

Making the Sustainable Development Goals work for local communities everywhere

Dr. Daniel Christian Wahl

Gaia Education and UNESCO launch ‘SDG Community Implementation Flashcards’ and an ‘SDG Training of Multipliers’

Why are people not participating more enthusiastically in the widespread implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals? How can we engage communities everywhere to make the United Nations’ Global Goals *their* local goals? How can individuals and collectives contribute to achieving ‘Agenda 2030’?

Among many activists, grassroots organizations and even some international NGOs the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been branded as the result of a top-down UN process. Failure to successfully implement previous agendas has damaged belief in the achievability of such multi-lateral agreements. Something needs to change if the SDGs are to be more successful than ‘Agenda 21’ or the ‘Millennium Development Goals’.

So far, too many on-the-ground actors are still hesitant to get behind the SDGs. The engagement with ‘Agenda 2030’ is currently too slow to catalyze the magnitude of change that is now urgently needed to avoid the worsening of a series of converging crises that are already upon us—rapid climate change, famines, mass-migration, fundamentalism, resource wars, biodiversity loss and economic volatility to name but a few.

We need to turn the Global Goals into *actively* shared objectives for all of humanity, if we want to create a more sustainable world that works for all by 2030. Having national leaders endorse a non-binding United Nations agreement to support the SDGs is not enough. Leaders can—at best—set an intention on behalf of their electorate. Manifesting the agenda will require active participation of people and communities around the world.

We need effective collaboration between the public and private sector and civil society at local, regional and global scale. We need to create processes that generate engagement with the SDGs at the level of communities and bioregions everywhere. Only if local people will take responsibility for implementing the SDGs in their community and their region do we have a realistic chance of accomplishing the audacious task set by Agenda 2030.

To motivate such a commitment we need people to understand the multiple benefits that will result from a successful implementation of all SDGs for their own lives, their families and communities, nations, and for humanity and the community of life as a whole. The future we want has to be co-created by *us*!

This is my favourite way of presenting the SDGs, as it indicates clearly how healthy ecosystems functions, biodiversity and biospheric services of bio-productivity, fresh water cycle and climate regulation are forming the basis of all real value creation in the biosphere, society and economy (Credit for graphic: Azote Images for Stockholm Resilience Centre).

Successful SDG implementation requires a systemic approach

There is a significant danger in misinterpreting the 17 SDGs as separate issues that need to be dealt with one by one. Our academic disciplines, government departments and international institutions are set up in a siloed expert-lead fashion that makes such whole systems thinking and collaborating a serious challenge.

The SDGs are all interrelated and mutually reinforcing aspects of a whole systems re-design of the human presence on Earth. Only by moving out of ‘issue silos’ and paying attention to their interconnections will the global goals be achievable by 2030.

Successful SDG implementation offers a transformative response to climate change: After 20 unsuccessful meetings, an international agreement was reached at COP21 in Paris to decisively act on climate change before we trigger run-away catastrophic climate change. The Paris accord might not have gone far enough. Scientists agree we should aim to remain below 1.5 degrees Celsius, rather than the 2 degrees that were agreed on in Paris. Nevertheless, the recent disregard of international commitments by the new US administration will only lead to stronger rather than weaker commitment by a growing global climate alliance—that is now cross-sectorial and deeply committed— at COP23 in Bonn.

The important and widespread understanding that was reached at COP22 in Marrakech is that climate change needs to be addressed systemically and not with carbon-myopia. The successful implementation of SDG 13 (Climate Action) necessitates systemic transformational change and the implementation of all the other sixteen Sustainable Development Goals.

By way of offering another example of the interrelatedness of the 17 SDGs, here is a 12 minute video of Johann Rockström and Pavan Sukhdev taking about the integration of the goals within the context of food as an entry-point into interrelated solution clusters.

Likewise, we will only achieve Agenda 2030 if we act swiftly on climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as, implement drawdown technologies to actively reverse global warming. Luckily many of these tested technologies, implemented at the scale of local and regional economies, will also serve achieving a number of other SDGs synergistically.

