

## Imagination & Creativity for Sustainable Regenerative Environments, Cultures & Futures

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*A contribution to the UN's Global Goals Week <https://globalgoalsweek.org/>*

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### Is 'Sustainability' the New High Stakes Context & Challenge for Personal Creativity?

With the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) looming, the issue of sustaining our planet and our very existence, has once again been brought to our attention. The wicked problem of humanity's future survival and prosperity is framed by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which offers 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>1</sup> and next week is the UN's annual "Global Goals Week" aimed at encouraging people to think about the contributions they are making to support the principles pm which the SDGs are founded.

To achieve a sustainable future in the face of many existential threats it stands to reason that we have to imagine a different more sustainable future and then invent solutions and change behaviours at all scales in order to achieve that future. We cannot achieve this without harnessing imagination and creativity on a global scale.

We all have a responsibility to address the issues being raised and the purpose of our conversation during Global Goals Week is to focus attention on the ways in which our imagination and little-c creativity enable us to invent our own solutions or adopt new behaviours or practices that shift us towards a more sustainable future for all.

### The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>1</sup> (see also appendix 1)



(1) No Poverty, (2) Zero Hunger, (3) Good Health and Well-being, (4) Quality Education, (5) Gender Equality, (6) Clean Water and Sanitation, (7) Affordable and Clean Energy, (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth, (9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, (10) Reducing Inequality, (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities, (12) Responsible Consumption and Production, (13) Climate Action, (14) Life Below Water, (15) Life On Land, (16) Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, (17) Partnerships for the [Sustainable Development] Goals.



creativity and innovation, at least in the west, often relate to creative destruction<sup>5</sup>. According to Glaveanu<sup>6p.559</sup>, “the engine of capitalism is not creative production as much as creative destruction, the repeated replacement of the old with the new.” In creativity, we can see this expressed in the process in which “we take natural resources—turn them into valued products and, after a while, consider them trash”<sup>7p.181</sup> Robert Sternberg has argued that creativity is the cause of many global sustainability challenges, such as climate change, which is why creativity should always be related to wisdom<sup>8</sup>.

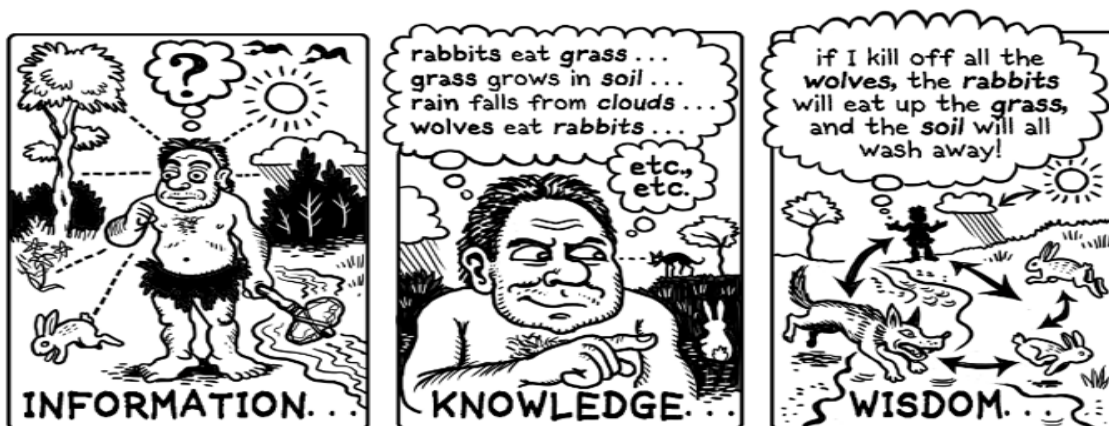
it is also necessary to highlight the positive potential of combining creativity and sustainability. Creativity can be seen as a phenomenon that involves leveraging resources from the past to find better alternatives for the future<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, it is questionable whether creativity actually produces something new because much of what is easily perceived as new is actually a reorganization of old elements in a different way<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, creativity often means reusing or recycling the old rather than replacing it altogether. In this context, Wegener<sup>11 p.181</sup> introduced the concept of upcycling, which she defined as the “mix between upgrading (add value) and recycling (reuse).” Whereas recycling means adding something new to the existing product or idea or utilizing something that exists in a completely new context, upcycling is associated with re-evaluating and reviewing an existing product from a different perspective<sup>12</sup>. As such, the main idea behind upcycling is to revive old material by placing it in a new environment or context and suggesting new ways to use or approach it.

