen in the agriculture and food sector since then, what would you say are the biggest changes – both positive and negative?

Dr. Kalibata

In the 1970s ecologists started raising the alarm about the relationship between mankind and the environment. But it wasn't until the nineties that we started seeing a major shift where the economy took centre stage and in fact the World Bank started talking about slowing down economics so that we minimise the impact on the environment. 1992 saw the Rio Convention – the first Convention where politics now comes in. Governments started signing the first Rio Convention, committing to balancing economic growth, human activity, and environmental needs, and really recognising that our environment is actually a finite resource. Since then, we've had the UNFCCC and so many other things, but the whole conceptualisation and understanding of food systems didn't come in until much later.

Before that point, we saw other shifts in sustainability. Poverty, hunger, malnutrition, started becoming a focus and that was the focus of the Millennium Development Goals. But it left out a major part of development – the environment. They did [introduce] one element which was critical: the MDGs had measurements. You could track progress, and you could hold each other accountable.

When the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) succeeded them [in 2016], they embraced that whole idea of measurement and tracking. But they also embraced environmental issues as critical elements of development.
Since then, we have recognised that achieving the SDGs means [making progress on] climate change, and adopting an approach to the food system which recognises the role it plays in climate and biodiversity loss.

Feeding the world, with trade-offs

Caroline

Was it a big failure that we didn't talk about food systems earlier on – for example, at the time of the MDGs? And when do you think we did start landing the concept of the food system, and how it fits into [the wider sustainability challenge]?

Dr. Kalibata

If we go back even earlier, the idea of [prioritising] feeding people became extremely important around the end of the Second World War. During the lifetime of Norman Borlaug (1914–2009), who gave rise to the Green Revolution, the world…

Dr. Kalibata

population increased from 1.5 billion to well over 6 billion people, and the catch was simple. We figured out how to feed ourselves. We figured out the economics of food and how we can produce not just enough to feed ourselves but also how to transform food into a huge global business.

Now, in the process of turning food into a business we probably went a little bit overboard, because then we started having all these externalities to the environment. Food became an industrial thing, rather than the way you feed people.

It was during the period between the MDGs and SDGs that the science around this negative impact of food systems (including food waste, which contributes close to 8% of global emissions), really became clear. I would say that today the biggest shift is that we recognise that to achieve SDGs we need to come through both on climate progress (as decided at the 'COPs'), but also on the food systems approach, which is what has been emerging in the last few years.

A system in transition

Caroline

Looking forward now, and considering relative risks: do you worry more that we'll sort out food security but damage the environment, or that we'll sort out the environment and ignore people's needs?

Dr. Kalibata

It's a very interesting question! I took part in the Food Systems Summit because I was worried about that. I'm seeing a lot of movement to address environmental challenges – and I understand why: Africa is hugely impacted by climate change – even though it accounts for less than 7% of global emissions. And we can't deal with poverty and hunger unless we also address climate change. But really, let's worry about people the most. Let's remember that there are…

Dr. Kalibata

[food] supply chains in place, that have grown up over time, and there are people who depend on them. So if we're to consider shutting them down for environmental reasons, we also need to consider the effect that will have on those people.

Africa is as concerned about the environment as everybody else, but we are also concerned that we have not been able to feed [all our] people yet. That's not an excuse for us to ignore environmental issues – we need to address things like biodiversity and forest loss. But we also need to deal with the challenge of feeding our people as we do so.

At present, I think that the world is mainly making the easy choices [on climate change], rather than hard ones. The easy part of the problem is fixing a [food] supply chain, rather than dealing with the problem of coal power, and the amount of emissions that's causing. Unfortunately, those easy choices have a major impact on people.

Caroline

Can you give me an example of some of those 'easy choices' that we're adopting for the food system, which are having these negative impacts on people – and what are some of the deeper actions you think we need in contrast to them?

Dr. Kalibata

Take the avocado. It contributes so much to our health. And there's a value chain, a whole economy, based around its [production]. Now some countries are already rejecting avocado as a credible commodity, all because it contributes to environmental change. So if that's the case, then we need to take it on – but we need to create an exit strategy. After all, in Europe, we talk about an exit strategy for [internal combustion] cars, and we allow ten years for it…

So I expect to see exit strategies for [African food] value chains as well. We need clear transition plans, that both manage their impact on people while advancing as much as possible on climate change.

Caroline

Interesting. So you're saying that basically, in Europe, they're planning a phased transition for cars, but not necessarily doing so for other shifts needed elsewhere…

Dr. Kalibata

We should be preparing for transitions right across different value chains. We should not suddenly wake up in the food system and impose certain policies that actually make it difficult for people who depend on those value chains to transition to other forms of livelihood.

Repurposing subsidies

Dr. Kalibata

A lot of countries in the Western world are supporting farmers with subsidies which really encourage big industrial agriculture. That has had its benefits, but now we need to repurpose those subsidies.

I'm being very deliberate – repurposing, not removing. I'm not saying that farmers don't need support, but that support cannot come at the expense of the environment, and it has been doing so. We need to repurpose that support, so that it minimises the food system's impact on the environment.

Time for Africa to raise its voice

Caroline

Do you feel that the African perspective, the African voice, has been too quiet in the years gone by, and is that changing now?

Dr. Kalibata

There is a lot of space for [us to have] those conversations. There is a UN system that ensures that the right balance is there. But there are areas where we need to raise our voice more. The impact of climate change is one example. Africa is among the regions hardest hit, and the communities that are affected most are the ones which have the least means [to deal with it]. So because of that, the voices around the table cannot be equal. Africa has to raise its voice the highest. People will starve because of climate change!

So that's the reason why Africa cannot afford to have its voice meek or humble. It needs to be loud – very loud around some of the unfair things that happen in the system we're working in. I mean, right now we talk about the whole challenge around the COVID pandemic and access to vaccines, and I am glad that people are raising their voices there.

From a food system perspective, we must both secure global action on climate change, and find ways for Africa to feed itself. For Africa, these are non-negotiable – so our voices must be very strong as we go forward.

The Food Systems Summit

Caroline

So if we come specifically to food systems, first of all can I ask you for your reflections on the Food Systems Summit? It's been very high profile, very contentious, very lively. What do you think were the big successes of the Summit, and what concerns, if any, do you have about the results?

Dr. Kalibata

The food system is complex. It spans all the way from production systems to processing to consumers. It has all sorts of stakeholders. But we cannot allow complexity to weigh us down, because if there's anything that has the potential to transform the world quickly, it's the food system. So being able to get a global consensus that we must start transforming it, for me that is the biggest success. It was beyond what I was hoping for.

Dr. Kalibata

We had 165 member states step forward with clear statements of what they are going to do differently; we saw significant private sector engagement; we saw communities, Indigenous Peoples and youth put forward declarations saying, ‘We don’t want the status quo, we need to do things differently, and we want change now.’ There was a sense that everybody’s willing to come forward with an idea. And [despite the challenges of COVID], we were able to reach billions of people. We’ve been able to communicate what is at stake.

Caroline

There was a lot of criticism that vested interests were rather powerful in the Food Systems Summit. I’d be interested to know how you feel about those…

Dr. Kalibata

Some in civil society really didn’t want to associate [with the Summit] because they thought that there was corporate capture of it. There was not. We set out to engage everybody, and the private sector was part of that. It’s critical to do so, because it has a huge stake in some of the issues we’re trying to address. Take obesity. The private sector can help us fix this problem, because a lot of it arises during processing, during ‘value addition’, which sometimes takes away more value than it adds. So we need [companies] around the table, to talk about how they can start to reduce the wrong impacts.

Second, there’s so much food waste in the system, whether it’s restaurants and hotels, or businesses [along] the supply chain. If we don’t engage the private sector, how do we expect that to go away?
Number three, the industrialisation of food systems is the product of the private sector. If we don’t engage them, how will this industrialisation and its impact, which we know is a huge part of the 30% of global emissions accounted for by food – how will that be managed? The private sector has been the elephant in the room. So, why would you not engage with it? Circumventing the elephant in the room does not lead to the results we’re looking for.

We need everyone to come to the table and find ways of building trust, because all of us are interested in the same…

Dr. Kalibata

results. We are all interested in a better environment, we are all interested in economies that can survive and that can assure the prosperity of our environment as well. That balance has to be found, and the private sector has a huge part to play in doing so.

Finally, it's important to stress that the private sector did not fund the Summit. The Summit was funded by member states.

Prospects for COP 27

Caroline

Some saw the food system as missing from COP 26 – or at least not as visible as you would like – but everyone seems pretty clear that's going to change by the next COP. Would you agree?

Dr. Kalibata

Yes, it's in the interests of the COP process to deal with the 30% of climate emissions that come from the food system, so I believe COP 27 will be different [especially in the wake of] the Food Systems Summit. And it will be in Africa, in the continent that's most challenged by climate change from a food perspective. So, yes, there's no way we can go into the next COP without recognising that we need to address the food system as part of it.

On priorities and hope

Caroline

What would be your top three priorities for the food system in the next 20 years – the top three things we need to do differently?

Dr. Kalibata

First, at the individual level, each of us has a role to play in ensuring that we waste less; that we eat only what we need. Education has a role here too, so that really thinking about how we eat is as important as thinking about switching off the lights.

Number two, we really need to start putting resources where they are needed. The urgency in our food system means that we need to fix some of its problems yesterday rather than today. But I don't see resources coming onto the table at the rate at which they should be.

There are countries which have many more resources than they need. We really don't need to be swimming in resources when our ship is sinking. We need to ensure that those resources are put to task to help our ship stay afloat.

This isn't about poor versus rich: the challenge of a sinking planet is a global challenge. We must all play our part, including here in Africa. We must rehabilitate our degraded landscapes and reforest our environment. But so must the rest of the world, which has got rich on [the back of] our [African] environment. We need to put some of those resources that are sitting in the West into rehabilitating it. Our children depend on that. Future generations of children depend on it, and those children are not necessarily in Africa. Even children in the US, in Europe, depend on it.

Third, our governments must really put their best foot forward. People are put in leadership for a reason. They need to ensure that things happen faster, that policies are put in place that ensure we do the right thing, and that the most vulnerable among us are not paying the cost of what is done by the richest among us.

Caroline

In terms of food production, there is so much innovation happening now. There's really futuristic talk about labs, there's lots of companies adopting regenerative agriculture, there's farmers experimenting with different approaches. Do you think how we produce our food is going to be radically different in 10 years' time?

Dr. Kalibata

We've figured out so many ways of producing more with less, improving genetics to ensure that we have crops that can take up sunlight faster, that can use nutrients better and so produce food faster. That is how we are producing so much more than we need.

Now we need to address food waste, and turn it into something of value. And we need to explore new sources of protein, including insects, which reproduce faster and consume less energy [than other sources], while generating the same amount of proteins.

There was no shortage of new ideas emerging in the Action Tracks of the Food Systems Summit, and because of the rate at which things are changing, the only way we can stay on top is to embrace innovation as quickly as possible.

Caroline

Finally, what is it that gives you hope?

Dr. Kalibata

I take comfort in the fact that as human beings, we are very committed to finding answers to our problems…. We are also extremely innovative. Although we create problems for ourselves, we have the ability to innovate ourselves out of those problems…

I believe in leadership; [that] the people that are put forward to lead us actually mean well. We just have to make sure, and they have to make sure, that they continue to work hard to find the right solutions for the problems of the world that we are living in, and to find ways of collaborating and coming through together. Because where the world is at today, we need to collaborate.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

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Tune in to the podcast to hear more.

Momentum, collaboration and connecting with the human story

Reflections from 3M, Bupa, GSK Consumer Healthcare and Target

This article puts the spotlight on big business perspectives. Here, senior leaders from our partners 3M, Bupa, GSK Consumer Healthcare and Target, share their reflections on the last 25 years of sustainability and their personal take on the most valuable lessons learned along the way.

With over a century of business experience between them, these four leaders shared similar views on the progress made and the big shifts in terms of mainstreaming sustainability. They come with different perspectives on the biggest gaps so far – from data to inequality – and on their biggest lessons – from collaboration, to mindset, to methods for inspiring different audiences.

On key areas of progress in the last 25 years of the sustainability movement:

Many of the leaders emphasise the tremendous shift in awareness and knowledge over the past quarter-century, with sustainability issues moving from the fringes of society or siloed corporate functions into the mainstream and corporate boardrooms. In celebrating progress, the key areas they highlight are: scientific insights and more transparent measurement methods enabling robust and informed decision-making; sustainability being firmly on the agenda across university courses, investors and media; and increased awareness of key issues and higher expectations from consumers and other stakeholders. The group agrees that the case for urgent action – as well as the scale and interlinked nature of the challenges ahead – are widely understood and highlights the increased focus on integrated action, co-creation and collaboration – within a business, with key partners and across the sustainability movement.

"There has been tremendous progress in sustainability work over the last 25 years. General knowledge of the subject, interest, and passion for action have all increased exponentially in the global population. The people who are visibly committed to sustainability have shifted from a fringe but vocal minority to mainstream. Corporations, governments, and brands have responded accordingly."

DR. GAYLE SCHUELLER
Senior Vice President &
Chief Sustainability Officer, 3M

"The call to action to recognize and act on our collective sustainability challenges has become undeniable. As we think about how to address critical challenges, the idea of co-creation is the central component to our process and our progress."

AMANDA NUSZ
Senior Vice President,
Corporate Responsibility, Target

[A key area of progress has been the] increasing understanding of the intersection between people's health and the health of the planet. There has been a growing realisation that environmental issues such as climate change aren't just a problem for the world, they are impacting people's health right here, right now in my world, in my community with the most vulnerable in society often feeling the effects first and hardest. [...] This is helping to drive a step up in urgency of action and in joining up of actions to deliver benefits for both people and planet.

SARAH MCDONALD
VP Sustainability,
GSK Consumer Healthcare

Businesses now understand the opportunity and responsibility they have to drive collective progress towards sustainable development. They have to now hardwire sustainability into business planning and truly understand the business case of being a sustainable organisation, in order to ensure success in the long term.

NIGEL SULLIVAN
Chief Sustainability and People Officer,
Bupa

On the gaps remaining:
Despite these significant advances, the leaders point to a diverse set of gaps or areas where they each feel the sustainability movement has fallen short – from the need for specific data to the need for more human framing and the failure to address inequality

Dr. Schueller of 3M highlights that access to data is a major hindrance to informed decision-making and collective action.

"I see the biggest gap today as access to accurate, appropriately detailed data for decision-making. Progress is being made, but truly informed decisions on raw material selection, source of supply, manufacturing processes, equipment, and locations, and optimizing overall product portfolios all remain limited by the accuracy of understanding detailed data to inform which of many options is the best."
Dr. Schueller, 3M

Bupa's Sullivan calls out that, while sustainability is fundamentally a human story, and "a story of innovation, ingenuity, and survival", the current framing and communication is all too often detached, impersonal and technical. He argues that:

"We must make sure that sustainability is grounded in a way that is people-focused. We need the communications and behavioural change specialists to work hand in hand with the sustainability experts and scientists to make the story relevant to people so that they understand it and act on it."
Nigel Sullivan, Bupa

Sullivan and McDonald both reflect on the critical interconnectedness between people's health today and the climate crisis. These twin challenges have traditionally not received enough attention, argues Sullivan (Bupa), however, he points out that this is starting to shift, and that "mobilising the healthcare community to raise awareness about the health urgency to tackle the climate crisis could be powerful to drive change for healthy people and a healthy planet."