The Commonwealth Secretariat and the Cloudburst Foundation are actively working to build an international alliance in support of their ‘Regenerative Development to Reverse Climate Change’ initiative that was launched in October 2016. This approach holds the systemic linkages between all the SDGs at the heart of its reframe of climate change as an opportunity for transformational change towards diverse regenerative cultures, vibrant circular biomaterials economies and thriving communities everywhere.

The SDGs as an opportunity to go beyond ‘them-versus-us thinking’

A 3-year-long, multi-lateral and multi-stakeholder process was started at Rio+20 and led to the conversion of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) into a much more systemic set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These were agreed upon (as a non-binding commitment) by the UN General Assembly in September 2015.

It is now up to all of us—members of the human family—to make up our own mind whether to get behind the guiding intention to co-create a more sustainable world that works for all of humanity and life. Critiques point out that the process of arriving at the SDGs and the way the 17 goals and 169 targets were formulated was influenced by stakeholders who are considered part of the neoliberal power elite. Its lobbies have more than once co-opted, sabotaged or stalled the United Nation’s process in favour of vested interests.

The whole framing of the international development agenda, which divided the world into developed, developing, and so-called ‘under-developed’ nations has had the insidious effect of eroding the self-confidence and self-determination on many indigenous and local people. Their ancestors survived the first

wave of imperialist colonization, only for subsequent generations to be submitted to an even more destructive form of economic colonization in the wake of neo-liberalism.

Unbridled economic globalization without the simultaneous strengthening of local and regional economies, ecosystems and cultures has spread into the most distant reaches of the world, from the highlands of Ladakh to the forests of Borneo and the rainforests of Africa and Latin America.

Many indigenous people have been further disenfranchised in the wake of the development agenda and many farmers have been forced to stop the ancient practice of seed-saving that has helped humanity to maintain the biodiversity of food plants for millennia. The win-lose (zero sum) logic of neoliberal economics structurally drives competition and exploitation of resources, ecosystems, and people—with destructive effects.

In the light of this history, it is understandable that there is a degree of suspicion with regard to the a renewal of the international development agenda. In particular, since the UN and many of its member governments continue to be influenced by the powerful lobbies of big multi-nationals in the pharmaceutical, chemical, agri-business, financial, armament and fossil fuel industries, the skepticism towards the SDGs has to be accepted and worked with. It is possible to critique the UN process and still get behind the vision of implementing the SDGs by 2030!

Reorienting the UN development system so that it is fit for the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls for a transition strategy far more ambitious than past attempts.—Global Policy Watch, 2017

We are facing a planetary emergency at the species level and we do need all nations—and what's more all people—of this Earth to unite in a shared vision to redesign the human impact on Earth from destruction to regeneration. The time for them-against-us-thinking is over! We have to come together and co-create the future we want now!

This video narrated by the indigenous elder Oren Lyons reviews the history of the UN's sustainable development agenda since the Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972. Things have got worse since then and we also have come along way towards improving many aspects of people's lives and our impact on the environment.

The Sustainable Development Goals represent a huge opportunity for all of us to collaborate as one species and unite behind a relatively simple—yet audacious—set of 17 goals.

We might want to tweak the wording of some of the goals a little. For example, I prefer to call Goal 8 'Right Livelihood & Qualitative Economic Growth' rather than 'Decent Work & Economic Growth'. Nevertheless, it is relatively easy to agree that if we were to achieve widespread local, regional and global implementation of these 17 goals by 2030, we would have come a long way towards making the world a better place.

Here they are again. Take a look at them one by one and you will see that all these goals could be easily framed in such a way that they would describe necessary improvements in your own community and region that would be worth collaborating towards.

The SDGs are the result of the largest consultatory process ever held within the history of the United Nations. More than a million people and an 'expert group' of over 3000 participants from over a hundred

countries and six continents helped to establish the SDGs on behalf of humanity. This does give the Global Goals a certain legitimacy and grounding in participation.

Just like the UN systems itself, the SDGs may not be perfect but they are the closest thing we've got to a broad agreement among the human family that it is time to co-create a better world for all. Now it is time to turn that agreement into commitment and action on the ground, community by community, and bioregion by bioregion. This is where the work of Gaia Education comes in!

