

GPSEN VIRTUAL SUSTAINABILITY SYMPOSIUM

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE - PULSE FROM OUR PARTICIPANTS

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Like emerging new shoots in spring, our 2020 Symposium participants engaged in our community dialogue session with enthusiasm after riveting presentations on energy, food systems and permaculture. Our community dialogue started with a nod to the [International Day of Peasants' Struggle](#) observed across the globe on April 17. We shared a moment to reflect on how being in a pandemic reminds us of our interconnected world, and to intentionally advance sustainability across diverse fields by using education as a tool to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the new [ESD for 2030](#) decade and framework.

GPSEN's community dialogue adopted the Talanoa approach to harness community thoughts, concerns and vision for action. The [Talanoa dialogue](#) model is the traditional method of solving differences in the Pacific Islands. In 2017, the Fijian presidency used the Talanoa dialogue to bring together governments and civil society in conversation on climate change. Talanoa dialogue is an inclusive, receptive method where empathy is the primary diplomacy tool to understand the repercussions of climate change in different countries, and to arrive at emission reduction agreements.

Talanoa dialogues are led by three questions:

- 1. Where are we?**
- 2. Where do we want to go?**
- 3. How do we get there?**

To enable the process of 'hearing' everyone, we asked our participants to share their thoughts via Zoom chat page. The next paragraphs contain a collective reflection from the community to these lead questions and a subset of questions which facilitate the community dialogue for 20 minutes.

As you read through these paragraphs, you will see participants' words and thoughts (in quotations) braided into sentences showing **collective wisdom, hope and call for action**. I acknowledge all participants for their contributions in the community dialogue.

WHERE ARE WE?

The question 'where are we?' and the sub-questions mentioned below helped us to take stock of where we gauge ourselves to be, in the context of our journey toward sustainability and sustainable living.

- Main challenges to sustainability, their current and future trends?
- Underlying drivers that challenge sustainability?
- Current sectoral, national and international legal and policy framework that support or challenge sustainable action?
- What "best practice" examples and business models have successfully driven sustainable action?
- What are the available technologies that can be game changers to address sustainable action today?

The **overarching challenge to sustainability** is 'general public not having a holistic understanding' of sustainability, 'not always being motivated to prioritize' sustainability front and center for decision-making, and a lack of movement of sustainability from 'information to action'.

These challenges reflect on the lack of education to connect the dots for sustainability between our linear economies and non-renewable natural capital (biodiversity, fossil fuel, water etc.), between local and global economic systems and initiatives, and a 'lack of formal government support and funding to connect to global initiatives'.

"Education systems built on and in systems of colonization, create feedback loops contributing to dominant paradigm."

Further, there is the systemic issue of the 'infinite profit in the form of accumulation of capital' which can 'no longer be the primary guiding principle' for development. However, linear development models that lead to accumulation of

wealth and power are still the ‘biggest challenges to sustainability’ underscored with ‘expectations that things of importance are only relevant at a large-scale’.

E.F. Schumacher’s [Small is beautiful: A study of Economics as if people mattered](#) comes to mind to further our understanding to sustainability challenges, and finding potential solutions.

Some of the underlying drivers to sustainability, identified in the community dialogue include political divides that test communication between people, impeding progress to design sustainability policies that have a large buy-in from stakeholders to ensure successful implementation. The repercussions of political divides lead to the often-asked question ‘How to build relationships across political divides?’ How do we connect with each other, while recognizing our ‘disconnection from the Earth’, and from each other? How to identify and address ‘ethical shortfalls that underlie climate change, wars and social injustices’, reestablish connections between the different systems – production system, energy system, economic system and the consumption system which are all dependent on the earth systems/natural capital and design sustainability policy that can respond to challenges holistically and urgently.

“Hard to prioritize sustainability while experiencing homelessness and food insecurity and lack of healthcare.”

The [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) provide a framework to address sustainability challenges and the underlying drivers in a holistic way. The SDGs provide an interlinked framework that can sensitize us to the basic knowledge on ‘how the earth works’ and find solutions that factor our dependency on a healthy planet. When used with a mindful Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) approach, the SDG framework can help facilitate ‘key questions around connecting indigenous wisdom with science’ to gain insights from time-tested knowledge of the land and its people and help find solutions to sustainability challenges. Such insights will empower all people in the community to be informed, and overcome the ‘lack of systems-based approach on closed loop cycles’, shift from linear approaches to circular, factoring ‘steady stream of inputs (materials, energy, etc.) and outputs (waste, etc.)’, into the design for sustainable solutions.

Some of the “**best practices**”, **technologies** and **business models** that have successfully driven sustainable action include, adoption of permaculture, community gardens and home gardens for produce on site, and solar energy alternatives that work with systems approach. Best practices also include having a process to ensure engagement of businesses through ‘corporate social responsibility’ and ‘divestment from fossil fuels’. Other best practices include establishment of ‘victory gardens’, ‘teaching Living System attributes’, ‘infusing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) to sustainability work’, and ‘listening and learning from those who’ve lived sustainably for millennia’.