Elsewhere, McDonald calls out inequality as a particular gap, as evidenced so clearly through the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years.

"Covid reminded us that access to and understanding of health is not always equal, with vulnerable groups in society who already experience inequalities being disproportionately impacted."
McDonald, GSK Consumer Healthcare

McDonald shares examples of BAME communities in the US being significantly more affected by infection rates and death rates, but also that the pandemic led to "women doing nearly 3 x as much unpaid care and domestic work as men [...], driven by school closures, stretched healthcare systems and the suspension of social support services."

On the biggest shifts within the sustainability movement:
While the group acknowledges that there is still lots more to do, one of the biggest shifts within the sustainability movement has been that sustainability is now a mainstream issue.

According to 3M's Dr. Schueller, it is now "much more pervasive across all geographies, age groups, and socioeconomic groups. Our collective global challenges have become increasingly clear, immediate, and extreme." She also highlights that the discourse has shifted from whether and 'why' action is needed, to "engaging each other on how we can act together to make the greatest impact".

Echoing this reflection, Bupa's Sullivan adds that "whilst there's still a long way to go, there's momentum, focus and determination to act on this agenda holistically like never before." For businesses, Sullivan argues, it's now clear that "having sustainability at the core of their strategy goes beyond moral responsibility: there is a strong business case for doing so, in order to ensure success in the long-term, building resilience, reduce risks, increase employee engagement, improve retention, attract talent and meet customers' expectations."

Drawing on her experience at GSK Consumer Healthcare, McDonald, shares that "Tackling these issues is not just important for planetary and human health, but also really matters to our stakeholders including consumers. We have witnessed a generational shift in consumer awareness and concerns about climate change with for example, 52% of Americans having personally experienced global warming's effects (Yale Q4 2021) and a Sustainable Brands Survey (2021) finding that 70% consumers believe they can influence companies to do more."

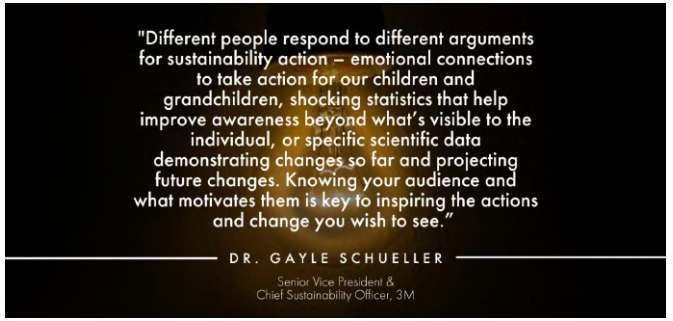
Collaboration and partnerships between and within governments, businesses, and civil society, as well as scientific advances and further

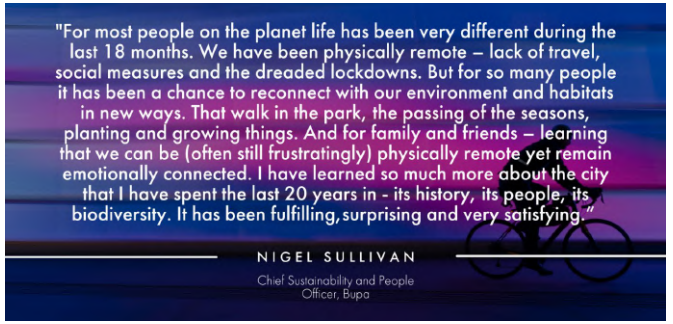
development and adoption of sustainability-driven technology, will all be critical to addressing today's interlinked challenges. Dr. Schueller of 3M is hopeful that "the interest and momentum is building and that if this trend continues, the scientific solutions will make a bright future possible."

On lessons learned:

From the power of collaboration; striving for affordability and scale; meeting your audiences where they are to inspire action; and reconnecting with nature and the local environment during the pandemic, our contributors share the most valuable lesson they have learned on their sustainability journeys.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.





PHASE 3

Today's response

What are the biggest questions proliferating across the sustainability movement right now? How is the world responding to today's multifaceted challenges and opportunities? **Where are we falling short - and, as our crises continue to escalate, how can we reset our ambition?**

Deep transformation or shallow transition? How can we leverage the disruptions of the decade to deliver the change needed?

Dr. Sally Uren
Chief Executive
Forum for the Future

Forum's Chief Executive, Dr. Sally Uren, revisits four trajectories Forum for the Future identified in late 2020 as emerging from the disruption of COVID-19. These trajectories were based on the mindsets we were seeing develop in response to the pandemic, and provided us with a framework for looking at how the world might proactively shift on to a more transformative footing. With new analysis, we look at how things have moved on over the last 15 months, what might come next and what practical solutions may be needed going forward.

One thing is clear: we are not yet on track to deliver a deep transformation of our systems. We instead are running the risk of shallow transitions that will not help us navigate the 2020s into a liveable future.

Here, Sally argues that we need to face reality, learn to live with immense disruption and substantially up our game… fast.

* * *

We live in hugely uncertain times. For almost two years, COVID-19 has shocked the very systems on which we rely, overlaying and influencing a set of wide-ranging changes and transitions – both positive and negative – that were already shaping the 2020s.

As we look forward to 2030, the target year for the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals and a key milestone for rapid reductions in carbon emissions, will we find ourselves in a just, resilient and sustainable world – or one in which we witness ever more destabilising shocks on a pathway to a hot house earth?

In order to answer this question, it's timely to take another look at the four different pathways or trajectories towards 2030 that Forum identified 15 months ago in our *From System Shock to System Change – Time to Transform* report. These trajectories were based on the mindsets we were seeing proliferate in response to the pandemic, and provided us with a framework for looking at how the world might proactively shift on to a more transformative footing – not just building back better, but actively looking to build forward into a new future.

They were:

1. ***Compete and Retreat***: Characterised by a retreat into national borders driven by the perception that there is not enough to go around, resulting in the strengthening of existing nationalist dynamics, the

gradual collapse of what's left of globalisation and international collaboration, and the emergence of fragmented regionalism.

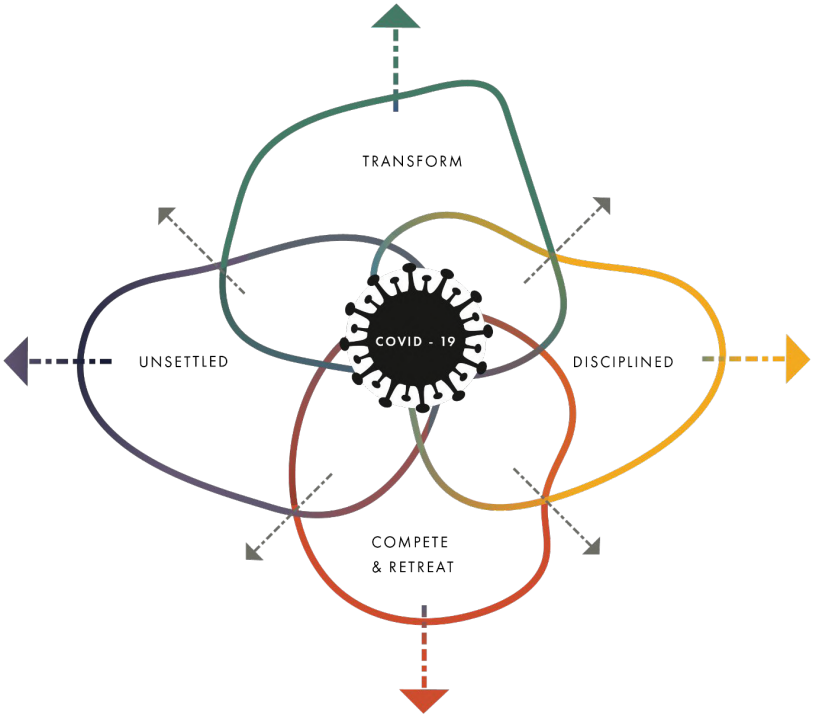
2. ***Discipline***: Characterised by greater state control to manage public health and safety, resulting in the ramped up use of technology for automation, remote connection, surveillance and control, as well as a concurrent sacrifice of personal privacy, in order to keep growth and global interconnection going as 'normal'.

3. ***Transform***: Characterised by a growing understanding of the deep connections between human and planetary health, using the pandemic recovery as a 'reset' to catalyse a fair and equitable zero carbon transition and a shift towards new business and economic models based on resilience and regenerative thinking.

4. ***Unsettled***: Characterised by a continued inability to settle on a 'new normal' due to ongoing discontinuity and disruption from crises of all kinds: climate and ecological, political, social, economic and technological. Recognising that many previous ways of thinking are no longer helpful, *Unsettled* presents an urgent need to adjust and adapt to a difficult and strange reality – one in which resilience, adaptability and opportunism constantly jostle with fatalism and anxiety.

So, what are we seeing now? All four trajectories are still in play, but a strong flavour of Unsettled

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all four trajectories are still in play. Taking each in turn:



The four trajectories.

Within ***Compete and Retreat*** we're seeing intensifying energy geopolitics and resource hoarding; vaccine hoarding in pursuit of national interests; nationalist populism continuing to gain traction; the resurgence of local forces such as the Taliban; the closure of borders to migrants and polarising debate on immigration policy.

Where *Compete and Retreat* overlaps with ***Discipline***, we're seeing growing autocracy and new impunity for dictators.

Within *Discipline* alone, we've seen the accelerated use of AI and automation; vaccine passports; the normalisation of authoritarian lockdown politics; increasing surveillance capacities by governments; use of spyware and more.

Turning to ***Transform***, signs of purely transformational change include: Berlin's rethinking of the car; ecocide laws being drafted in respect of the rights of nature; governments being sued by young people whose voices are only growing louder in the climate activism movement; four-day weeks being trialled in a shake-up of how we work; growing energy behind grassroots democracy, as seen with the rise of citizen assemblies and protest movements in support of democratic values; changing diets, particularly in the West; and advances in regeneration, not least the resurgence of regenerative agriculture.

Where *Discipline* also overlaps with *Transform*, we're seeing the growth of nature-based solutions often spearheaded by corporates; growing interest in corporate sustainability and climate reporting for financial institutions; satellite imaging and AI technology used in fighting deforestation.

Finally, looking at *Unsettled*, this has been a very dominant story of the last 15 months. We've seen crisis after crisis unfold in some nation-states. We've seen disruption to supply chains, to energy supplies, not to mention multiple waves of COVID-19 and the disruption that causes.

Many are asking if there will ever be a new normal, or is this continued disruption and discontinuity here to stay?

In many ways, a strong flavour of *Unsettled* in our daily lives is to be expected. Triggered both by the pandemic and by systems that were already transforming pre-COVID-19 – from food to energy – we are living in a moment of accelerated system change.

System change isn't linear, it is messy, it exposes us to new realities. It also opens up new opportunities. For example, where *Transform* intersects with *Unsettled*, we're seeing growing people power and community influence, the maturation of new ways of organising, just transition rhetoric gaining pace and the channelling of funds to vulnerable communities.

I recently discussed these signals of change with Joy Green, Forum's Principal Futures Affiliate. You can watch our conversation – including our reflections on how 2021 dramatically exposed the fragile and interconnected nature of our systems, as well as their inability to bounce back from crises.

Catch the conversation here

What now? Time to face reality, recognise we're off track and prep for further disruption

At Forum, we believe *Transform* must prevail – it is the trajectory that will bring about the just and regenerative future the world needs. With *Unsettled* dominating right now, four things are front of mind if we're to get on track.

First, we must get real about the scale of the system transformation needed. The current systems we rely on are at the very edges of their ability to meet the needs of a growing population. Many of our systems are at breaking point.

They are brittle and vulnerable, with one event having the potential to cause cascading impacts; think back to the disruption caused by a single ship blocking one part of the Suez Canal. In Part Two of our *Looking Back to Go Forward* series, John Elkington elegantly referred to the 'decomposition of our systems'. It's a clear sign of the huge task ahead of us if we are to create new, resilient systems capable of sustaining both planetary and human health.

Second. Be honest about the effort this will take, and just how far off we are from where we need to be. Johan Rockstrom spoke of us being at the 'end of the road' following three decades of putting unsustainable pressure on the planet. It's easy to see *Transform* as a distant dream right now and we must all do more, faster if we're to create the future we all want.

Third, be ready for more uncertainty, more discontinuity. Accelerated system change is messy and often non-linear. Take for example the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy where we are currently witnessing rapid exponential change. Adding in the features of the *Unsettled* trajectory means planning for disruption and for prolonged uncertainty would seem sensible. As is remembering that non-linear change can be a good thing; the speed and scale of some of our responses to the pandemic illustrate this, from the availability of a brand new vaccine to the success of public/private partnerships in converting manufacturing lines to PPE.

Discontinuity is often framed as negative, something to fear. But it can work in many directions.

Which is one of the reasons, why, lastly, *Transform* is still possible. As we head towards 2030, it is very likely that we will continue to experience *Compete and Retreat, Unsettled* and *Discipline*, as well as *Transform*. We can expect multiple versions of our future to be in play at any one point in time. However, if we are experiencing these different trajectories, how might we harness the energy behind them and influence what happens next?

Shifting systems means working with activating *and* resisting forces

In order to shift systems it is usually necessary to work with both activating forces for change (abundant in *Transform*), and resisting ones (think vested interests that might dominate *Compete and Retreat*). Ignoring resisting forces means they will remain and keep trying to lock in the current configuration of

any system. But engaging with them and understanding prevailing mindsets makes it possible to divert this energy into a different direction.So our challenge is this: how can we leverage the shake-up created by the *Unsettled* trajectory to embrace new ways of living and working?

The way forward will not be easy. The wholesale systemic change we need will require coordinated efforts at multiple levels and across multiple stakeholders, each embracing innovation and shifting their fundamental mindsets. At the same time, the resisting forces in the form of vested interests will continue to present a high risk of leaving us stuck in shallow transitions.

There are signs of hope: a new generation entering the workforce with much greater expectations of their employers when it comes to sustainability; communities strengthening as they mobilise around common causes; an investment community waking up to the need to rewire our economy. As a new year sets in, a just and regenerative future is within our grasp, but we need a decisive and immediate course correct to achieve it. Our future isn't written, it is ours to write.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Rising to meet new tides of change – by building our systems change practice

Jasmine Castledine & Dr. Anna Birney

Dr Anna Birney, *Forum's Director of the School of Systems Change and* Jasmine Castledine, *Operations & Development Designer at the School, demystify the concept of 'system change' – what it is, what it means, and why it's urgently needed.*

As we brace ourselves to take on the new year, we are keenly aware of the challenge ahead: **the ever-enduring race to create radical, systemic change for a just, regenerative and sustainable future.**

2021 saw a huge growth in awareness of the magnitude, scale, and critically, the complexity of the challenges we face. In a growing range of countries, political upheaval and polarisation of societal issues has raised questions of disillusionment and fears for the integrity of democratic systems, all catalysed by the outcry of misinformation and mistrust in the media. The long-awaited IPCC report released in August that laid out the trajectories of climate disaster in stark, condemning numbers sparked fear for many, if not surprise for all. The world then watched in November to see how our leaders would convene at COP 26 to respond, in the wake of extreme weather events from forest fires to snowstorms; and cries for climate justice from those who have been at the forefront of climate devastation for decades.

Never has it been clearer how interconnected and interdependent our global challenges are, as changemakers and activists around the world fight to effect deep change in systems that just aren't working in ensuring a viable, sustainable future. However we feel about the outcome of COP 26, one thing is certain: collectively, we have a long way to go, and we need to do better, for people, planet, and all in between.