Gaia Education's long-standing partnership with the UN in providing participatory education and capacity building for sustainability

In 2005 Gaia Education launched its acclaimed 'Ecovillage Design Education' (EDE) curriculum in partnership with UNESCO as an official contribution to the 'United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development'. Since then, Gaia Education has steadily expanded its range of participatory community-focussed education programmes in support of local capacity building for sustainable development. By mid-2017 these course had reached more than 14,000 learners from 104 countries. This was made possible by Gaia Education's collaboration with over 80 partner organizations in 49 countries on six continents (and the philanthropic support of Gaia Trust).

The EDE curriculum syllabus describes the different subject areas that have been integrated to create a holistic and participatory approach to sustainable community design. The syllabus for this 125-hour face-to-face course has been open-source from the beginning and the document can be downloaded for free in English, Danish, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Japanese, Finnish and Chinese on the Gaia Education website.

In 2009 Gaia Education launched a 400 study-hour online programme in 'Design for Sustainability' (GEDS) in response to a growing demand for whole systems design education that supports sustainable community development. The course had UNESCO endorsement from the outset and was initially taught through the online platform of the Open University of Catalunya (UOC)'s 'Campus por la Paz'. It is now offered by Gaia Education and partners in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. After initially authoring the up-dated version of the Worldview dimension in 2012, I had the opportunity to fundamentally up-date and partially re-write this curriculum in 2015. Participant numbers have more than doubled between 2015 and 2017. Here is what a participant had to say about the course:

Among the aspects of the programme which I valued the most are the curriculum and the way in which the dimensions interact and overlap with one another; the exposure to new ideas and others doing amazing work in the world; the interaction with people from other cultures. The sense of the global shift and the fact that this is not a US-centric programme helped to expand my awareness.

The holographic nature of the coursework—it is hard to put into words but I have not experienced this in any other learning programme—was a treasure! The case study really helped me to apply what I was learning.— Jean-Louis Rey, organic farmer and consultant, Switzerland/USA, GEDS participant 2014–2015

The 4 Keys (Economic, Social, Ecological, Worldview)

Both the 'EDE' and 'GEDS' are supported by a series of four books offering background reading in the different areas integrated by the whole systems design curriculum. The 4 Keys (Economic, Social, Ecological, Worldview) are—so far—available as printed books and e-books in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

The Four Keys in English, Portuguese and Spanish serve as supplementary reading material for the online curriculum in Design for Sustainability which is also offered in those three languages.

The book series contains contributions by thought leaders like Hazel Henderson, David Korten, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Thomas Berry, Joanna Macy, Albert Bates, Max Lindegger, Gunter Pauli, Malindoma Somé, Starhawk, Marshall Rosenberg, Wangari Maathai, Patch Adams, Robert Gilman, Vandana Shiva, Elisabet Sahtouris, Will Keepin, Maddy Harland, Satish Kumar, Stephan Harding, Duane Elgin, Rob Hopkins, Diana Leafe Christian, E.F. Schumacher, Herman Daly, Margrit Kennedy, and Richard Heinberg—among many others.

In addition to these books each of the four dimensions of the GEDS online curriculum are based on 120–160 pages of written content that course participants access through Gaia Education’s online platform. It also offers links to original sources, additional reading, videos, hundreds of images and useful websites.

This 4 Dimensional Whole Systems Design Framework underlies all of Gaia Education’s educational programmes (for a higher resolution image [click here](#))

In recent years Gaia Education has started to collaborate with international development organizations, the UNITAR ‘CIFAL Network’, UK Aid and the Scottish Government to offer ‘Project Based Learning’ (PBL) in Senegal, India and Bangladesh. These programmes teach communities in the front lines of climate change about agroforestry, regenerative agriculture and aquaculture skills to increase food sovereignty and food security, as well as, strengthen community resilience and improve social cohesion. This 4 minute video offers a short overview of some of Gaia Education’s Project Based Learning Programmes

In Southern Italy, Gaia Education collaborates with the University of Catania, local authorities, the ethical cosmetics company LUSH and Sicilian farmers in yet another Project Based Learning programme aimed at immigrants and un-employed Sicilian youth. By training them in organic farming techniques, integrating them with the local farming communities and supporting the creation of a small cooperative that sells its own pasta called ‘Grani di Gaia’ this project has already changed the lives of many. You can read the personal blog posts of some of the participants [here](#).