At the same time, the negative effects of creativity have been largely ignored in research. Creativity is not inherently good or bad, but the intention of the creative actor and the consequences of creativity determine whether it is positive or negative<sup>5,12</sup>. Indeed, Kampylis and Valtanen<sup>5</sup> argued that creativity should be considered from the point of view of consequences and that attention should be paid, in addition to the immediate consequences for individuals, to the social and long-term consequences.

The perspective of consequences serves as a defining connection between creativity and sustainability.

### **The Ecological Mindset: relatedness, connectivity and interdependence, appreciation of consequences**

As Tom Chalkley’s brilliant cartoon depicts, humans have always had to deal with sustainability issues in their environment and their existence depended on developing the ecological wisdom to survive: wisdom that became cultural knowledge within communities. Through their experience of the world and their experiments with it our hunter gatherer ancestors learned to recognise the relationships, connectivities and interdependencies of the living and non-living things in their environment and the consequences of their interventions on these relationships.



Everything is connected – including the SDGs! The ecological mindset is fundamental to living a life that contributes to sustainable futures yet some commentators believe that most people have little awareness of the environmental, social and economic consequences of the decisions they make about such basic things as what they eat, what they wear and how they travel. *“The fundamental reason why we’ve managed to construct the most highly unsustainable culture the Earth has ever seen is precisely because we have not been taught to see the connections.”*<sup>13</sup> Seeing and understanding the complex webs of relationships and connections requires all of our cognitive capacity. It involves the productive integration of our perception, our reasoning and our imagination.

*focusing on sustainability, requires not only an equal embrace of both mythos (deep imagination) and logos (rational and critical thought), but an immersion into the environment itself involving encounters with the “Other,” eliciting a sense of interrelatedness and compassion for other life. This can act as an antidote to the (still) prevailing “epistemological error”.... at the heart of the Western worldview, with its perception of separateness and rugged individualism. A deep identification with other life in this way may be viewed as an end in and of itself with processes and outcomes unique to each .....individual [and their] context(s).*<sup>3 p5</sup>

Surely, human imagination which sparks creativity lies in our tendency and ability to relate to, care for and have compassion and empathy for other living and non living things

As Hans d’Orville, a sustainability advisor to the UN, explains we cannot hope to solve the multitude of sustainability problems without human imagination, creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness. *“The world must resort to the ultimate renewable resource: human ingenuity and creativity. Creativity is at the heart of sustainability, rooted in sustainable social, economic, environmental and cultural practices. It is a special kind of renewable resource and human talent.”*<sup>14</sup>

## **Imagination and Creativity for Regenerative Environments, Cultures & Futures**

Zammit-Lucia argues that our unsustainable culture is taken up with an all-pervasive pretence at rational, data-driven decision-making. The rational, data-driven approach tends to keep us stuck in the past and the present, reducing sustainability to mere extrapolation. **Our failure to address environmental issues is not a failure of information but a failure of imagination.** But imagination cannot thrive in a culture that privileges the rational and analytical to the exclusion of all else. In sustainability we need to create a capability to allow emotional experiences to unleash the imagination, stimulate creative processes and break us out of incremental extrapolation.<sup>15</sup>

Imagination and commitment are both affective not cognitive processes. They require emotional engagement to work. A culture that encourages regeneration in all its forms must also encourage and value imagination and creativity that are both engaged by emotion and generate emotion. Human creativity and ingenuity is the heart of a regenerative culture which can apply at all scales from what we do as individuals to influence the world around us to the way whole organisations, cities or societies behave. In this way imagination and creativity for regenerative futures emerges everyday in individuals’ ‘lifeworlds’ – the world that has meaning to them.