It is prescient this month, as his life, civil rights activism and mission are celebrated around the world, to remember the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:

> **It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inseparable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly.**
> **–Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Civil Rights Activist**

Shifting mindsets: from disconnect to interconnection

Over the years of Forum experimenting and learning about how to create change as an organisation and collaborator, the importance of taking a systemic approach has become increasingly clear.

The Civil Rights Movement shows us how different parts of a system interact and influence one another. No single event started the movement, but rather it evolved through collaboration and decades of perseverance. By working together, we can change how power and privilege is allocated and design societies that are free, democratic and support everybody on the planet to flourish.

As this quote – one we often share when introducing systems change to partners, stakeholders, and programme participants – reflects, the root of many of our challenges is too often perpetuated in how we respond to them:

> **The world is a complex, interconnected, finite, ecological-social-psychological-economic system. We treat it as if it were not, as if it were divisible, separable, simple, and infinite. Our persistent, intractable, global problems arise directly from this mismatch.**
> **– Donella Meadows, American environmental scientist.**

Meadows' words remind us not just of the interconnectedness of all things, but that **when we fail to respect this nexus, we cause harm**. We see this in an increasingly recurrent cautionary tale: businesses evaluating their success through a dominant economic lens, parking climate impact and pollution under the umbrella term of "externalities", failing to appreciate the impact they have on the wider environment. Only when those "externalities" become financial concerns does this narrow lens expand; but often, far too late to reverse.

Interconnection means collaboration

Starting with an approach that takes into account interconnected systems and dependencies allows us to strive towards a sustainable and mutually beneficial future. In other words, **system-level challenges require a system-level response**. At Forum, we committed to taking this precept into practice in 2011, shifting our strategy for enacting change: from one-to-one partnerships to a systems innovation approach.

The organisations we were supporting in their sustainability goals were up against large-scale, complex challenges: pre-competitive supply chains; shared industry standards; financial mechanisms for community energy; a multitude of questions that could not be properly interrogated in silos.

With a systemic lens, we started to facilitate multi-stakeholder collaborations around complex issues, bringing together actors across the systems we were working to transform. This gave us the invaluable opportunity to work with the wisdom of stakeholders across the system, and work together to pinpoint where to innovate and how to intervene. Projects such as the **Sustainable Shipping Initiative**, **Cotton 2040** and the **Protein Challenge** were established, and we have been able to enable collective approaches such as shared standards in cotton, support innovation in energy saving of ships and shift narratives, and seeing the future of our meals in a flexitarian world.

Rock and Roll and systems change? A surprising and complex series of influences – societal, technological and niche – led to the rock and roll movement. If we can learn to 'dance' with the ever changing system around us, we have a great chance of transforming the world we live in.

Process and practice are just as important as outcome

Our strategic shift in 2011 demonstrates a key observation of system change: **It is not just an outcome, but also, fundamentally, a process**. While we want to see the systems around us radically shift, our ability to continually work and adapt ourselves, and work with changing contexts, is just as important. Working systemically asks us to fundamentally rethink the way we see and act in the world, often in opposition to how our societies and dominant structures operate. **It asks us to model the systems and paradigms we want to cultivate**, requiring us to gain – against the tide– the capabilities to do so. So as well as convening stakeholders around large system challenges in food, energy and finance, Forum began to deepen its inquiry into systems change practice, and explore the role of learning to enable others to do the same.

The School of System Change was born in 2015 to contribute to the growing field of change practitioners. Seeing growing a global community of changemakers as our best chance to accelerate a transition to a sustainable future, the School works to foster the enabling conditions of systemic change itself, through capacity building. We also identified five key capabilities that will equip changemakers to create impactful and lasting change in our systems, namely:

1. **Systemic diagnosis**: to holistically diagnose complex sustainability challenges, such as ocean health or structural racism, change-makers can embrace a range of approaches to gain different insights;, from futures, transition thinking or system dynamics.

2 **Strategy design**: strategies to drive systems change need to identify where there is strong potential. This may be supporting the niche to replace the mainstream, or supporting those in the status quo to radically shift their practices, or it may be setting a new cultural narrative.

3 **Innovation for impact**: develop innovative solutions that are not just 'shiny new' but can create systemic impact by shifting patterns of how things work. For example, a new business model that shifts how value is created and distributed.

4 **Collaboration and engagement**: At the core of systemic change is the assumption that it cannot be achieved alone. A system change agent will be able to facilitate, build partnerships and create coalitions and seek to influence and engage wider audiences in the change.

5 **Leadership and learning**: A systemic leader needs to be able to reflect, learn and continually develop their skills and resolve to implement system change, cultivating the personal resilience to lead organisations into a complex and uncertain future.

Adapting to thrive

As we enter into discontinuity and ever-growing uncertainty about the future, what will become of our political systems? Our approach to extreme weather events? The appreciation of the need for systems thinking and the processes of navigating complex change, learning, and adapting as we go, will be vital to our survival.

A key element of systemic practice is to be awake to shifting contexts, in order to properly understand and work with their implications to leverage impactful change. **What we are seeing emerge now are questions about how we deal not only with positive change but also the collapsing of systems**; how do we navigate multiple trajectories that are emerging and competing at the same time? How do we lean into decline in a way that creates the flourishing of new better systems?

Equity and socially just practices are of rising and fundamental importance in this work.

We need to work out what it means to heal and work with injustices that are embedded in our societal structures, through generations of power imbalances designed and perpetuated to privilege certain groups over others. This lens is not an add-on, but integral to all approaches to shifting systems.

As the challenges we face evolve and grow around us, we must ask ourselves again: what might be an effective change approach to addressing these issues? What is our practice and what is needed to support other change-makers, to achieve our collective goals? We face big questions: do we want our businesses to be machines for profit, or adhere to global citizenship? What do we want the true purpose of our economic systems to be? Our political systems?

While we heighten our awareness of what is happening in the world and see the growth of people and organisations working together, we also need to

pay attention to the histories, power structures, and the wisdom of all actors within them. This means engaging with the facilitative capacity for change, and the governance models that might support how we re-organise, as well as the emotional work required to deal with such change. **Empathy is an essential practice of systems change**. We must be awake to the experiences of others, open to the discomforts of self-examination, vulnerability and accountability; ready to embrace failure as a stepping stone in the journey of continual learning and exploration into how we can respond better, and evolve our practices of change to meet the challenges of our time.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

With a narrow window for innovation, will our food systems transform or unravel?

Lesley Mitchell and Charlene Collison

Forum's Associate Director for Sustainable Nutrition, Lesley Mitchell *is in conversation with* Charlene Collison*, Forum's Associate Director for Sustainable Value Chains and Livelihoods as they discuss the past, present, and future of food, and why food systems transformation could be the great unlock to tackling our intensifying social and environmental crises.*

Where were we in the world of food and agriculture in 1996? 25 years on, **what is the role of food in both exacerbating, but also potentially helping tackle, the climate crisis**? How do we positively impact human and planetary health within the next decade? What would it take to have truly 'just' and 'regenerative' principles at the heart of the supply chains that get our food from plant to plate, crop to cup, farm to fork?

Recognising that **food sits uniquely at the nexus** of some of our greatest social and environmental crises, this special edition of the *Futuring Podcast* sees Lesley Mitchell, Forum's Associate Director for Sustainable Nutrition and Charlene Collison, Forum's Associate Director for Sustainable Value Chains and Livelihoods, reflect on the world's food production systems and examine the fragility of the supply chains behind them.

The subject of much debate at COP 26, the world is on a daunting trajectory to 2.7 degrees of global warming despite increased efforts towards net zero. Food is a huge contributor to this – yet remains largely overlooked in the climate agenda.

In this provocative discussion, Lesley and Charlene explore how we've got here based on the last two decades, as well as what's happening today – activities, innovations, and ideas with real potential to **ignite deep transformation to a food system that's fit for the future**. This means one capable of sustainably feeding a growing global population with affordable and nutritious food, and in ways that respect and protect the rights of those involved throughout its supply.

Lesley and Charlene take us **back to a time** where 'sustainability' was little more than a new buzzword; globalisation accelerated; the complexity of the world's supply chains increased.

And crucially, we were **far from recognising the truly interconnected nature of the systems** on which we rely – meaning attempts to tackle issues related to livestock, food, farming and more happened in silo. Elsewhere, a focus on short-term profits meant industrialised economies grew reliant on poor practices of production and exploitative models for cheap labour overseas.

In the 2000s we began to see the **first points of connection between food, agriculture, and climate change, flagging the crisis ahead if we did not act.** And many of those deep challenges face us now – from extreme weather events risking greater volatility to failing crop yields, to widespread malnutrition and farmer poverty. In our recent history, 2021 saw the Suez Canal blockage, an event that dominated global headlines and brought into stark focus the **rippling domino effects inherent in our supply of goods and services.**

Our recent history – not least COVID-19 – is peppered with moments that have dramatically exposed the brittle nature of our supply chains and put the spotlight firmly on a growing need – and opportunity – for us to challenge business as usual.

Here, Lesley and Charlene consider our **rapidly closing window to innovate** and argue that **what will hold us back in seizing our opportunity is a failure to put system change at the heart of action**. How can businesses go beyond the recent flurry of net-zero commitments to embrace solutions capable of tackling the root causes of issues and recognising, even leveraging, the interconnections between them?

And crucially, how do we embrace the need not just to 'fix' current supply chains, but use current crises – and the turbulence they bring – to re-think and re-design all of our supply chains to be fit for the future.

Lesley and Charlene also **reflect on the decade of action** and what questions are already emerging. Consider what the increasing pressure on land brought by rewilding and restoration efforts will mean for food security? How are farmers engaging with innovation? How can new technology step up to the food challenge? How will regulatory reforms around human rights impact food production? How are the multiple stakeholders involved in the food system collaborating and is it effective?

And vitally, can promising solutions be rapidly scaled to meet the biggest challenges of our time? ■

Tune in to explore the podcast

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Demystifying the 'just transition': How can we ensure no one is left behind in a rapidly changing world?

Anna Biswas
Associate Director, India
Forum for the Future

Forum's Associate Director – India, Anna Biswas, takes a closer look at the concept of 'just transition'. What does 'justice' mean in the context of the many transitions we will be experiencing over the coming decade? How can we ensure that these transitions aren't shallow, but deep and transformational? Here, Anna explores four levels of transition and why it's going to take much more than approaches akin to moving deck chairs on the Titanic.

The concept of a 'just transition' is rising in prominence as governments, businesses and civil society alike wake up to the risk of people and communities being 'left behind' in a changing world. It is already taking centre stage in the now-inevitable fossil fuel transition, recognising the vulnerability of those involved in or peripheral to the industries past their heyday. Looking beyond the energy sector, it will also be essential in many other interconnected transitions – from how we use land and produce food, to creating circular economies and how we will live in (or even relocate) cities.

The concept comes with great promise. However, conversations and declarations around what a just transition really means have so far focused on the distribution of jobs and / or levies, rather than the deeper opportunity to rewire and reconfigure underlying systems to achieve greater equity, justice and regeneration by placing respect for universal human rights at the heart of transformational work.

This **needs to change** if we're to genuinely realise a just transition.

The depth of the **current energy transition** and the **scaling of renewable energy (RE)** is a case in point. Taking the Indian RE sector, it is clear that more justice is required across areas such as price pressures, human rights, governance, jobs and power dynamics. Left unaddressed, the energy transition is on track to be shallow, thus creating rather than tackling social and environmental risks. For example:

- The race to the bottom to make renewable energy price-competitive means there is less time and resources available to focus on sustainability, let alone justice and regeneration in the value chain. The search for ever-cheaper renewable energy means **cutting costs**, which almost inevitably means **less scrutiny and transparency** in the supply chain and thus dropping environmental and social standards. We have been told that actors find it 'impractical' to comply with **human rights** norms in their value chains and social impact assessments. Even when done with the best of intentions, rushed community consultations fall victim to structural power dynamics and risk reinforcing negative norms.

- The market creation drive has included a **relaxing of governance standards** including the need for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for renewable energy developments. There is no shared view of what constitutes a negative impact in many areas, or the threshold for violation. Though a number of investors are working to improve the situation, there remain only **weak accountability mechanisms** throughout the value chain.

- The **jobs** provided by the coal industry and its peripheral sectors are physically not where the renewable energy investment is going, so we cannot rely on a direct swap to avoid joblessness, even if the skills needed were vaguely close.

- **Dynamics and differing power** between actors in and around the renewable energy value chain are stark. Many different types of actors related to this chain have expressed a concern that their ability to have a positive impact is limited by the decisions made by others, in which they have little or no influence. Decisions around what site to use for instance, or timelines, can be make-or-break on whether proper thought and process happens on environmental and social impacts.

All of these, including in other areas we are observing such as food and supply chains, point towards an **opportunity to do things differently** and in a manner that can contribute not just to tackling the climate emergency but also the biodiversity crisis, and inequality.

So what could seizing this opportunity look like?

Four levels of possible transitions

'Transformational'.

'Perpetuation of Status Quo' is where providing jobs is the proxy for justice, and **'Managerial Reform'** is where rules and standards may change but the basic economic model and balance of power do not shift. They do not address the underlying causes of why we need the transition in the first place, and so humanity remains on a collision course with the iceberg that is the trauma of fallout from perpetual inequity and injustice.

Any progress made will therefore be undone over time. These two transition levels are akin to moving deck chairs on the Titanic, and could be what we are seeing when it comes to the scaling of renewable energy.

The Glasgow Climate Pact says just transitions must factor in the eradication of poverty, create decent work and quality jobs, and pathways to sustainable development. Yet, the danger of an interpretation that drives only shallow transition along these lines is high – to 'green capitalism' that is still fundamentally extractivist.

'Structural Reform', JTRC's third level, focuses on distributive and procedural justice. It sees inclusive and equitable decision-making processes, collective ownership and management of the new system by different stakeholders – or rights-holders – which requires an evolution in institutional structures, power dynamics and governance.

Forum's collaboration with communities in Selby (Yorkshire, UK) on *The Local Just Transition Challenge* aims to work with those in deprived areas who are traditionally excluded from planning processes and decision-making to create ways in which they can vision their own pathways for their community. This goes beyond job security, and offers the space to tackle inequity in access to nutrition, green space, affordable and safe transport and housing.

This gets us some way towards a compelling vision of a 'just and regenerative' future, but it is only really JTRC's fourth level, **'Transformational'**, that changes reality.

Transformational transitions find alternative development pathways to those built on continuous growth, explicitly dismantling systems of oppression and manifesting profoundly different human-environment relations.
But *how do we know* we have reached the Transformational level?

Shifting from extractive to regenerative models

According to the Climate Justice Alliance, a transition is only just when it sees the repatterning of power and a shift from an extractive to a regenerative economy. The transition itself has to be just and equitable, not simply the destination, and that it must redress past harms.

When done well, this provides the opportunity to address multiple challenges (across the Sustainable Development Goals) as the transition happens. What these deep transformational transitions look like will vary greatly across contexts, necessarily responding to cultural and socio-economic factors.

The *Responsible Energy Initiative* – a multi-year stakeholder collaboration of which Forum is a part – is exploring these factors and how to address them working as a constellation of actors, including investors, buyers, manufacturers, developers and civil society. Already there is an acknowledgement that a responsible energy system looks distinctly different from the one we operate today, even for renewable energy.

Stepping towards that distinctly different system will require significant effort, but the opportunities that will come with a deep

transformational transition are vast and too meaningful to be sacrificed in the name of political acceptance or speed.