This video shows some impressions from the rich learning community created by the Sicilia Integra project

In Denmark, Gaia Education is teaching asylum seekers the theory and practice they need to contribute to the creation of sustainable organic food systems. On the island of Langeland Gaia Education is collaborating with Andelstanken, a local NGO, to support regional economic development in a remote rural area. The project involves immigrants in a series of socio-ecological enterprises and cooperatives aimed at supporting the revitalization of the regional economy.

Furthermore, Gaia Education has created a ‘Training of Trainers’ to support the growing demand for its international programmes by establishing a global network of Gaia Education certified trainers. The ‘Designing for Sustainability’ 15-hour online introductory course has been recently added to Gaia Education’s repertoire to make it easier for people to make the initial step into online learning and becoming a glocal (global-local) change agent.

The Ecovillage Design Education group at the Findhorn Foundation ecovillage in Northern Scotland, in 2006.

Together, all these courses now enable students to embark on a learning journey that can lead them all the way to the professional pathway of becoming a Gaia Education trainer.

Personally, I started my relationship with Gaia Education in 2005, during the 10th anniversary conference of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) when the curriculum was first launched. In 2006, I joined the first EDE training at the Findhorn Foundation ecovillage as a participant. Soon after I was invited to join the GEESE (Global Ecovillage Educators for a Sustainable Earth) and facilitated my first EDE in Thailand in 2007 together with Pracha Hutunuwat, Jane Rasbasch, Chris Mare, Max Lindegger, Helena Norberg-Hodge and Sulak Sivaraksa.

To support teachers and students in primary and secondary education Gaia Education is also involved in a series of experimental school projects in India, Estonia, and Brazil as part of its 'World We Want Design Education' initiative.

The 'Bioregional Design Education' programme is still under development. It will offer an intensive 10-month blended learning experience in which cohorts of exclusively local students work with the online material of the GEDS and the face-to-face techniques of participatory learning and practical skills of the EDE to apply them to co-creating transformative sustainability projects in their home region. The first pilot programmes will start in 2018.

This graphic shows the mutually reinforcing blended learning approach that will support participants on Gaia Education's 'Bioregional Design Education' course in becoming regional change agents organized in collaborative networks for bioregional regenerative development.

Clearly all of Gaia Education's educational projects are indirectly supporting the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. The next step was to develop an agile one or two day training in support of SDG implementation at the local and regional scale.

Gaia Education launches 'SDG Community Implementation Flashcards' & 'Achieving the Global Goals—A Training of Multipliers'

In 2016, I was given the task—in my role as Gaia Education's head of design and innovation—to craft a novel training approach and materials in support of widespread community participation in the implementation of the SDGs at sub-national levels. The recently released 'SDG Community Implementation Flashcards' and the training of multipliers 'Achieving the Global Goals', are the result of 12 months of intense development work and collaboration within the Gaia Education team.

Group of participants in the second SDG Training of Multipliers pilot on Mallorca in early 2017, organized in collaboration with the Universidad de las Islas Baleares.

Achieving the Global Goals—One Community at a Time is designed to train multipliers by enabling them to facilitate community focussed conversation about how to implement the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets at the local and regional scale in ways that are carefully adapted to the bio-cultural uniqueness of each location.

This highly participatory small group work and question-centered training engages local communities in a process that will turn what might be perceived as top-down goals of the United Nations into meaningful projects that are locally relevant and can be collaboratively implemented by the communities themselves.

There are 61 cards in each set: 3 cards with different questions for each of the 17SDGs (51 cards), two that enable conversations about the history of the UN work on sustainability, 1 about Gaia Education, 3 on the background of the SDGs, 1 that lists all 17 SDGs in full, 1 that specifically addresses the need for systemic integration of the SDGs, 1 on the UNESCO Roadmap for ESD, and 1 that offers a half and full-day workshop outline for using these cards with diverse groups of stakeholders.

The **‘SDG Community Implementation Flash Cards’** contain more than 200 questions structured into the four dimensions of Gaia Education’s whole systems approach to sustainability (social, ecological, economic and worldview).