### **Our Inquiry**

The scale, urgency, complexity and inter-related nature of the sustainability problems we now face, requires the whole of humanity to engage in and with what amounts to a constellation of wicked problems<sup>16</sup>. It’s an unprecedented challenge requiring unprecedented levels of collaboration and coordination. Which is why we are facilitating discussion in our own community.

While recognising that the SDGs are essential to focus attention and drive change at a global scale, some of the SDGs seem far removed from our daily lives. The question arises how might we, as individuals in our contexts,

develop a pragmatic but responsible and meaningful response to the principle of a sustainable future, using the SDGs as a prompt, and embed our responses in our everyday life?



Between 17-26<sup>th</sup> September we will encourage and facilitate a conversation aimed at exploring how participants engage with sustainability in their own ways in their everyday lives and share examples of how they have or are using imagination and creativity to contribute to more sustainable futures.

What this might look like is a completely open question and we want to encourage diverse responses and approaches so that we can develop new understanding. Some hints are provided in the introduction to a wonderful book which describes, through a series of 56 case studies, the creative responses of many individuals who imagine and implement solutions to problems, “in which individual interests converge with those of society and the environment, creating conditions for a more satisfying use of resources (human, environmental and

economic), which restores, or bestows, meaning and value to everyday activities and therefore seems promising as a transition towards sustainability”<sup>17</sup>.

*Creativity is the disposition of thought and behaviour that enables us to imagine and put into practice such solutions as: time banks, home nursery playgroups, car-sharing, ethical purchasing groups, producer markets, self-help groups for the elderly, shared gardens, eco-sustainable villages, vegetable gardens in parks, weblogs, co-housing, neighbourhood self management, home restaurants, local micro-logistics, community supported agriculture, tool exchange, elective communities, small producer networks...and more!*<sup>17 p9</sup>

**If sustainability the new mega context & challenge for personal creativity, what might a creative life for a sustainable regenerative future look like? How is this idea currently manifest in our everyday lives. From our explorations do we gain new insights into the meaning and application of creativity when we use it in the context of sustainable, regenerative environments, cultures and futures.**

### Invitation & Discussion Plan

*“the wellbeing and survival of future generations of most species, including our own, are being seriously compromised. Clearly the ways in which most humans live, particularly those in the so-called developed world,*

are unsustainable. The challenge facing us is to collaborate together in learning our way towards holistically conscious and sustainable futures” 18 p48

Our Creative Academic inquiry represents a small contribution to this social learning challenge. By connecting people who care about these things and co-creating a process through which we can gather many different perspectives on this matter, we hope to develop our collective understanding.

Over the 10 days of discussion, Norman, Johanne and Paul will encourage participants to share their views on what sustainability means to them and how they give meaning and substance to any of the UNs 17 Sustainable Development Goals in any aspect of their life, contexts and circumstances. Our emphasis is on living for sustainable futures and we would like participants to share stories or vignettes of how their interests and concerns for the health and vitality of themselves and others, the environment, and the economy have engaged their imagination and creativity to try to achieve or change something in ways that contribute to a more sustainable, regenerative future.

We appreciate that while we are seeking to emphasise personal engagement with the SDGs, individuals may be collaborating with others. We also appreciate that by engaging with one SDG you might also be engaging with other SDGs. Furthermore, engagements with an SDG can be at different 'levels' for example, (micro) what you do in your personal/work life that impacts only on you and those immediately around you, (meso) what you do in your personal/work life that impacts on your neighbourhood or your local environment and (macro) what you do in your personal/work life that impacts regionally, nationally or internationally.

**We welcome your involvement in our inquiry and we hope that you will want to participate in the discussion. Please join us in the #creativeHE facebook group**  
[www.facebook.com/groups/creativeHE](http://www.facebook.com/groups/creativeHE)

### Discussion Plan

At a personal level how do you engage with these SDGs?  
 How do they inspire or demand your imagination and creativity?