This is the opportunity for development that lasts, and for all.

Just transitions must be about the process, not just the outcome

We've talked a lot about 'just transition' as an outcome, but the *process of getting there is vital*. How is the vision for transition set? Who shapes it? How can we use the opportunity transition brings to build an economy that creates and shares value differently? These are all key questions.

The transitions we are already experiencing, with more set to come, must be deep and transformational.

Each transition will require context-specific responses, coupled with international cooperation and learning.

The opportunities that could arise from deep transformational transitions in response to this moment are too big to forgo, and the consequences of shallow transition are too unpleasant to even consider. ■

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

There is an alternative: how emerging ideas are challenging core economic assumptions

Caroline Ashley and Charlie Thorneycroft

We know our current economic system is no longer fit for purpose. It continues to value profit over people and planet – but there are signs of new models emerging. Charlie Thorneycroft, Forum's Senior Change Designer, and Caroline Ashley, Global Programmes Director, explore what innovations are bubbling with potential to transform how we think and feel about our economy.

In our daily work attempting to address critical global challenges and stretch the ambition of sectors, companies, partners and ourselves, we are constantly hitting up against the constraints of the current economic model and the pursuit of growth at all costs. We cannot achieve many of our ambitions unless the goals of public policy, business models and financial flows are all rewired to value human wellbeing and environmental regeneration at their core.

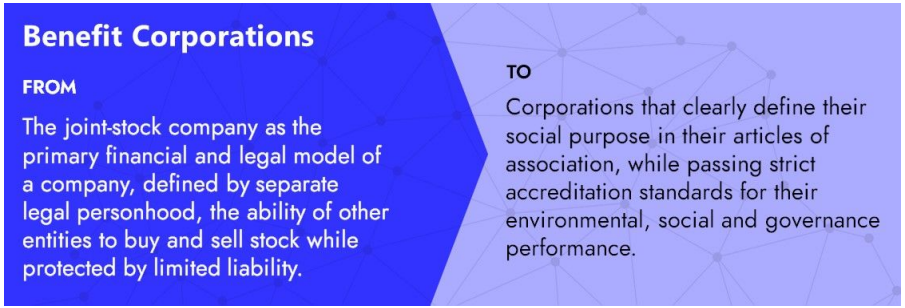
At Forum for the Future, we are constantly scanning disruptions that are bubbling in the niche that have not yet mainstreamed. New ideas from the margins will be invaluable in shifting assumptions about how our economy works and building new models. For example, most of us assume that money is fundamentally a store of value that enables us to trade with anyone; that investors naturally seek strongest financial returns, and that intellectual property rights are necessary to incentivise innovation.

Here, we explore **six innovations that are challenging mainstream economic assumptions, covering business models, finance, intellectual property, money, and regional economic policy**. None of these ideas are particularly new; indeed, some of them have been around for hundreds of years. However, each of them challenge the current economic model, which is based on the logic of efficiency, extraction, and exponential growth.

We do not know which, if any, of these will scale or become intertwined with other innovations. However, they do appear to be gaining traction in new and surprising ways. What is certain is that the pace of innovation is picking up and being considered from more mainstream players. Greater dislocation and innovation in our economic models should be expected, and indeed, welcome.

Benefit Corporations and B Corps

Benefit Corporation is a legal structure for companies to enshrine a social purpose in their articles of association and be held accountable for strict standards, thereby challenging the notion that companies must maximise value for their shareholders, rather than be driven by other interests, including the environment and society. B Corps is the voluntary certification that is available in any jurisdiction.



The legal structure of the joint-stock company created the ability and incentive to pool small amounts of capital from a large number of people to invest in corporations that are able to achieve economies of scale. However, this legal structure effectively separated owners from managers, creating a need to re-align their interests through tying executive pay to share prices. Corporate governance has since been dominated by a short-term focus on share price movements over the long-term success of the corporation and the interests of wider stakeholders. Meanwhile, there has been no mainstream means of investing long-term, while short-term thinking continues to dominate corporate culture, and thereby mainstream financial markets.

On the other hand, Benefit Corporations are legally required to balance the interests of a range of stakeholders and be accountable for their social and environmental performance through regular auditing and accreditation. All stakeholders can then engage, divest or even sue corporations for breaching their articles of association as a result.

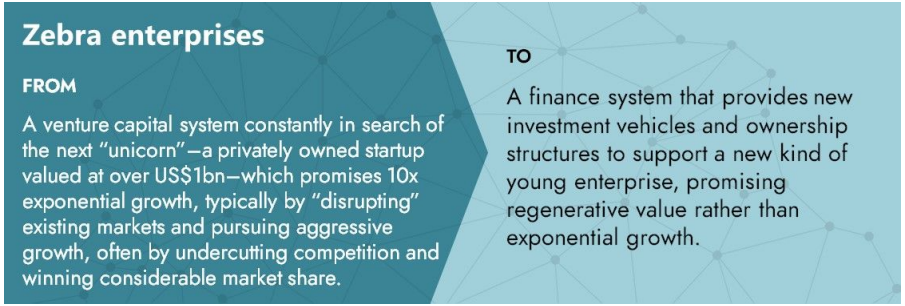
The US is perhaps currently leading the way in this regard, with Benefit Corporation legislation passed in 31 US jurisdictions. In the UK, the Better Business Act movement is striving to amend the Companies Act to enshrine these principles in UK law. The B-Corp movement has risen as a voluntary scheme that does not require legislation. Fast Company reported in 2020 that more than 3,500 companies have achieved B-Corp accreditation, passing a 200-question assessment that judges performance across governance, environment, workers, customers and community. **In 2020, two B Corporations went public, and six large multinational companies began the journey to qualify for B Corp status.**

By enshrining public benefit through Benefit Corporations, business behaviour that seeks profit at the expense of social value is much more readily challenged and changed, and moves beyond voluntarism.

Zebra enterprises

The concept of 'Zebras' in venture capital seeks to replace that of Unicorns,

pitting companies that deliver regenerative value as the epitome of success in investment, rather than exponential growth.



While the venture capital system may have its roots in the whaling industry, it is the unicorn that has since become the emblematic metaphor of the industry. This model has given us Facebook, Uber, Airbnb, WeWork, and the like – companies that are rewarded for delivering exponential growth regardless of the social and environmental impacts of that growth. Meanwhile, companies that are disruptive in ways that enhance social and environmental outcomes but hold less prospect of exponential growth attract less capital.

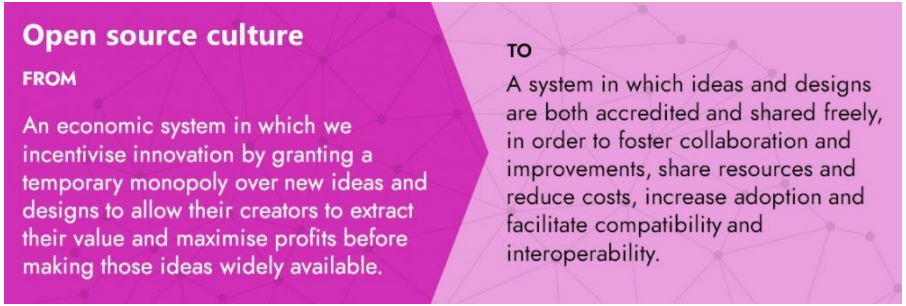
Shifting this system could instead foster so-called 'Zebras' – **companies that are black and white; both profitable and purposeful; mutualistic, working together to support the communities they serve; and have stamina, able to think and plan long-term if given the right enabling ecosystem.**

The Zebras Unite movement was started by a series of blog posts in 2016, sparking the inaugural gathering of a Dazzle (the collective noun for a group of zebras) of 250 investors, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists in San Francisco. The group now has 25 chapters internationally providing support, advice and funding to 'zebra enterprises' around the world.

Rather than simply accepting the commonly-held precept that 90 percent of start-ups must fail, Venture Capitalists could focus on creating the right enabling ecosystem and financing for these zebra enterprises to flourish.

Open source culture

Challenging intellectual property regimes to promote an open source culture would put value over profit as the driving force behind innovation.



One of the effects of the current intellectual property regime is perpetuating a model that creates value by locking-in consumers. With significant costs of switching to competitors, customers become dependent on a particular

company for goods, services, repairs and replacements. For example, a printer manufacturer may sell the printer at cost in order to make significant margins on cartridges. Intellectual property rights prevent other companies from selling compatible cartridges or spare parts for the printer. This model perpetuates the phenomenon of planned obsolescence – preventing other companies from designing spare parts and modifications drives obsolescence. This model is therefore a significant barrier to the Right to Repair movement and the circular economy.

In practical terms, an open source culture **can enable a sharing and repairing economy, creating new opportunities to either repair or build upon existing products in innovative ways.** Open-source cultures also harness a broader range of incentives to drive innovation, from short-term cost-reduction, creating long-term economic value, and to intellectual curiosity and innovation for its own sake.

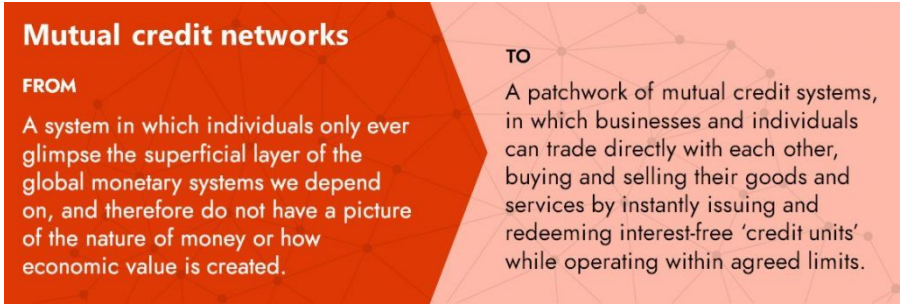
Open source culture has developed fastest in the tech sector. Mozilla were early pioneers of open-source software development, producing a range of freely available digital products. Software developers from around the world collaborate in a decentralised and asynchronous fashion using Github, a platform that allows developers to branch code, make suggestions for improvements and merge changes with the master version.

This culture is also beginning to bleed into hardware. The Open Source Ecology Movement has published the designs and instructions for constructing "50 different Industrial Machines that it takes to build a small, sustainable civilization with modern comforts", selected with the intention of enabling the production of other machines in a self-replicating, regenerative cycle. These modular designs can be built, repaired and improved on at a fraction of the cost of commercial models.

As younger generations become fluent in open source culture, it will begin to influence how we work, organise, plan and innovate.

Mutual credit networks

Mutual credit systems turn individuals from being simply users of money into issuers of money, which helps to drive a mindset shift in how we view money – not as an object or commodity we accumulate in a bank account but as a promise to actively participate in society.



Commercial banks create 97 percent of the money in circulation in the form of loans, or IOUs. While it is possible for individuals to transfer cash and issue loans between one another, in practice there is almost no infrastructure to facilitate these activities outside of the banking system.

This has resulted in global monetary systems that provide us with enormous benefits. However, it also restricts access to credit in places where large populations do not have access to banks, and to small and medium sized enterprises – especially when banks' confidence in the economy is low. It may sound surprising but in practice, people technically loan their money to a bank when they hold it in an account – all the money in our bank accounts takes the form of credit, or IOUs. This fact is obscured from us because we rarely see or think about the other side of the bank's balance sheet. Yet, this system encourages us to think of money instead as if it were an object or commodity we collect, with its value tied to its scarcity or the scarcity of the commodities we can buy with it.

Mutual credit is a form of alternative money, but unlike a currency, it cannot be exchanged outside of the network for legal tender or other currencies; nor is it a form of commodity or token like Bitcoin, where its value is tied to the notion of scarcity. Instead, the **credits are in effect promises to contribute goods and services back to other organisations in the network.**

Several working mutual credit systems already exist today. The WIR Bank in Germany was founded in 1934 following the Great Depression and is a type of hybrid mutual credit system that today has a ten figure turnover and more than 60,000 members. The Sardex mutual credit network in Sardinia was formed in 2009 following the financial crisis. Today, it has 3,200 business members and a transaction volume of €43m.

One of the trade-offs with mutual credit systems is that they are built on trust, and therefore its scale is limited to specific local communities or business networks, covering limited goods and services. There are, however, attempts to link these networks together to form a credit commons. For example, the Open Credit Network in the UK is developing an open-source software that enables local mutual credit systems to link to one another, while Trustlines and the Serafu Network in Kenya are building similar systems based on blockchain technology. In 2020, the Serafu Network reached nearly 90 million Shillings (~US$900,000) worth of trading between 30,000 users in Kenya for basic needs, in over 300,000 transactions on a blockchain.

In practical terms, these systems improve access to interest-free credit to those who cannot meet the lending requirements of banks. It encourages the circulation of credit within the network, which responds flexibly to the level of demand and available resources in the local economy. Most pertinently, mutual credit systems change the way we think about money: from a thing we can own and pass from one to another, to a promise to actively participate in society. It enables individuals to see themselves as part of a network, issuing IOUs to obtain goods and services now, in return for goods and services in the future.

This shift from being a money *user*, to money *issuer* could help to drive a mindset shift to seeing the real source of economic value as originating in the community working together to turn resources into things we need and want.

Community wealth building

Community wealth building is an approach to economic development that **uses local institutions to promote the circulation of wealth within communities and to empower local economies, relative to global capital.**

The current dominant system drives competition between regions for investment, putting downward pressure on standards, wages, and regional tax take. It can result in an area being over-represented by large corporations with little connection to the local economy. These companies are owned and operated in the interests of distant shareholders rather than local stakeholders, meaning much of the wealth generated in local economies flows out in the form of profits and dividends. In return, communities are offered jobs and 'efficient' prices for goods and services.

In contrast, the community wealth building approach **challenges the assumption that competition alone delivers the most efficient outcomes.** Procurement rules of anchor institutions need to consider social and environmental values alongside price, and recognise the importance of collaboration alongside competition. The result is increased circulation of wealth within communities, while building a diverse ecosystem of locally-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and promoting fair employment.The result is **increased circulation of wealth within communities, while building a diverse ecosystem of locally-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and promoting fair employment.**

This model has already been successfully applied in Preston, England. The application of the community wealth building model in Preston resulted in the proportion of spending by the six anchor institutions in the local Preston economy increased from 5 percent to 19 percent between 2012 and 2017, while spending in the Lancashire region increased from 39 percent to 81 percent. In 2016, Preston was ranked as the best city in north-west England to live and work in, beating both Manchester and Liverpool. The new mayor of Chicago recently proposed a US$15m community wealth building pilot, which she said "will create a new economic development program to promote local, democratic and shared ownership and control of community assets."

The aim of this movement is not to turn our back on the benefits that come with large multinational corporations. Instead, it aims to restore the balance of power between local communities and SMEs, and global capital.

Doughnut economics

Doughnut economics **reframes the goals of the economy away from growth maximisation to meeting the needs of all, with the boundaries of**

planetary health. Cities and municipalities such as Amsterdam are proving to be the ideal scale for testing this new framework.

In the current system, cities and regions develop unequally and at the expense of others, with social and ecological impacts that extend far beyond their borders. The Doughnut Economics approach requires an analysis of what it would take for the people and environment to thrive *within* that place, while respecting the wellbeing and health of people and environment *outside* of that place.

