

Conversations

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for tomorrow

Discussion with
Dr. Sally Uren,
Chief Executive,
Forum for the Future

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Chief Executive,
Forum for the Future



ACCELERATING THE SHIFT TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



Sally Uren is Chief Executive at Forum for the Future, a leading international sustainability non-profit. She is leading Forum's mission to create a more sustainable future by catalyzing transformational change in key global systems. As part of this, she works with leading global players, including businesses such as Unilever and Olam, and foundations such as the Laudes Foundation, to address complex challenges in systems as diverse

as food, energy, apparel, and shipping. With almost 30 years' experience in sustainability, Sally acts as an independent advisor on Advisory Boards for several global businesses. In December 2017, Sally received an OBE in the Queen's New Year's Honors List for services to sustainability in business. The Capgemini Research Institute spoke with Sally Uren to understand the Forum's systems-based approach to sustainable development.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

Could you tell us about Forum for the Future and its overall mission?

— Our mission is to catalyze progress towards sustainable development using a systems-based approach. In other words, we try to understand the world around us as a set of interconnected systems, and use that understanding to design for transformational change. It's about really recognizing that the world isn't linear and that everything is connected. And if we can understand those connections more in key challenge areas, we can potentially accelerate progress towards sustainability.

What are some of Forum's key focus areas?

— We work in partnership with a number of organizations in business, philanthropy, and the public sector and our partnerships and collaborations are focused on three key challenge areas. One is how can we ensure we stay below a 1.5-degree temperature rise by the end of this century. The second is looking at how we can design and deliver a sustainable food system. The third is understanding how we can design and deliver sustainable value chains and sustainable livelihoods. Our partnerships and collaborations are designed to activate key leverage points in those challenge areas, and we use our systemic approaches, tools, and techniques very deliberately to try and drive positive change.



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Could you tell us more about the systems approach and what it entails?

— The systems approach is about undertaking a really good diagnosis of any particular challenge area to identify where the interconnection points are – or leverage points, as we call them. These are areas for action that can drive transformational change. So, for example, if we’re looking at the interconnected systems of climate and nutrition, then soil health is a really great leverage point. If we can improve soil health, we can drive benefits for climate as well as nutrition. Similarly, if we’re looking at the food system, then the protein in our food system is a really good leverage point. If we can rethink



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protein and look at alternative proteins, then we can start to drive resiliency in the food system. So, the first step in the systems approach is a really great diagnosis that allows you to understand where to act.

The other part of a systems approach is designing for transformational change. By that I mean change that has two key features. The first is change that is catalytic, which means you design some change and then that change in and of its own right sparks further change in the system. For example, we have been looking at alternative business models in commodities to understand how, by changing the business model, you can then drive benefits for livelihoods, the environment, and the economy. The second feature is designing change that is self-sustaining. This involves identifying the enabling conditions around a particular change intervention, be it policy, finance, or behavioral conditions that need to be there for an innovation to really scale.

Could you highlight an example of the systems approach applied to an industry challenge and the need for collaboration to solve such challenges?

— Collaboration is critical for systemic change because no one actor can shift a system on their own. That’s why it’s vital to “bring the system into the room” to really understand how to activate different elements of a system to

drive that change. Our “Cotton 2040” project, for example, is a collaboration between sustainable cotton standards such as the Better Cotton Initiative; well-known brands and retailers, such as Burberry and Marks & Spencer, as well as manufacturers and non-profits. With the representatives of different parts of the system in the room, we then created different future scenarios for where the cotton industry might be going, the big risks that the industry faces, and where the opportunities lie.



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This process really helps people step out of their current reality and to think big. And looking at the future of cotton, it became really clear that there

were a number of systemic issues that need to be addressed today to secure a sustainable future for cotton. These include driving demand for sustainable cotton among everyday consumers, building climate resilience in the industry, and aligning

sustainable cotton standards. Currently, these standards are all slightly different, which means that a smallholder farmer wanting to convert from conventional to sustainable cotton can find it really confusing and difficult. This is why we have been working to harmonize metrics and approaches across the standards to make it easier to convert from conventional to sustainable cotton. We’ve also published a guide to sourcing sustainable cotton as a way to build demand for it in the apparel industry.¹

What is holding back the adoption of sustainable business practices within organizations?

— Typical barriers tend to be short-term time horizons, lack of access to available capital, the lack of an enabling policy environment, and the lack of a mindset that is in a regenerative space – i.e., one that understands that economic health equals planetary health. Those are the typical barriers that we tend to need to step over to start to drive transformational change.

What can organizations do to overcome these barriers?

— One of the approaches that is really interesting at the moment is the

¹ Cotton Up, “A Practical Guide to Sourcing More Sustainable Cotton.”

level of investment and interest in nature-based solutions, such as Unilever's EUR1 billion Climate & Nature Fund² and Amazon's USD2 billion Climate Pledge Fund.³ Both businesses are placing big bets on key levers for change and I think that's one way to step out of the barriers. So really understanding the material areas where you can make a big difference and placing big bets is one way of overcoming barriers.

Thinking long term is another tactic. We're seeing more and more organizations developing 10-year visions but not locking them down into the inflexibility of annual goal setting. So, having a guiding star, a North Star, and an active pathway to get there, also helps to deal with some of the barriers. And then you see organizations just experimenting with different business models. I love what Patagonia has been doing in this area. I think a

willingness to experiment and innovate is a hugely positive characteristic.

How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted the conversation around sustainability?

— COVID has created some

sustainability positives, such as new public-private partnerships, and governments stepping in to protect the vulnerable. It has also accelerated some very important trends, such as the adoption of renewable energy and digital access to healthcare. Equally though, it has made some of the pathways to sustainability harder. So, if you think about the apparel industry and the massive chaos to supply chains, there's a really difficult socio-economic story there. Similarly, in travel and tourism – many communities in the world are dependent on tourism for local economic growth, and that's gone in the short term.

Looking ahead, what are some of the changes that you envisage in the world in the next 10–15 years in the area of sustainability?

— I think we are at a massive inflection point. At Forum for the Future

² Unilever, "Unilever sets out new actions to fight climate change, and protect and regenerate nature, to preserve resources for future generations," June 2020.

³ Amazon, "Amazon Announces \$2 Billion Climate Pledge Fund to Invest in Companies Building Products, Services, and Technologies to Decarbonize the Economy and Protect the Planet," June 2020.



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we have been working on a project called “Future of Sustainability” that has shown us that multiple different versions of our future are currently emerging. There is a version of our future – a trajectory called “Transform” – where we use this moment to reset, to build back better, to redefine the goals of the economic system, and to broaden them out to account for environmental and societal value. That is really great news for sustainability. It would suggest that we are able to use this decade to design solutions that will address the worst of the climate emergency.



My own view is that for all of us involved in sustainability right now, what we do over the next 6-12-18 months has actually never mattered more.”

But equally, we see a trajectory emerging – one we call “Compete and Retreat” – where we see huge negative pressure on multilateralism and global governance, and with that our ability to solve global challenges such as climate just falls away. And in that trajectory, sustainability doesn’t really move in a significant way.

We also see two other trajectories: “Disciplined” – which is about strong government intervention to ensure public health outcomes, and “Unsettled” – which is just a continuation of where we are today, lurching from one crisis to another.

My own view is that for all of us involved in sustainability right now, what we do over the next 6-12-18 months has actually never mattered more. This is because we have these multiple versions of our future opening up every day. As sustainability professionals, we need to pay attention to “Transform,” and ensure that every decision we make, every action we take, is aligned with “Transform.” Because then, that might become the dominant version of our future. •



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