Participants explore these four dimensions for each of the 17 SDGs in small group conversations that invite them to collaboratively identify actions and solutions aimed at implementing the global goals in ways that are relevant to their lives and their communities. The training offers an effective way of creating local community ownership of the SDGs and hence local participation in SDG implementation.

Daniel Wahl (standing) supporting participants in a Training of Multipliers at the cultural centre Casa Encendida in Madrid, May 2017

Each SDG card has some background information (figures, facts, and trends) relevant to a particular SDG. This background information is presented through the lens of Gaia Education’s 4-dimensional whole systems design framework (see above) and offers a social, worldview, economic and ecological perspective on that particular SDG.

In addition each card has four questions—or series of questions—that invite people to have a conversation: How is this SDG relevant for our community? Are there already projects in our community or city that help to implement this particular SDG? If yes, what can we do to support these efforts? If no, what kind of project could we start to strengthen the local implementation of that particular SDG? During the training of multipliers a lot of emphasis is put on the systemic interrelationships between the 17 SDGs and how to strengthen them.

This is the back of one of the 3 cards focussed on SDG 2

The day-long training includes a brief introduction and history of the SDGs, followed by a participatory process that invites people to identify those SDGs with the highest and most immediate priority in their particular locality. Participants work in small groups to identify those SDGs that are already on a path towards widespread successful implementation and the ‘strong links’ between them. In a subsequent round groups identify those SDGs that still need a lot of work for successful implementation and how to strengthen the ‘weak links’ already existing between them.

Various small groups exploring local, national and international SDG implementation at a Training of Multipliers in Madrid, May 2017.

Towards the end of the day the small groups identify what kind of local policy changes, resource mobilization strategies and which specifically targeted projects could help the implementation of the SDGs in their locality. In a further step groups explore how to strengthen both the weak and the strong links between the different SDGs regionally, and begin to commit to concrete next steps that they will take after the workshop to move from theory to practice.

In a variant of this process different groups can work on SDG implementation at different scales: local, regional, national and global. This can lead to interesting conversation about how to create synergies between these scales (vertical integration). Each workshop also offers an opportunity for at least some of the participants to begin practicing their own facilitation skills as they use the cards to focus small group conversation and help their group harvest key insights and possible next steps.

There is always a feedback and evaluation round at the end of each training and a brief conversation about how the group can stay in touch to promote SDG implementation in their region. Some time is dedicate to explaining how best to collaborate with Gaia Education in becoming multipliers in the use of the ‘SGD Community Implementation Flashcards’ and use the cards to replicate the training of multiplier.

Gaia Education ran the first trainings in Germany, Spain, Denmark, Brazil, Canada, Thailand, and there will be further trainings in Scotland, Italy and Argentina soon. The flashcards and the associated training of multipliers have been reviewed by UNESCO and met with enthusiastic feedback. The flashcards are already available in English, Spanish and Portuguese and UNESCO is providing support for translations into Arabic, Chinese, French and Russian.

May East, Gaia Education’s CEO (on the right) holding a pack of SDG Community Implementation Flashcards during an international gathering of educators—the UNESCO week for peace and sustainable development—in Ottawa, Canada.

As a key partner within the UNESCO ‘Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development’ (GAP), Gaia Education has joined the ‘Accelerating Sustainable Solutions at Local Level’ partner network. Over the coming months and years we will continue to creatively weave the use of the ‘SDG Community Implementation Flashcards’ and the methodology of the ‘Training of Multipliers’ into most of our face-to-face courses.

The overall objectives is to support communities in using the Sustainable Development Goals as a means to create a more sustainable future for themselves. The training of multipliers aims to build will and capacity within local communities to actively engage in SDG implementation. Only together we can achieve Agenda 2030 and co-create a world that works for all—one community at a time! You are shaping this future too!

We need a ‘Declaration of Interdependence’, but more than another declaration and agenda we need to come together to collaborate in co-creating a thriving future for all of humanity and all of life. We are shaping our future through both our actions and our failures to act. This is the story you are shaping! Choose to be part of the Regeneration! Chose a thriving future for all!