The city of Amsterdam has become one of the first real testbeds of the doughnut economics framework. In 2019, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group commissioned Kate Raworth to analyse where Amsterdam stood in relation to the doughnut, and in 2020 the city decided to formally adopt the framework in their policy decisions. There is evidence that the framework has begun to shift the mindsets of public officials, which is starting to influence their decision making. For example, at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, the city collected and refurbished 3,500 laptops for residents without digital access rather than purchasing new ones. According to one city official, this choice reflects their new way of thinking.

Several other cities are now following Amsterdam's lead, from Copenhagen and Brussels, Birmingham and Manchester to Sao Paulo and Kuala Lumpur. Doughnut Economics even featured in an episode of UK soap opera Eastenders, signalling that the ideas are truly starting to enter the mainstream consciousness.

What do these innovations mean for our future?

While each of these disruptors may be piecemeal, they are gaining traction and challenging some of the fundamental tenets of neo-classical economics, which current economic models are built on: the idea that maximising growth, cutting costs or attracting external investment should be the goal driving city or regional planning; that innovators must patent and protect their ideas to secure gain and provide incentives, that businesses' first duty is to shareholders; the idea that money is something you store, rather than a commitment to act. All of these principles are foundational in our system.

In exploring these alternatives to our current systems, we begin to reckon with the possibility of change, and the potential to overcome the barriers we so often face in our everyday work. Our economic assumptions are not fixtures. Just as the Amazon rainforest may become a net emitter or Atlantic currents may collapse, equally, basic principles of current economics may change.

To quote the late economist and anthropologist David Graeber: "*The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently.*"

But beyond just possibility, these alternatives also reveal the desirability of change. We need economic fundamentals to change. The obsession with growth as the end in itself, rather than just a means to support wellbeing, with environmental resources as an input, not systems to regenerate, has to change. We take optimism from the growth of these alternatives that such change is possible. ■

Six alternative economic models and the assumptions they challenge

Benefit Corporation and B Corps	**Purpose of business for which business is legally accountable:** from generating profit for shareholders with voluntarism on the side, to fundamentally meeting needs of social and environmental stakeholders.
Zebra enterprises	**Epitome of success for VC investors:** from exponential growth of winner companies, to enabling success of companies that deliver regenerative value.
Open source culture	**Drivers of innovation:** from maximising income from intellectual property to a range of drivers: short-term cost-reduction, long-term economic value, intellectual curiosity or innovation for its own sake.
Mutual credit networks	**Money:** from a thing we can own and pass from one to another, to a promise to actively participate in society.
Community wealth building	**Regional/city development:** from pursuit of minimising costs to the public purse and incentivising any (external) investment to prioritising local spend and institutions.
Doughnut economics in cities/regions	**Goals of a regional economy:** from maximising growth to enabling residents to thrive, while respecting needs of people and environment beyond those boundaries.

Further reading

Benefit Corporations
- Shareholder Capitalism (NEF)
- A Free Market Manifesto That Changed the World, Reconsidered (New York Times, 2020)

Venture Capital and Zebras
- Is Venture Capital Worth the Risk? (The New Yorker, 2020)
- Sex and Startups (Zebras Unite, 2016)
- Zebras fix what Unicorns break (Zebras Unite, 2017)
- Where unicorns fear to tread — building businesses that are better for the world (Zebras Unite, 2020)

Open source culture
- Here's the truth about the planned obsolescence of tech (BBC, 2016)
- Are the right-to-repair laws fair? (Raconteur, 2020)

Mutual credit
- People Powered Money (NEF, 2015)
- Altered States of Monetary Consciousness

Community wealth building
- Plugging the Leaks (NEF, 2001)
- Community wealth building: a history (CLES, 2020)

Doughnut Economics
- Doughnut Economics (Kate Raworth)
- Amsterdam Is Embracing a Radical New Economic Theory to Help Save the Environment. Could It Also Replace Capitalism? (Time, 2021)

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Insights from the 'next edge' of sustainability

James Payne
Associate Director,
Transformational Strategies
Forum for the Future

How does the response of business to the big sustainability challenges we face measure up to what is needed to make a more hopeful future possible?

In November 2021, Forum for the Future launched the Business Transformation Compass, *a new tool to help and challenge business leaders looking to drive ambitious change at the next edge of sustainability. Three months on and as part of* Looking Back to Go Forward, *James Payne, Forum's Associate Director for Transformational Strategies, shares insights on how the Compass has landed and the implications for business leaders wanting to adopt a just and regenerative mindset.*

Forum for the Future's recent Compass for Just and Regenerative Business report was inspired by the gap between how businesses are responding to the multiple challenges humanity faces – from spiraling inequality to climate breakdown and nature in crisis – and what's actually needed to credibly address them.

Earlier in this Future of Sustainability series, Johan Rockstrom emphasised this gap, recognising that we are doing better than before on climate change, but so far, falling significantly short of what's needed. He poignantly puts it as us coming 'to the end of the road'. Too often we see even the most ambitious net-zero strategies completely missing the key unlock of tackling climate justice, instead creating silos where social impact is managed separately from environmental impact as if they are not intimately related. In other places we see sticking plaster solutions that ignore the deeper systemic roots of problems.

It's clear we need to reset our ambition, viewing even net zero not as our destination but as a milestone en route to something more ambitious: a just and regenerative future.

Forum believes that to create this future, businesses need to rise to today's challenges in ways that build the capacity of communities and landscapes to increase positive impacts in a self-sustaining way over time. This requires a different way of thinking and acting; only then can we unlock the rapid transformation we need. Embracing this shift is central to the Compass, which launched in November, and initial reactions to it are helping us learn more about the implications for business leaders.

But first, some background. Working with business, we set out to create a guide that would be both visionary and stretching, but also grounded and practical. Specifically we aimed for three things:

1. Define what an authentically just and regenerative approach from business is, setting a high bar

A just and regenerative approach is defined as one that: *embraces the power of nature to renew and regenerate, understands that humans are a fundamental part of nature, and respects everyone's universal rights and potential to thrive.*

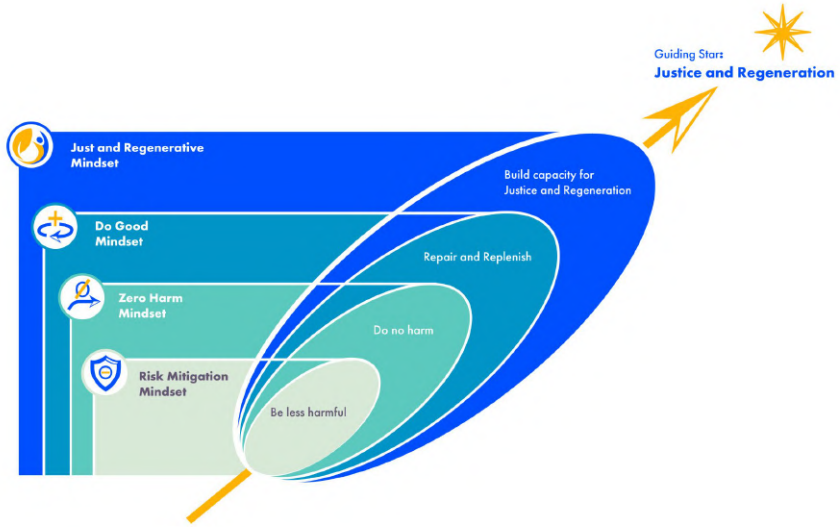
The reaction to this has been overwhelmingly positive. People welcome the 'guiding star' of justice and regeneration and the list of outcomes a business adopting a just and regenerative approach would aim for. The elements of this definition – such as human rights being universally respected and social and environmental systems thriving – are hard to argue against, and land with people intuitively. While very stretching, this ambitious vision is usually not rejected.

2. Highlight four business mindsets and share a 'business transformation compass' to navigate them

The Compass shares four levels of action a business can take. But more important than the level of action is the mindset or intent that guides it. The four mindsets we commonly encounter in business are risk mitigation, zero harm, do good, and just and regenerative.

Rather than working through these mindsets sequentially, we strongly recommend making the critical shift to adopting a just and regenerative mindset now, no matter the dominant mindset a business has had to date.

This is because a just and regenerative mindset, guiding your actions, unlocks the potential for an enhanced response at all four levels.



The four mindsets within the Business Transformation Compass

The focus on mindsets has been welcomed as a distinctive value of the Compass, but it is also challenging to translate into practice.
The implication of the Compass is that superficially adopting a few new practices or principles such as moving to regenerative agriculture or strengthening diversity, equity and inclusion training is not enough. But for business leaders, explaining a new and different mindset and way of thinking is really difficult.

Forum finds it hard to convey and business partners find it hard to translate. On the one hand you risk using specific language or jargon that is accurate,

but hard to understand; on the other hand, if you make it feel too similar to current ways of thinking and acting it becomes watered down and ineffective at creating the deeper change needed.

A further challenge is that asking experienced professionals (who have often based their success around understanding and operating in one business mindset) to shift to a new and different one – complete with new language and concepts – could be alienating or even threatening. To avoid eliciting a negative response, it is important to manage people's expectations and let them know that this thinking is meant to be challenging *and that that's okay*. We now introduce the Compass to new audiences saying *'expect to be challenged. If this makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, that's fine'*.

3. Make the shift to a just and regenerative mindset more tangible by providing guidance on specific 'critical shifts'

Forum felt that a lack of specific and accessible guidance for people who want to embrace a just and regenerative approach to business was an obvious blocker to adoption. So supplementary 'critical shifts' guidance covers seven typically material sustainable development issues (such as decent work, human rights and climate) and eight key business functions (such as procurement, HR and finance).

Many on social media commented positively about how the report delivered this. But, and this is a big but getting specific means thinking about more fundamental issues impeding transformation. It's easy to agree with the high-level guiding star principles such as the aim of human rights being respected universally, and resilience and vitality across generations and geographies being supported. But when the specific guidance gets into how your procurement function needs to work differently to share value more fairly across your supply chain, it starts to raise questions of costs, margins and moving from short-term to long-term profit maximisation. We have not found many business leaders ready to interrogate these.

In turn, these tough questions lead to other questions about purpose, ownership structure and more fundamental design of the business. These are simply not up for discussion in most business contexts, but will become increasingly important if we are to unlock the transformation needed.
One of the critical shifts covers the 'corporate affairs' function, as how business influences their own operating context is core to the next edge of sustainability. When I've raised this with businesses in the past, there's often a reaction of denying any agency at all –

"we just need regulation"; "we can't create change on our own"; "it's up to governments". Now, that attitude is beginning to shift. On climate mitigation in particular, businesses are stepping up their role to influence policy.

Implications for leaders

For business leaders in the 2020s, operating at this next edge of sustainability looks and feels very different.

Our recommendations are:

- Embrace a stretching and challenging but also hopeful vision Celebrate the urgent and difficult work to reach net zero, but see net zero as a milestone not a destination, an essential point in creating a thriving and fair future
- Join the dots between social and environmental issues, particularly when it comes to fair value distribution for workers and other stakeholders across a business' value network
- Focus on the health of your operating context, not just the health of your business, and recognise this requires a new way of thinking and acting
- **Be prepared for how different it is to adopt a regenerative mindset: even short-term problem solving or risk mitigation looks different**
- As you get into specifics, be willing to address crunchy issues about how core business drivers might block change
- **Don't wait. The shift to a just and regenerative mindset can be made today; it shouldn't be something that's seen as a future goal**
- Adopting a new mindset can happen in a flash of inspiration or slowly over time, but the important thing is to expose yourself to visionaries and diverse resources that can help us to see the world with new eyes.

This will be an exciting learning journey for those who want to explore the next edge of sustainability.

Forum is already sharing this thinking with many organisations through talks and workshops and by road-testing the Compass together. We're developing the guidance further, particularly around the critical shifts and the policy advocacy approaches needed. And we're building out our thinking about the deeper shifts required in businesses to make a hopeful future possible.

Why not join us on this journey, and be one of the people who helps to blaze a trail towards a just and regenerative future? ■

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

From laggard to system changer: can the finance sector step up as an agent of change in sustainability?

Emilie Goodall and Caroline Ashley

Emilie Goodall, Forum for the Future Affiliate, and Caroline Ashley, Forum for the Future's Global Programmes Director, explore whether and how finance sector players can step up as agents of system change. As innovations start to stretch ambition well beyond the uptake of ESG, Emilie and Caroline consider what trends we're seeing and use systems change thinking to assess progress and potential.

Note: The authors recognise that this opinion piece is necessarily partial – not all trends or dynamism in the finance sector are represented. They also acknowledge that these insights are reflective of their own position and biases, based in the global north, and working as part of an international sustainability organisation, originally founded in the UK.

The finance sector has long been a laggard in addressing sustainability. Recently that seems to have changed. Environmental, social and governance (ESG) investment is booming. Net zero alliances have been established for asset owners, managers, banks, insurers and advisers. But this is no panacea. If the huge power of financial organisations is to be harnessed to drive a different future, there is so much more to address than the uptake of ESG.

The key opportunity for finance sector players is in realising the potential of investing not just in a business but for the wider health of a system.

This may sound ambitious, but a window of opportunity has opened. The concept of 'finance is neutral' has been debunked. The climate crisis has provoked recognition that finance has a role in driving carbon emissions – and reductions – *and* a responsibility to act. In 'systems speak', agency is now recognised. The principle that finance is a *shaper of change* can now be applied to more than just GHG emissions.

Beyond ESG

Most conversations on sustainability within finance focus on uptake of ESG, a term used as shorthand for the wide range of environmental, social and governance 'nonfinancial factors' that could affect financial returns and should be integrated into financial decision-making. ESG assets are forecast to hit one third of global assets under management (AUM) by 2025, or $53 trillion. Europe is leading the way, with the US catching up. Japan and other Asian nations are anticipated to follow.

Part of ESG's rapid growth is down to its success at selling itself as a way to mitigate (financial) risk and/or boost (financial) returns. And therein lies the limitation

of ESG in driving system change: it *serves rather than shifts the existing goals of the system*.

ESG in public markets is often about rearranging portfolios. It affects stock holdings, without changing the fundamentals of the economy. Another major problem in this ESG-era is the neglected 'S'. World Benchmarking Alliance data reveals just 1% of large businesses screened meet even basic social standards. There is a lack of acknowledged responsibility for human rights abuses through the value chain back to financiers.

So ESG is mainstreaming, but it's not changing the system. What could? At the 'niche,' we identify three dynamic trends:

- **Impact investing intentionally seeks out – and measures – net positive impact, such as contribution to the SDGs.**
  This is a fractional sub-set of ESG or responsible investing, defined by its active focus on the 'delta' or the added environmental and social value delivered by financing selected businesses. Various impact investing 'tribes' range from the green finance movement and hyper-local social investors to multi-million development finance initiatives engaging in blended finance.
- **Judging 'good investment' not on whether it is better than before, but on whether it keeps the economy within necessary thresholds.**
  The Science Based Targets initiative and 2DII are the most well-known technical approaches to applying thresholds to financial institutions' so far, but others are emerging in what is a contested discipline that reflects a critical principle of how to judge – and compare – performance, with r3.0 and Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics leading the charge.
- **Influencing the rules of the game.**
  While corporate lobbying to protect vested interests continues, we are also seeing finance actors actively calling for better sustainability-driven regulation. COP26 saw a number of financial players urging governments to both change the incentives for private sector behaviour and regulate it more tightly. Elsewhere, investors have vocalised their frustration at the potential watering down of the EU green taxonomy, and delays to the social taxonomy.