Other best practices demonstrate in Oregon how ‘disparate groups working in synergy’ to accomplish joint goals. For example, Oregon has made some ‘significant new inroads into solar under the state tax credit’. Although ‘adoption has somewhat been impacted after its expiration, though there is an effort to revive out now’. On a similar note for energy, the Portland Clean Energy initiative “is probably a game changer example for everywhere’ starting with its integration ‘with state community solar project’. We also need to “continue stronger connections between environmental and justice movements, so we’ll have progressive coalition.”

WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

This question and the sub-questions mentioned below helped us to take stock of where we envision ourselves and our communities to be, in the context of our journey toward sustainability and sustainable living. We explored ‘where do we want to go?’ with the following sub questions.

- Your short-term (by 2030) and long-term vision (by 2050 and beyond) for sustainable development? E.g. achieving a balance between emissions and removals in the second half of this century.
- Where should efforts be focused (sectors, regions, practices) in the short, medium and longer terms?
- Fundamental barriers (policy/technology/awareness etc.) preventing a determined response in any sector? If so, what are the best ways to overcome them?

The feedback to this question woven into paragraphs below show linkages to issues identified in the previous section. It shows cautious optimism for solutions and a growing recognition of interlinkages between the practice of economics (mostly linear), policy making and the role of access to resources for individuals and communities, and the role of government in enabling change.

Responses to **where efforts should be focused to further sustainability** highlights linear approaches to development, its impact on ongoing social and environmental injustice, and a growing recognition that building community resilience starts with an understanding of these linkages. ***It starts with education, formal and informal, making the connections tangible with a systems approach to enable change.***

Being in a pandemic perhaps set the tone of take 'one step at a time' to build the future with a 'systems approach'. It calls attention to **the barriers preventing a determined response to sustainability** identifying 'immediacy of families dealing with trying to survive and focusing on work as means', bringing us to the crucial question 'how can we make focusing on sustainability financially incentivized?' while keeping the systems approach, 'thinking of the big picture(s)'. This systems approach should be adopted, for example, 'to provide a scientific and publicly accessible rationale for incorporating clean air and climate change adaptation into City of Portland policies', and to install 'community-based sovereignty and governance systems (anti-displacement)' and to 'expand public transportation system'.

"How can we make sustainability financially incentivized?"

One of our participants pointed to the 'food banks stretched to their limit'. This draws attention to barriers such as lack of access and equity in communities, and the environmental degradation wrought by linear economic systems we are part of. Participants recognized these barriers and called for 'working environmental justice concerns into health crisis response and health care systems' and having 'sustainability education is CORE to widespread understanding, adoption and collective shift' to sustainability.

While some responses were highlighting barriers, some shared their ***near term and long-term visions*** for ***change led by a systems approach***. These visions include applying systems approach to ‘universal health care’, to create ‘transparency in health and environmental footprints’, and enable ‘policies that stimulate health care, clean energy, sustainable farming practices, and free education’, and policies to ‘divest from fossil fuel’. In line with systems approach, these efforts ‘should be focused on environmental justice-oriented solutions’ and ‘must be led and informed by frontline and marginalized communities.’

Address ‘immediacy of families dealing with trying to survive and focusing on work as means.’

A good start to working toward these near-and long-term visions would be digging ‘into the different SDGs and exploring the targets and indicators that we can achieve locally’. Other suggestions to step in the direction of sustainability include identifying the potential of ‘primary school garden curriculums based on the 10 elements of Agroecology’, and short-term goals such as ‘less lawns in Portland and more drought tolerant plantings and food gardens’ and growing ‘food forests’, ensuring ‘equitable access to land, plants, seeds, and knowledge’, and “re-internalizing the “externalities” such as ecosystem service’ to help create ‘a local strategy with community involvement to address the SDGs’, through ‘markets, effective regulations, public support for public resources’ and address ‘basic needs and first category of SDGs’ including ‘access to education, healthcare, financial stability and universal basic assets’. ***This will lay strong foundations to build a network where we can increase our collective impact.***’

“Support policies that stimulate health care, clean energy, sustainable farming practices, and free education.” “They must be led and informed by frontline and marginalized communities.”

Ongoing environmental, economic and social challenges call for visibility of on-going positive work. This should go alongside an understanding of capitalism, questioning its ability to do good for society and the environment, *if led by equitable and transparent rules*. As one participant mentioned “**Capitalist economies are directionally opposed to sustainability** as they stand now - **shifting them to different frameworks** allow the golden opportunity to understand and shift the very unexamined policies undergirding these.”

Education and academia can play a pivotal role here. As one participant mentioned academic and activist messages pose a barrier in “lacking emotional and spiritual content”, and ‘we make our big decisions with our emotions’. One way to overcome this is to bridge different stakeholders contributing and driving sustainability work and decision-making processes, making ‘data’, ‘assumptions’ and ‘ground realities’ speak realistically and empathically to all stakeholders. This gives a grounded approach to push the sustainability envelope in an equitable and just way.