Fri 17	Launch – introduction & explanation of process
Sat 18	GROUP A: PERSONAL/SOCIAL/CULTURAL: (3) Good Health and Well-being (lifestyle choices) (12) Responsible Consumption
Sun 19	GROUP B: SOCIAL/ECONOMIC (1) No Poverty, (2) Zero Hunger (6) Clean Water and Sanitation (7) Affordable and Clean Energy
Mon 20	GROUP C: ENVIRONMENTAL 13) Climate Action (14) Life Below Water, (15) Life On Land
Tue 21	GROUP D: SOCIAL/CULTURAL (5) Gender Equality (10) Reducing Inequality
Wed 22	GROUP E: ECONOMIC/SOCIAL (8) Decent Work & Economic Growth, (9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities, (12) Responsible Production
Thur 23	GROUP F: SOCIAL/CULTURAL (4) Quality Education (16) Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions
Fri 24	GROUP G: SOCIAL/CULTURAL (17) Partnerships [and cultures] for [Sustainable Development] Goals
Sat 25	Synthesis, Reflections, Issues & Concerns
Sun 26	Synthesis, Reflections, Issues & Concerns

### Some questions/prompts for inquiry

- What concepts of sustainability do we hold – what do we associate with the word? And do these ideas or associations constrain our thinking and practice? What else might the idea of sustainability contain to liberate our thinking and practice?
- Do the SDGs and what they stand for create a new imperative and environment for individuals' creativity? *If they do how do they change the landscape for personal and collective creativity?*
- Do the SDGs impact on creativity in the work environment? How/why? *Please share any examples of how*

*they have influenced your creativity in the work environment.*

- Which of the 17 SDGs are most relevant to you in your own life and why? Please use Appendix 1 as a prompt to show which SDGs are most relevant to you.
- Can you illustrate with a story, picture or other means, how concerns for the sustainability of the environment, society or economy have engaged your imagination and creativity to try to achieve or change something in ways that contribute to a more sustainable regenerative future?
- What are the educational implications of learning for sustainable regenerative futures? How might personal creativity feature in such learning?
- What words/language do we use when describing acts involving creativity for sustainable/regenerative futures?
- If creativity is a social-cultural phenomenon, how can one social-cultural environment learn from the creative ideas and solutions in another social-cultural setting?
- Can/how can our creativity be inhibit or damage our ability to secure more sustainable/regenerative futures? *How can we minimise such negative effects?*
- How do you contribute to educating others about sustainability eg by example, by transfer of knowledge or by engaging learners in their own inquiries and projects for sustainability?
- How does what you say, or your behaviours and actions impact positively or negatively on others in respect of any of the SDGs?
- What small change can I start to make that will make a positive difference to a more sustainable world?

**Most importantly, what questions do you have to motivate inquiry?**

## After the discussion

Our intention is to curate the content of the discussion in an issue of Creative Academic Magazine for the benefit of the wider community of interest. <https://www.creativeacademic.uk/magazine.html>

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**Norman Jackson**

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**APPENDIX 1** Framework for Personalising and Implementing UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 'Good Life Goals'<sup>18</sup> intended to be more relevant to the everyday lives of ordinary people

<b>1 UN Sustainable Development Goals</b>	<b>2 Good Life Goals</b>	<b>3 Ways in which these concerns have meaning and are expressed in my own life and circumstances.</b> <i>Examples of how these concerns have stimulated or inspired my imagination and creativity</i>
(1) No Poverty	1 Help End Poverty	
(2) Zero Hunger	2. Eat Better	
(3) Good Health and Well-being	3. Stay Well	
4) Quality Education	4. Learn and Teach	
(5) Gender Equality	5. Treat Everyone Equal	
(6) Clean Water and Sanitation	6. Save Water	
(7) Affordable and Clean Energy	7. Use Clean Energy	
(8) Decent Work & Economic Growth	8. Do Good Work	
(9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	9. Make Smart Choices	
(10) Reducing Inequality	10. Be Fair	
(11) Sustainable Cities and Communities	11. Love Where You Live	
(12) Responsible Consumption and Production	12. Live Better	
(13) Climate Action	13. Act on Climate	
(14) Life Below Water	14. Clean the Seas	
(15) Life On Land	15. Love Nature	
(16) Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	16. Make Peace	