These three trends feed into a fourth shift for financiers as agents of change, and perhaps most significant: **Acting to influence change at a *system level* by intentionally investing for the health of the economy, environment and society.**

System-level investing is a term coined by The Investment Integration Project (TIIP), to define *'the intentional consideration by investors of the bigger-picture environmental, social or financial system context of their security selection and portfolio construction decisions'*. It is the difference between assessing the sustainability risks and impacts of individual assets or enterprises, and seeking to assess the risks and impacts of the market on

such issues. And, critically, it's about using this assessment to influence change, recognising it as central to, rather than in conflict with, enhancing long-term investment returns. System-level investing can use any or all of the

three trends above. Indeed, all three are likely needed to drive positive impact.

Examples of what this looks like include:

- ***Investors pressuring firms to mitigate behaviour that, although profitable for the individual company, damages the market overall.***
  Consider Shareholder Commons' Fox News resolution, in which shareholders were asked to vote in support of insisting Fox stop spreading disinformation about climate and vaccinations. The argument is that the majority of Fox's shareholders hold shares across the wider market and, therefore, benefit from a well-functioning market. If a company spreading disinformation undermines that market functioning, the result is a bad outcome for such shareholders, even if lucrative for the individual company.

- ***Engaging with standard setters to inform international standards, in order to adopt these into their own investment processes.***
  Consider the Coalition for an International Platform for Climate Finance, led by Aviva Investors, which is calling for a new financial architecture to leverage public and private finance into the carbon transition.

- ***Revisiting the responsibility investors have in multiple jurisdictions to maintain 'market integrity'.***
  There is potential to widen responsibility from its current focus on matters such as bribery and corruption, and to incorporate wider sustainability matters that threaten market integrity.

System-level investing could also be seen in investor actions to transition other systems (such as food or energy). In the US, diverse investors are actively shaping the transition to regenerative agriculture. Akiptan, for example, is a Community Development Finance Institution of the Sioux community, with a mission to 'transform Native agriculture and food economies' by delivering creative capital, leading paradigm changes, and enhancing producer prosperity.

In South East Asia, finance players are joining with Forum for the Future and other protein actors to explore the shift from 'protein engineering' to a 'protein visionary' approach that addresses equity and sustainability in the entire protein system, from diverse production to affordable nutrition.

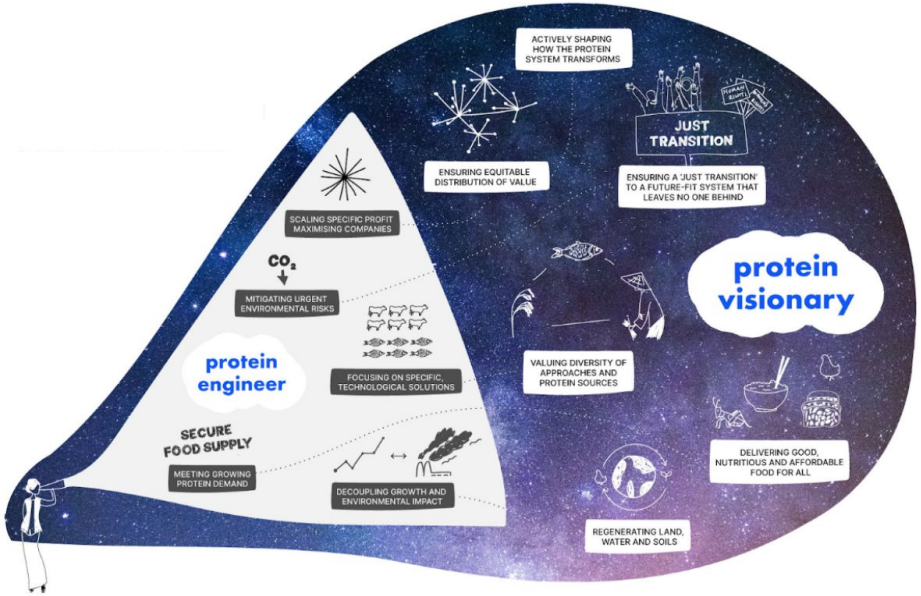
Promising, but...
While these examples are promising, it is still rare that financial players taking a systematic agent of change approach.
Our conclusion? If these trends are to truly shape a different future, there needs to be a more fundamental remodelling of the financial architecture. None of the trends listed above are (yet) truly challenging the fact that only a fraction of the world's population is served by global capital flows – the same capital flows within which all of the above trends operate.

To quote Gillian Marcelle, a blended finance advisor experienced in economic development and capital mobilisation, there must now be a *"widening of the solutions space"* across all of the trends cited above.

It cannot be about extending an unsustainable financial infrastructure, moulded by a handful of countries, to the rest of the world.

Other voices and ideas must be incorporated. And more substantially, we need different models and mechanisms capable of acting as alternatives to – rather than niches within – the mainstream.

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.



Investors are encouraged to widen their perspective to protein visionaries in the Protein South East Asia project

Philanthropy 2050: Catalysing a just and regenerative future

Jane Lawton and Clare Baker

Jane Lawton, Forum for the Future's former Chief Development and Communications Officer and Clare Baker, Forum's Senior Global Development Manager, share insights from grantmakers, grantees and philanthropic networks which explore how philanthropy might become a greater catalyst for change – fully leveraging its power to test new approaches and shift systems.

Although the capital deployed through philanthropy is tiny compared to the finance flowing through capital markets, the sector's ability to provide flexible, risk tolerant capital can be a powerful and much-needed ingredient in creating change. The sector is rapidly evolving, with new forms of philanthropy emerging around the world, next generation philanthropy and the paradigm-shifting power of huge funders being brought to bear on global issues.

Yet philanthropy risks missing the boat in realising its potential to create truly transformational change – held back by risk-averse approaches and an inability to connect the dots across the issues it is working to solve. More fundamentally, there are many ways in which philanthropy may actually be holding in place the structural inequalities and global challenges it seeks to overcome.

At this critical inflection point in time, we share insights from grantmakers, grantees and philanthropic networks which explore how philanthropy might become a greater catalyst for change – fully leveraging its power to test new approaches and shift systems.

While each participant brought a different perspective from where they sit in the system, our interviews with them surfaced a number of common insights including:

- A positive trend towards **more systemic approaches to change,** moving beyond rigid approaches to impact measurement;
- Ongoing gaps in connecting environmental and social issues, and **collaborating effectively across sectors** – most notably a real lack of engagement with the private sector, and support of a strong public sector;

- The **critical need for philanthropy to examine its own approaches** to ensure it is not contributing to structural inequality, and to find ways to shift the balance of power and build relationships of deeper trust with their grantees, partners, and across sectors;
- A call to action for philanthropy to **do more to leverage its unique position as a change agent** with the capital, influence and risk tolerance to enable bold, innovative and long-term change even in the most challenging of contexts.

We would like to thank Dr Miatta Fahnbulleh, CEO, New Economics Foundation (NEF); Heather Grady, Vice President, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA); Sara Hossain, Executive Director, Bangladesh Legal and Aid Services Trust (BLAST); Leslie Johnston, CEO, Laudes Foundation; and Kevin Teo, COO, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN); for sharing their experience and insights with us.

Three positive trends in philanthropy that are enabling greater impact

Over the past 25 years there have been a number of positive shifts in philanthropic giving as the sector has developed and responded to the growing complexity of global challenges.

Some philanthropies are moving beyond a rigid approach to impact measurement to looking at change more systemically, and investing in building an ecosystem that will provide the enabling conditions for change.

> ***"What I've seen in the last five years is the pendulum swinging away from an obsession with measurement to systems approaches which look at changing the underlying conditions holding the problem in place. Now we're moving faster toward funders collaborating, working with a network of connected organisations aimed toward a shared goal and vision."***
> **Heather Grady, RPA**

> ***"Any foundation working on system change has to be doing core funding. COVID-19 was really a wake-up call in this regard – philanthropy realized it needed to be more flexible and to give more core support in order to keep the field alive. A lot of the areas we are working in are embryonic, which means we need to strengthen the institutions first, and core funding is critical for that."***
> **Leslie Johnston, Laudes Foundation**

The sector is also responding to new areas of need, often before other sectors have fully embraced them.

> ***"I don't think we can underestimate the importance of philanthropy for the climate movement and for the new economy movement which would not have burgeoned and grown in the way they had without philanthropic funding."***
> **Miatta Fahnbulleh, NEF**

"Philanthropy is increasingly active in justice and access to justice such as gender based violence in Bangladesh. It is filling a gap as bilateral donors are withdrawing due to economic and geopolitical changes rejigging priorities; extreme poverty, COVID-19, and Afghanistan are diverting funding from other development concerns."
Sara Hossain, BLAST

Although the north-south divide is still very much in play – with a high percentage of philanthropic funding to poorer countries flowing from the global north – the increase in wealth and philanthropy in other regions is shifting this balance fast, and driving some new approaches that could influence the entire sector.

"The fastest growth in philanthropy anywhere in the world is in China, with other hotspots in Brazil, Colombia, and India. Philanthropists I have worked with in Colombia are bemused at the idea that funders would be engaged in philanthropy that doesn't involve working directly with communities or beneficiaries of their funding. But there are many US philanthropists who barely interact with the local community, yet feel that is appropriate. So there is a strength in domestic philanthropy [outside the US] that is undervalued and underreported."
Heather Grady, RPA

"The rest of the world could learn from Asia how to take a more equitable approach. The 'E' of ESG is more advanced, especially in Europe, but the 'S' is still developing. But the 'S' dimension is a key aspect of philanthropy in Asia and could be one of the ways a mutual exchange of learnings on both sides [geographically] on what impact is about."
Kevin Teo, AVPN

Do more to connect environmental and social outcomes

While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have helped enshrine the idea that social, economic and environmental problems and their solutions must be interconnected, there is no question that efforts by philanthropy to connect across issues and sectors need to go further if they are to be long-lasting and avoid unintended consequences.

***"There's a world in which we achieve the green transition but we've hammered everyone in that process and we have lost all public consent for doing it. On the other side we've got a load of philanthropies interested in mitigating the social consequences of* our system, and they see climate as a headache they can't deal with. There is only a tiny subset thinking about how you bring the two together."**
Miatta Fahnbulleh, NEF

Partner more effectively with the public sector

There is also a critical need for many philanthropies to be truly collaborative – ensuring their efforts are complementary to those of the public sector, while also enabling learning, innovation and bringing in different knowledge and perspectives.

"I have seen no real progress, possibly even a regression, in philanthropy understanding the importance of the public sector. For example, it's a shame that funders are giving to health work in Africa but not paying any attention to the plans or role of the ministries of health. Or education funders in the US who pay no attention to changing education outcomes by influencing fiscal policy for greater redistribution of resources between rich and poor neighbourhoods."
Heather Grady, RPA

"Bangladesh is a victim of climate change, an important voice in calling for global activity and accountability. But the rhetoric that the state is engaged in internationally is different to the local view. If governments bulldoze climate refugees locally this does not match their international-level conversation. How can philanthropy operate both at the high table and locally?"
Sara Hossain, BLAST

More positively, some philanthropies in Asia are experimenting with new ways to enable policy innovation:

"Venture Philanthropy – catalytic entrepreneurial capital – is best placed to challenge the status quo and fund new models for interventions. This [funding] was previously directed at social entrepreneurs and enterprise. There is a move towards innovative ideas from public servants too. AVPN's Asia Policy Forum engages with policy makers to get private funders to support some of their ideas to make change as it is not in standard government budgets to do so."
Kevin Teo, AVPN

Provide the patient, flexible capital needed to deliver system change

As the world goes through a number of key transitions toward the new energy, food and economic systems that will be needed to create transformational change, there is a recognition that short-term investments will no longer deliver. This has been a criticism for investors and the business community for some time.

While philanthropy – unburdened by the need to deliver shareholder return– has the potential to drive longer-term approaches, there are still very few funders investing at the time scales required for systemic change, and not enough are providing flexible capital that demonstrates trust in the ability of their partners to create change.

"Lots of funders are funding in a short-term, project-based way that actually detracts from the very collaboration you need from your actors to drive the change they want. When you are trying to drive big structural changes it just doesn't play out in that way, and I think the ability to recognize that and adapt is far too slow for the urgency of the challenge and the pace of change that we want."
Miatta Fahnbulleh, NEF

"[Funders should] not focus tightly on project deliverables but more on core funding, allowing an organisation to be flexible and focus on its USP and use it [funding] the way it thinks, and knows from hard won experience, is best."
Sara Hossain, BLAST

"We know the global economic system needs significant change. That is going to require very patient capital. We need at least a 10-year runway if not more and to be putting significant resource behind that."
Leslie Johnston, Laudes Foundation

Address issues of power and equity to create a more just and regenerative sector

Central to the historic notion of philanthropy is that there is a giver and a receiver. The power imbalance inherent in this concept makes questions of power and inequality very challenging for a sector that is trying to solve the same issues. We are seeing a growing recognition among many big philanthropies of the need to address inequality, lack of inclusion and harmful power dynamics in their current structures and practices.

"In the last few years George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter movement shook US society. Commentators on philanthropy, whether inside or outside the sector, are now being much more provocative about how philanthropy is working vis-à-vis power issues, and really questioning the status quo of power dynamics."
Heather Grady, RPA

Transforming the power dynamic is a complex undertaking, and an ongoing journey for most philanthropies. As in other sectors, this often starts with acknowledging the underlying tension between the source of the wealth and the change the institution is trying to create in the world.

"The question of philanthropy and its own contribution to structural inequalities is part of the conversation. More organisations are looking at this dynamic, including in Asia, where family business is the main backdrop. Donations come from businesses where there is a conflict between how profits are being generated and philanthropic aims. How could the same decision-maker think about how the business is run and philanthropic efforts – so that together they make sense?"
Kevin Teo, AVPN

"Where family foundations are transitioning to being run by a Chief Executive and Board of Trustees there's far more openness to have a conversation about where the money's coming from, how we make sure we're making the right investments in order to keep growing the pie. It is much harder to have these conversations the closer you are to the source [of wealth], but even with the foundations that are at the vanguard of doing this it's still quite incremental."
Miatta Fahnbulleh, NEF

Transforming power dynamics will likely also require new approaches to governance, both within institutions as they examine the makeup of their staff and their boards of trustees, and overhaul their granting mechanisms and practices to ensure they are more inclusive.

"If philanthropies aren't willing to invest in local engagement it can be a barrier. It is easier to hang out with a few inspiring people and live in that stratosphere instead of dealing with what happens down below. [Philanthropies] need to learn more, and have a better understanding of what interventions have impact. Not just from people whom they meet at Davos."
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"As long as you're giving people money there is a dynamic there. And the way you break that is to create flexibility, so you move to things like core funding, basically saying we trust you to deliver these outcomes. I think that shifting the terms of the funder relationship is the thing that negates the power."
Miatta Fahnbulleh, NEF

"The risk is that foundations like to do their own thing – even though there are more coalitions and they are collaborating more, the sector is still a bit of a black box. If we are stepping up to hold business accountable – who is holding us accountable as a sector?"
Leslie Johnston, Laudes Foundation

Some pilots and new ways of working show how philanthropy can respond to these challenges:

"In the Philippines and Australia, Fund for Shared Insight is looking to emphasise listening tools and funders being more aware of the voice of the beneficiary [both NGOs and the people they serve]. Two pilots with groups of philanthropic funding members open to enquiring about listening practice. This is different to M&E, it happens at the front end before we do a programme and deploy resources to bring these voices into the room and not jump to conclusions on what is needed. If each philanthropy tried to do this it would be too expensive and hard to justify. But if we work collaboratively, and pool resources and inputs, you can get better outcomes."
Kevin Teo, AVPN

Philanthropy 2050: A call to action

If philanthropy is to realise its potential to catalyse a more just and regenerative world, how does the sector need to evolve to meet that challenge?