“City- and state-wide initiatives, from schools to communities is an essential piece that needs to happen and find broad agency with the help of media keeping it front and center for all constituencies”

Understanding our ‘Environmental Handprint’ and identifying ‘proactive interventions in the system give priority to the interests of future generations and non-human species in our decision-making’ are critical for our sustainability journey.

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

This question and the sub-questions mentioned below helped us wrap our discussion. Participants shared ideas for the pathways or actions they envision to reach sustainability goals and sustainable living. We explored ‘how do we get there?’ with the following sub questions.

- What fundamental changes are required for the vision described under “where do we want to go” to be realized? What factors would enable the realization of this vision?
- legal, policy and fiscal frameworks
- technological advancement/development (by sector)
- foreseen role of the financial sector
- new engagements and/or partnerships
- role leaders from national and local governments, institutions (financial, research and education etc.) companies and others to realize this vision?

While there is no “one-size fits all” approach to solving problems’ **fundamental changes are required to understand** the state of current economic and environmental state through a scientific lens, which includes the planet as a partner¹ in the equations and calls for rethinking of conventional ways that development is planned, practiced and evaluated².

On the note of syncing human activities with the planetary boundaries (Raworth, K³) and **technological development**, participants identified ‘mimic nature’ to learn ‘loop systems with nothing wasted’, and to create pathways to reach sustainability goals. Mimicking nature, or biomimicry⁴ allows us to rely on the abundance of lessons in nature to shift our linear approaches to circular ones. This would inform how we produce, value and consume products, and ensure this cycle leaves the least environmental footprint in the process.

‘Diversity and sustainability are connected at the hip’. “The air is the same across the skies.’ Identifying, acknowledging and translating this to action is critical to make progress toward sustainability.

¹ <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jul/21/capitalism-alternatives-sustainable-development-failing>

³ <https://youtu.be/1BHOflzxPjI> and <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

⁴ <https://biomimicry.org/>

This will require us to broaden our understanding of shared political and cultural history and values of the land we come from, travel and adopt over our life spans, comprehend the evolution of capitalism and if and how we account for natural capital that provides all goods and services for economic activities. This will give a first informed step to “deprogram our society from marketing, get off the consumption treadmill”. This could set us in a path of recovery from the current economic and environmental crisis. [195 million jobs have been lost worldwide](#) due to COVID-19 crisis. The socio-economic impact of these numbers far exceeds that of the 2008-2009 financial crisis. We are now challenged in **how we frame the urgency** of climate change or COVID-19 pandemic ‘in a way that resonates with people are most oriented around financial stability for economy, etc.’

“Re-orient banking industry towards sustainable goals.”

On the note of pathways to sustainability and supporting local economies, clearly ‘they can vary for different folks and doing your best with what you have with where you’re at’ matters. As one of the pathways to ‘how to get there’, participants encouraged ‘everyone think locally for getting food (CSA, farmer markets) and energy (roof top and community solar)’. Milk Run⁵, Farm Punk Salads⁶ were mentioned in the symposium as go to sources locally in Portland. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)’s listed [here](#) provides abundant opportunity to take individual action towards sustainability by decreasing energy footprint, supporting local economies, addressing food security, supporting local biodiversity and agricultural practices that help keep water clean and cities sustainable⁷.

“Need economic incentive for sustainability so more people think of all their actions in terms of how sustainable they are.”

Participants reminded ‘healing the self is a very important first step to healing the world. Intentions are key.’ This is especially relevant for the times we are in, challenging us to rethink ‘land-use decisions are driven by fundamental human

⁵ <https://localmilkrun.com/shop>

⁶ <https://www.farmpunksalads.com/>

⁷ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

needs and ecological values', and push for participatory decisions 'made in a holistic and intentional way.' To do this, we must understand sustainability at its core, as everyday actions we can take, when possible within our means, and everyday action all stakeholders -businesses, policy makers, governments can take, to enable a collective movement of communities across borders to reach the sustainability goals locally. These collective local impacts energize pathways to reach the global goals.

Enabling this process is the responsibility of education from all stakeholders in the economic systems, including formal education institutions (K-12, universities etc.) and other stakeholders such as businesses, governments and the planet. 'Educere' (Latin) means 'to nourish, to bring up, to lead forth, to draw out'. Making progress in sustainability will require us to have a systems view, **to bring up** the linkages between economic systems, production systems, urban systems and energy systems, **to draw out** their inter-dependency, and dependency on the natural capital of the planet and the social capital offered by communities, and **to lead forth** accountability of these capitals in individual and collective decision making processes, **to nourish** our growth in circular, sustainable ways.

We call all of you readers to join us on our journey toward [ESD for 2030](#) goals, learning from each other, and creating a network of sustainability solutions for all.