Beyond the insights shared above, we heard a clear call for philanthropies to be bolder and braver – to rise to the challenges of today and push the

boundaries of what is possible in the future. And to fully leverage their power and influence to do this.

"Philanthropy needs to be bolder. I read recently that only a very small percentage of environmental funders are engaging in more disruptive practices like strategic litigation. If we aren't bold enough to come in where no-one else will, that's a challenge."
Leslie Johnston, Laudes Foundation

"[Philanthropy should] take on some of the challenges of doing this kind of work in authoritarian settings and support people in those contexts. Don't become overcautious, and just sit at the big table [national level] and ignore everything else that needs to be done."
Sara Hossain, BLAST

"Many philanthropic organisations have very powerful networks. Imagine if they put their heads above the parapet, and used their voice to intervene in the very debates they are trying to influence."
Miatta Fahnbulleh, NEF

"In an ideal world you wouldn't have any philanthropy. We are trying to change a system and working toward a climate-positive, inclusive economy. If that exists, there won't be a need for philanthropy?"
Leslie Johnston, Laudes Foundation

Ultimately, can philanthropy transform the systems we rely on so deeply that it contributes to shaping a world where philanthropy itself is no longer needed?

Further reading

- **Inside Philanthropy** on lessons we are learning around funding for grassroots organisations
- **The Futuring Podcast:** Cressida Pollock, Quadrature Climate Foundation, on systemic climate philanthropy
- **The Futuring Podcast:** The need for increased investment in climate funding, and in work that addresses both climate action and social justice
- **Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors,** The State of Climate Philanthropy
- **Edgar Villanueva**, Decolonizing Wealth
- **Phil Buchanan, Center for Effective Philanthropy**, Giving Done Right

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

PHASE 4

Going forward

Inspired by the past, exploring the future

A distillation of all we've heard to present key takeaways for the sustainability movement and present glimpses of **what's coming**...

Transformation, collaboration and the power of youth

Reflections from 3M, Bupa, GSK Consumer Healthcare, SC Johnson and Target

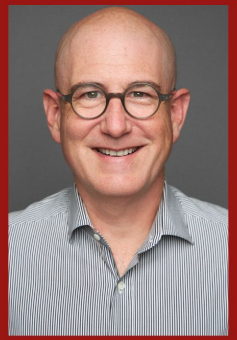
Senior leaders from our partners SC Johnson, 3M, Bupa, GSK Consumer Healthcare and Target reflect on the biggest challenges facing the sector in 2022, highlight what could unlock deeper transformation, and share what gives them hope.

The contributors

Alan VanderMolen, Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer at SC Johnson
Dr. Gayle Schueller, Senior Vice President and Chief Sustainability Officer, 3M
Nigel Sullivan, Chief Sustainability and People Officer, Bupa
Sarah McDonald, VP Sustainability, GSK Consumer Healthcare
Amanda Nusz, Senior Vice President, Corporate Responsibility, Target

On the biggest changes needed in sustainability

The diverse insights generated across the *Future of Sustainability* series to date have highlighted the need for urgent action at this pivotal moment for change, and the depth of the shifts that will be required – on the scale of completely rewiring how many of our systems work together. Our corporate leaders reflect on these challenges from their perspective.



Far too much recyclable packaging ends up in landfills or, worse, in the environment. Therefore, nothing is more vital than creating scalable, closed-loop recycling infrastructure. And we're never going to solve this issue without better regulation

ALAN VANDERMOLEN
Senior Vice President &
Chief Communications Officer, SC Johnson

For the sustainability movement overall, I believe the biggest near-term challenges are (1) motivating urgent action across all stakeholders; (2) rooting actions in sound science that truly deliver positive impact; and (3) inspiring collaboration – it's the only way to make a sustained difference at scale.

DR. GAYLE SCHUELLER
Senior Vice President &
Chief Sustainability Officer, 3M

Our collective contributions to the sustainability movement must begin to recognize and reconcile the inextricable link between planet and people, regeneration and equity, climate change and climate justice. There is strong momentum among leaders and organizations taking a more holistic view of sustainability – one that delivers on the demands for environmental and social action we continue to see from all stakeholders.

AMANDA NUSZ
Senior Vice President,
Corporate Responsibility, Target

On unlocking deeper transformation in the coming year

Given the depth of the shifts required, it can be challenging to see how individual companies can make a difference. The leaders we interviewed spoke of the need to drive transformation through their own corporate sustainability strategies.

"The environmental issues we face require systemic solutions, and at SC Johnson, we feel a responsibility to play a part. To that end, we intend to focus on aggressive near-term milestones in four critical areas: innovation, advocacy, capacity and education. All of which are needed to drive meaningful change."
Alan VanderMolen, SC Johnson

"3M's focus is on delivering on existing ambitious commitments across our sustainability platform, with a particular emphasis on driving a global circular economy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions across our global supply chain."
Dr Gayle Schueller, 3M

"Bupa's main priority over the coming year is to embed our new sustainability strategy contributing to a healthy future for people and planet. This includes setting a path to reducing the environmental impact of healthcare – prioritising the development of robust roadmaps to reach Net Zero by 2040 and circularity, accelerating real solutions to the biggest health related sustainability challenges, and supporting action to protect, restore and regenerate local environments to benefit human health and wellbeing."
Nigel Sullivan, Bupa

"For Target, the focus will be on activating our new enterprise-wide sustainability strategy, Target Forward. Central to our efforts is the mindset that sustainability efforts are part of an interconnected system, where our actions to address climate, restore natural systems, and drive opportunity and equity for our teams, communities and partners, impact and reinforce one another to create change that is good for all."
Amanda Nusz, Target

"Our sustainability strategy focuses on tackling the environmental and social barriers to better everyday health as we look through the lens of health in everything we do. As the health consequences of climate change are impacting vulnerable groups hardest, we are focused on tackling climate change and nature loss and also improving health inclusivity to ensure more people are included in opportunities for better everyday health."
Sarah McDonald, GSK Consumer Healthcare

Greater and different forms of collaboration

The group also, however, acknowledged that the greatest unlock for transformation will be greater, and different forms of collaboration – across individuals, businesses and sectors.


"If we as humans truly aligned and acted with urgency to each bring our full capabilities to bear in collaboratively addressing the global sustainability challenges facing the world, the variety of solutions and rate of change could be amazing"
DR. GAYLE SCHUELLER
Senior Vice President &
Chief Sustainability Officer, 3M


"The recognition of the role co-creation will play in achieving our ambitions is so promising. Collaboration and listening will allow us to learn together, celebrate progress together, and build better solutions as we advance this critical sustainability movement."
AMANDA NUSZ
Senior Vice President,
Corporate Responsibility, Target


"Greater collaboration, leading to wider systems change is key to unlocking deeper transformation. By coming together as companies, creating scale, adopting common practices and working together with suppliers, governments and policymakers; we can create a much deeper transformation than by acting on our own."
SARAH MCDONALD
VP Sustainability,
GSK Consumer Healthcare


"Partnering with disruptive organisations could unlock deeper transformation, challenging old ways of multi-stakeholder collaboration to drive faster action."
NIGEL SULLIVAN
Chief Sustainability and People
Officer, Bupa

On reasons to be hopeful

Our contributors have plenty of reasons for hope for the decade ahead – from the promise and expectations of the young generation; the momentum, demand and ambition for action across actor groups; growing openness to co-creation and collaboration as well as immense scientific and technical breakthroughs.

"The bold sustainability ambitions being set in the business community are truly remarkable. Demand for action has never been higher, and it's energizing to see so many working to meaningfully answer that call."
Amanda Nusz, Target

"I am inspired by the momentum happening worldwide. We now have the first generations growing up with sustainability as a fundamental ideal in their everyday lives. They are motivated by the feeling that they can make a difference through the choices they make"
Alan VanderMolen, SC Johnson

"Hope is only possible if action is happening – and I see action in every part of the equation – in businesses and the corporate world, in citizens, and increasingly so, in policy makers and governments. Where there is action there is hope."
Nigel Sullivan, Bupa

"I am hugely inspired by three developments that are accelerating progress to tackling some of the most complex sustainability challenges that we face: impactful collaborations that make it easier for companies to come together and create the scale needed to drive change; the mainstreaming of sustainability, which makes it much easier for organisations to develop a clear internal business case for action; and the scale up of breakthrough technologies which means they can compete more effectively with less sustainable alternatives."
Sarah McDonald, GSK Consumer Healthcare

"From affordable and accessible renewable energy to transportation electrification and creative entrepreneurial ideas, I'm inspired by the scientific and technical breakthroughs that are starting to emerge that help make taking sustainable action no longer aspirational but easy. Combine these emerging solutions with the passion, intelligence, and skills of our youngest generations, and I'm excited about the possibilities for the future."
Dr Gayle Schueller, 3M

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

The future of sustainability: ‘the same, only faster’ or deep transformation that challenges the fundamentals of our systems?

Caroline Ashley
Global Programmes Director,
Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future’s Global Programmes Director, Caroline Ashley, draws out key takeaways from all we’ve heard in the campaign. Looking back, she reflects on three things holding progress up in the sustainability movement: piecemeal. As part of going forwards, Caroline also reveals six things that will be vital to driving deep transformation

The time for action is now. Crises are here, and intensifying everyday. The planet is rapidly and dramatically changing around us and many of our long-established systems are now, quite simply, no longer fit-for-purpose given the complexity and intricacy of the social and environmental challenges we face.

The transformation needed must be deep and undoubtedly, much deeper than the efforts we are currently seeing around us. The scale of change required is one with the potential to infuse every single aspect of how we eat, live, produce, consume, work and relate to each other. Anything short of that will no longer cut it – and arguably, never has.

Far from being a doom and gloom picture, this moment is ripe for transformation and a fundamental reset. Now more than ever we have the potential to create a world that is better than the one we currently inhabit; a future that is more just, more regenerative, more in balance with the planet we all call home.

This opportunistic appetite for change is not unique (after all, it’s what’s driven the sustainability movement for decades), but it feels like the 2020s have brought with them a distinctly more decisive crossroads.

As John Elkington so elegantly put it: right now feels like the *“fulcrum between the old and new… There is a sense that there is something deeply broken in the current system, and therefore it’s only a matter of time before it decomposes in front of our eyes…. I think we’re right on the edge, the cusp, of things potentially changing but the question is, do they go in our direction or somewhere else?”*

> **“Wouldn’t it be amazing if this moment in time… was talked about in 100 years? Not as the moment we sealed our own fate as a species, but as the moment we woke up, realized what we needed to do to transform our relationship with each other and with the planet, and got on with the job?” Sally Uren and Jane Lawton kicking off Forum’s Looking Back to Go Forward series.**

So, if the time is right, and to some extent change is

happening already – whether in response to COVID-19, extremely changing weather, wars, or demographics – why is it not adding up? Insights from Forum for the Future's Looking Back to Go Forward campaign has revealed three critiques.

Current solutions are too piecemeal, shallow and short-term

In many sectors, there is a chase for quick solutions that do not address the root causes of issues or lay solid foundations for long-term change. Too often, these 'solutions' do not change the mindsets that really determine what we assume, what problems we see and what future we think is possible.

Consider, for example, corporate action on sustainability: Forum's James Payne contrasts the 'do no harm' and 'do good' mindsets of well-intentioned businesses with a business mindset to seek a 'just and regenerative' future. It's only the just and regenerative lens that will drive what's needed: investment in the health of the whole system in which a business operates. Elsewhere, Forum's Jonathon Porritt called time on' corporate volunteerism', arguing that while it's well-intentioned, it's simply not delivering. Government action is needed and, he suggests, the gold standard for corporates is now to advocate for that government intervention.

It's a similar story in finance. On the surface, change over the last few years looks promising, with rapid expansion of ESG funds and adoption of net-zero targets. But – as I explored with Emilie Goodall – look a little deeper and it's clear that 'ESG labelled funds' – now in their billions – are not redirecting finance into the new approaches needed at scale or changing the basic calculations behind financial return. Only more fundamental shifts will do that, whether it's a move to systemic investing, redefining the purpose of our economy or reshaping the (now bygone?) structures of our financial systems.

Social justice is missing, separated, and/or tokenistic

Despite gaining prominence in recent decades, aspects of social justice aimed at ensuring the universal respect for human rights and equal opportunities continue to be overlooked or only tokenistically considered.

Forum's Anna Biswas shared insights on this with respect to the growth of renewable energy in India. Anna vividly highlighted how the rush to scale renewables is leading to short-cuts in addressing land issues, human rights in the minerals supply chain, and inequitable decision making. Just because renewable energy is a clean alternative to fossil fuels, there is no excuse for the fact that "actors find it 'impractical' to comply with human rights norms in their value chains and social impact assessments".

> **"Conversations and declarations around what a just transition really means have so far focused on the distribution of jobs and/or levies, rather than the deeper opportunity to rewire and reconfigure underlying systems to achieve greater equity, justice and regeneration by placing respect for universal human rights at the heart of transformational work."**
> **Anna Biswas commenting on the 'just transition' as part of Looking Back to Go Forward**

Meanwhile, Ewi Lamma shared her personal experiences of a forestry project that was supposed to consult local communities, but instead directly bypassed hers – the users and managers of a Cameroon forest. The lesson here? Even when processes are in place, they often do not work unless real power – and how that power is used – changes.

Siloed approaches have driven unintended consequences, and will continue to if not addressed

Building on the wisdom of Donella Meadows, Forum's Anna Birney and Jasmine Castledine reminded us not just of the interconnectedness of all things, but that "when we fail to respect this nexus, we cause harm". History yields multiple examples where we have gotten things wrong, often trying to solve one problem while neglecting or causing another.

Take, for example: focusing on clean but not responsible energy; designing climate interventions that fail to consider biodiversity or recognise climate and nature as one single existential crisis; tackling hunger issues without addressing the fundamentals of food production.

On food, Dr Agnes Kalibata described the huge increase in food production, but noted that "in the process of turning food into a business, we probably went a little overboard, because increasing food production on a massive scale also played a huge part in climate change and biodiversity loss."

Similarly, Forum's Lesley Mitchell and Charlene Collison have seen repeated failure to see the interconnectedness of food and other systems. While food is finally being recognised as a critical part of climate strategy, and soil is being recognised as a carbon sink, many other factors and challenges are going unacknowledged. Among them: the ever-growing and increasingly unsustainable scale of the demands humanity is making on our finite land; the urgent need for regenerative approaches capable of restoring our soils and biodiversity; the need to support the livelihoods of land stewards experiencing change, especially as calls for climate adaptation as well as mitigation get louder.

In summary, these 'looking back' critiques point to what we need going forwards: not 'the same, only faster', but fundamentally different mindsets and pathways/approaches.

So what does this look like?

From ensuring social justice to making tough choices, six things we need right now

Based on what we've heard in *Looking Back to Go Forward* – from the practical ideas about specific sectors to shared wisdom on how to approach change – Forum is calling for six things if we're to deeply transform at the scale and pace needed.

1. Driving a truly socially just transition

Just adding a 'social pillar' to what we're all doing is not enough. We must move beyond a narrow 'managerial' approach that looks to share the costs and benefits of transition differently, to 'transformational' transition (as coined by the Just Transition Research Collaborative). *This means '[seeking] alternative development pathways to those built on continuous growth, explicitly dismantling systems of oppression and manifesting profoundly different human-environment relations.'*

Inequalities between countries and sectors also need action. As **Dr Kalibata** reflected, the shift to electric vehicles in Europe and the US is being done

What's holding us back? What will propel us forward?

- Current solutions are too piecemeal
- Social justice is missing, separated and/ or tokenistic
- Siloed approaches have driven unintended consequences and will continue to if not addressed

- Driving a truly socially just transition
- Multiple actors stepping up to help create and seize opportunities to drive change
- Shifting mindsets to build synergies, prioritise the long-term and work with turbulence
- Drawing on energy and innovation at the 'niche'
- Not giving up, and not getting stuck
- Facing up to tough choices in shifting the fundamentals

according to a transition timetable. Yet for water-thirsty avocados, which underpin the livelihoods of many smallholders in Kenya and elsewhere, there's no transition plan.

Meanwhile those on the frontline of climate change – and feeling the impacts most acutely – are often also those overlooked from the decisions that impact them most. Addressing inequalities between people must not be something we do 'after the fact' to 'put things right'. It's about hearing directly from those whose lives are affected, not tomorrow, but today

2. Multiple actors stepping up to help create and seize opportunities to drive change

We've shared insights on the wide-ranging roles of government, business, scientists, citizens, communities, women, youth, consumers and more in driving change. In particular, regulation is critical. Change-actors from any stakeholder group need to help drive regulation that sets a higher standard. It's not just about national governments – as Aaron Maniam highlighted, *"... a lot of the biggest game-changers can come from sub-national units such as cities."*

> **"I hope we'll see a lot more activity among cities, and greater complementarity between them and national governments."**
> **Aaron Maniam commenting as part of Looking Back to Go Forward**

Communities, women, land-managers and those holding indigenous knowledge, must have a voice at the table. Ewi Lamma is putting change into practice in her community: *"I asked the men, 'Don't you think your women, who have been managing the forest for a long time, will make great input if they are involved in decisions on its future? They are the mothers of your community and they will better understand the needs of your children".* Her efforts are delivering results, with more women taking up more positions, and she is confident they will fill 20% of leadership roles by 2025.

Archana Soreng shared with us the exclusion her community has experienced and the shoots of change: *"Our whole world view is different from the developed world view. I come from a place where, in the past, we were constantly being made to feel inferior, that our knowledge and practices were inferior, and we were called 'savage' and 'backward'. Nowadays, our traditional knowledge and practices are more acknowledged, but we still have to constantly push against this [dominant] developed world view."*

We heard a recurrent emphasis on working across generations – but crucially, this does not mean leaving it to the young. I felt a tightening in my stomach at John Elkington's framing: we need to address inter-generational issues and the inequity we have created because *"if we can't persuade younger people that these are societies worth investing their time and their effort in, democracy will... shrivel away".*

3. Shifting mindsets to build synergies, prioritise the long-term and work with turbulence

A deep shift from short-term 'fixes' to long-term strategies is essential. The key natural and manmade systems on which we rely are interconnected and, so our solutions must target intersections, such as the intersection of climate, nature and social justice – offering multiple benefits to multiple systems.

They must prioritise long-term returns and the health of the overall system.

And they must work with rather than attempt to get around turbulence. A deeply unsettled world is here to stay with various economic, social and environmental fallouts now inevitable. Accepting that, and building the capacity of people and ecosystems to adapt and thrive makes this turbulence less terrifying. It also strengthens our resilience and resolve, which – along with empathy and readiness, will be key to navigating the future.

This mindset shift sits at the heart of taking a just and regenerative approach. As James Payne outlined for business, it means focusing on potential, not just reducing harm. Or as Anna Birney and Jasmin Castledine explain, we need to lean into decline with empathy and attention to how we re-organise to build anew.

> **A key element of systemic practice is to be awake to shifting contexts, in order to properly understand and work with their implications to leverage impactful change. What we are seeing emerge now are questions about how we deal not only with positive change but also the collapsing of systems; ... How do we lean into decline in a way that creates the flourishing of new better systems? ... This means engaging with the facilitative capacity for change, and the governance models that might support how we re-organise, as well as the emotional work required to deal with such change. Empathy is an essential practice of systems change".**
> **Anna Birney and Jasmine Castledine commenting as part of Looking Back to Go Forward**

4. Drawing on energy and innovation at the 'niche'

There are many examples of exciting innovations bubbling at the edge, or 'niche', of sustainability. While these edges are not yet dominating the mainstream, they are essential spaces where new models are tested and prototyped.

Take for example, how six alternative economic models are challenging long-standing economic assumptions – from the purpose of money to the goals of regional development.

These ideas need to evolve and grow. Afterall, we can't always tackle tomorrow's challenges with yesterday's thinking.

5. Not giving up, and not getting stuck

We kicked off *Looking Back to Go Forward* with reflections on progress from 25 years of sustainability efforts and to be frank, the amount of change (not all good, but not all bad) is remarkable.

Dr Kalibata reminded us that when setting the Millenium Development Goals for 2000 – 2015, poverty was still seen as its own silo, quite separate from climate and entirely the responsibility of governments.

Johan Rockstrom reminded us just how little we initially knew about climate change. The journey since the early 1990s until today has been, and continues to be, dramatic. Remember that in 1996, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was only just establishing itself – fast forward, and its assessment reports regularly make headlines around the globe.

No one ever said change was easy; it's about holding on to success, building from it, refusing to get stuck, embracing change, learning quickly and challenging ourselves to do better, to be more ambitious.

6. Facing up to tough choices in shifting the fundamentals

There's now no denying that our systems are a big problem. We must also acknowledge that their complexity means there is no single solution or silver bullet.

That means being open to challenging and changing some deep fundamentals. Are businesses here to drive profit for the few, or to support every community, supplier, employee and more that they touch?

How can we redefine our economy? What is the true purpose of international and national politics? How can we really ensure universal human rights are respected as change gains momentum? And what are we all working towards as a collective sustainability movement?

As **Archana Soreng** calls out: *"When people speak of development, it is really important to ask: 'Development by whom, for whom, and for what?'"*

The final word goes to **Johan Rockstrom**, who so eloquently captures the need to reframe the system:

> **"In some ways, leaders have understood that we have a problem... but at the same time still think that somehow we can muddle through along incremental, linear pathways that don't in any way rock the boat of our current wealth creation models... That there are some quick fixes such as 'green growth' ... and if we just try to recycle better and reduce waste and stop eating meat, we'll save the planet! That I think is the symptom of failing to understand what the science has shown us: that this is a systems problem – that we're hitting the ceiling of the entire planet's capacity to be stable enough to support humanity."**
> **Johan Rockstrom**

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

Looking Back to Go Forward – Stepping over false choices and dreaming big

Dr. Sally Uren
Chief Executive
Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future's Chief Executive Dr. Sally Uren shares her personal reflections on her past three decades of work in sustainability, expanding on the various dreams she holds for the sector's future and lays out pathways to actualise them,

Back in November 2021, we launched our annual Future of Sustainability series, where we set out to understand why more than three decades of sustainability efforts have not gotten us to where we needed to be. What were our lessons from the past, how did they affect our present responses and how can we transform our future? What could, or should we have done differently as organisations, and as individuals?

For me personally, this is tough terrain. My entire career has been focused on sustainability and I feel I have scrambled over multiple and significant obstacles. So much effort! But the reality is that it just hasn't been enough. Which is why this year's *Future of Sustainability* – for me, at least – has come at the right time.

Since November, we've published thought provoking content from wonderful contributors, summarised brilliantly in the latest piece by our Global Programmes Director Caroline Ashley, challenging whether the future of sustainability will be 'the same, only faster' or marked by deep transformation at the core of our systems.

Whilst I could add to the list of what is holding us back – vested interests! Short termism! Vanilla versions of CSR that act as smoke-screens for deeply unsustainable practices! – I won't. Because **what comes next is what really, really matters.**

The stakes have never been higher. We know that we will not survive as a species if we continue on this climate-warming path we are currently stumbling along. We really are at a crossroads: we could choose to take the decisions and actions that could create a future that could work for us and the planet, or we could lock in a future which could be terminal.

This isn't being blunt or meant to incite fear: it is the stark reality that we face. We are out of runway for incrementalism. For sticking plaster solutions. This terrifies me, sometimes overwhelms me. Makes me realise that unwittingly, I have played a role in the past in legitimising being slightly less bad. But at least I now know what that looks like and this knowledge, coupled with an innate (and for some, incredibly annoying) optimism, means that even though it's bad, *really bad*, I

can see glimpses of a way forward.

Moving past false choices and daring to dream big

Caroline listed six things that can help bring us forward. But how can we deliver them? I'd like to bring us a step further and challenge our way of thinking—from binary either/ors and reductionism, to daring ambitions of what we can achieve. Here are six dreams that can help us overcome the four false choices commonly presented to us.

Driving a truly socially just transition

There is no Environment without the Social. No S without E. This is **false choice 1**: social or environmental outcomes? This is a false choice as we live in an interconnected world. It just isn't possible to prioritise one over the other. Not least as climate change will impact as a public health crisis and is inherently a social equity issue: our most impacted and vulnerable communities are often those least equipped to cope with crises.

Dream 1: For everyone to see everything as interconnected, and to use that understanding to design change programmes that deliver positive outcomes simultaneously across environment and social issues. This would mean that sustainability positions in business wouldn't reflect single issues. I'd love to see more Net Zero & Social Equity roles for example. For philanthropists this would mean ensuring every investment and grant drives both social and environmental outcomes. Separating social and environmental responsibilities is slowing down progress, and even more unhelpfully, forcing trade-offs, perpetuating unhelpful win-lose dynamics.

Multiple actors stepping up to help create and seize opportunities to drive change

We know that a key ingredient of systemic change is collaboration within systems and across generations. There is one system in particular that could step up here: the ecosystem of sustainability professionals, spanning profit-making organisations and non-profits.

This brings me to **dream 2: For sustainability professionals to work better together**, create additionality, and stop squandering our precious energy and time on squabbling about respective theories of change and definitions. As an ecosystem of actors, we need different approaches and different points of view. We could be so much more accepting differences, and value unique contributions as a contribution to the broader whole.

One of my most depressing memories of COP26 was hearing sustainability professionals (whom I hold in high regard) fuming that the Extinction Rebellion had disrupted a particularly high profile dinner. Only one person I spoke to suggested that perhaps rather than ignoring and criticising the protesters, what about engaging with them?

Let's work across this beautiful and passionate movement of ours, respecting difference and accepting it in the pursuit of the same end goal. And at the same time, work harder to enhance the diversity of this ecosystem.
For those of us in the non-profit sustainability world, this also means addressing the **false choice: Collaboration or potential loss of funding?**. Greater collaboration could actually alleviate the non-profit

The false choices we face...

Social or environmental outcomes?

Collaboration or Losing out on potential funding?

Sustainability or Profit?

Growth or Sustainability?

...and the big dreams we need.

For us to redefine the goals of the economy to include operating within planetary boundaries and creating societal value

To celebrate that there are solutions all around us, and that we just need to work hard together to bring them into the mainstream

For sustainability professionals to work better together, create additionality, and stop squandering our precious energy and time on squabbling about respective theories of change and definitions

For everyone, everywhere, to embrace a different mindset, and adopt a just and regenerative approach

For everyone to see everything as interconnected, and to use that understanding to design change programmes that deliver positive outcomes simultaneously across environment and social issues

To stop getting distracted by quests for the perfect definition and perfect metrics

hamster wheel of fundraising as it would allow us to aggregate effort to create tipping points for system change.

Shifting mindsets to build synergies, prioritise the long-term and work with turbulence

Our mindsets, values and narratives, are the deepest lever for systemic change. I have learnt this the hard way in my three decades in sustainability, co-creating some truly ambitious sustainability strategies only for them to wither away in the face of internal ambivalence. Likewise, I have co-created some ambitious collaborations with clear and precise diagnostics as to which systemic lever for change to pull, why and how, only to watch industry actors turn their heads the other way.

Deep transformation is a very human story, and if someone hasn't experienced the need for change and isn't willing to do something differently as a result, nothing, in fact, will change.

Which brings me to **dream 3: For everyone, everywhere, to embrace a different mindset**, and adopt a just and regenerative approach.

Drawing on energy and innovation at the niche

The niche of any system, be it energy, food or health is where we see glimpses of the future. The science fiction author William Gibson put this brilliantly when he wrote, 'The future is already here, it is all around us, just not evenly distributed.'

The future we want is already here, from new economic models that create and distribute value fairly, to nature-based solutions for climate centered on social equity. This is **dream 4: Let us celebrate that there are solutions all around us**, we just need to work hard, and together, to bring them into the mainstream.

This won't be easy and it might not even be possible. But surely we need to have a go? Our future isn't yet written.

What is a 'just and regenerative' approach?

A just and regenerative approach embraces the power of nature to renew and regenerate, understands that humans are a fundamental part of nature, and respects everyone's universal rights and potential to thrive. This approach:

- Redefines the meaning of a **prosperous economy** to one that meets the needs of everyone in society to thrive, creates value fairly and operates in harmony with nature and planetary boundaries.
- Addresses the **root causes of today's biggest challenges** – the climate emergency, nature in crisis and mounting inequality – by dramatically reconfiguring our systems
- Enables the **capacity** of social and environmental systems to adapt to and address challenges of the future.
- Moves beyond artificial divides between **people and nature**, integrating ways to stabilise the climate, restore and replenish our ecosystems, and promote dignity, fulfilment and equity for everyone.

Not giving up and not getting stuck

Our desire for detail, certainty and order means we can get very stuck; learned helplessness, as American Psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman called it.

Hence, **dream 5: Let's stop getting distracted by quests for the perfect definition and perfect metrics** (as, spoiler alert, it is distinctly possible to manage that which can't be scientifically measured to the nth degree), and just get on with changing systems. It's time we stopped moving deck chairs on a sinking ship.

Facing up to tough choices in shifting fundamentals

The goals of our current economic system are destroying our planet and perpetuating crippling social inequalities. There is no growth of any sort on a dead planet. Economic growth which takes no account of environmental limits, or social equity, is doomed. This brings me to my last two **false choices: 3. Sustainability or profit? 4. Growth or sustainability?**

And thus, **dream 6: Let's redefine the goals of the economy to include operating within planetary boundaries and creating societal value**. Let's change the rules of the game.

The good news is that this transition is already in progress, which means that pathways to economic value creation are already changing. There are already some trailblazing brands and businesses around the world who are already generating economic returns from being part of the solution, not the problem.

What if we woke up?

All these dreams are possible. But what's the bridge? The big unlock?

It's us. You and I.

We need to believe a just and regenerative future is possible, and we need to get on and make it happen. We need to believe in ourselves. We need to use what power and influence we have, help others discover their agency. This isn't always easy. I have days where the sum total of my influence scores a solid zero. This is when it's so important to remind ourselves that every action we take creates ripples in the system around us. Which means that they all matter.

It's also time to throw out the excuses. 'Too hard, too difficult.' This moment in time demands that we ask ourselves, 'is there more I can do?' Our answers will all be different and they will not come without risks. We will need to support each other. I, for one, want to tell the young people in my life that I did everything I could to help us avoid the worst impacts of climate change, to try and influence the way the world works, even though it felt uncomfortable, and it was hard.

I've shared what comes next before. But, as I look at the possibilities ahead of us, and accept that our progress to date just hasn't been enough, I need to share again: If not you, who? If not now, when?

See you all in the future. Let's create the one we want. ■

This piece first appeared on the Futures Center as part of Forum for the Future's Future of Sustainability series.

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