

# EXT NOW

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# SIX WAYS TO BRING PEOPLE & PLANET BACK INTO ↻ BALANCE

Inspired by Ashoka Fellows and Partners



In a world where the rate of change is increasing exponentially and where the shelf life of solutions is diminishing rapidly, we, at Ashoka, are aware that we must investigate a whole spectrum of insights across fields and geographies to tackle the Planet & Climate crisis.

With these in mind, on Earth Day 2021, after scrutinizing the models and work of our hundreds of fellows, we published a knowledge report summing up the trends, insights and broader patterns we were starting to see for the field: Thinking Differently: Ideas for Action on Planet & Climate. To read the whole report [click here](#).

Between April and June 2021 we organized a series of ten closed-door global dialogues on the most important insights in the report. We were joined in these precious moments of Socratic conversation by over 50 Ashoka fellows, partners, friends and experts in the field.

This briefing sums up what we learnt from our core constituencies when calling upon them to test, refine and update our emerging ideas and insights.

#### We learned that:

- Businesses must move from a “Reduce” to a “Regenerate” mindset.
- Governments Must Enforce Green Taxation Regulation and Push Companies for long-Term Planning.
- The global financial system must move to more sustainable risk – return ratios.
- Social entrepreneurs must transition from shining individually to working collectively. And funders must reward this.
- Ashoka and other ecosystem organisations must use global, interconnected datasets.
- We must use culture, language and education to shift behaviours.

Without any doubt, the challenge in front of us is enormous. This is not a moment to give up. This is a call to action. We’re looking for people who understand that if we are to win this fight, we’re going to need everyone. We’re looking for people who see nature as a collaboration partner, not a resource to be optimized. We’re looking for people who see that climate change isn’t just an environmental issue – it’s a whole system issue, encompassing the economy, power, social norms, identity.

# AGENDA FOR NEXT NOW: PLANET & CLIMATE GLOBAL DIALOGUES (APRIL – JUNE 2021)

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→ SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS IN THE GLOBAL CLIMATE MOVEMENT

**20** April 10:00 CET **Sena Alouka**

**22** April 17:00 CET **Beto Verissimo**

→ REFRAMING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE - FROM SEPARATE  
& SUPERIOR TO INTERCONNECTED

**4** May 10:00 CET **Cynthia Ong**

**6** May 17:00 CET **Reginaldo Haslett - Marroquín**

WORKING WITH COMPLEXITY - HOLISTIC, SYSTEMIC APPROACHES

→ **18** May 10:00 CET **Gladys Kalema - Zikusoka**

**20** May 17:00 CET **Gary Cohen**

→ NEW ECONOMIC STRUCTURES FOR EQUITABLE, SUSTAINABLE  
DECISION-MAKING

**1** June 10:00 C ET **Andreas Eke**

**3** June 17:00 CET **John Christensen**

→ EVERYONE IS NECESSARY - EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

**15** June 10:00 CET **Sebastian Groh**

**17** June 17:00 CET **Mélanie Marcel**

\*All dialogues are intimate, closed door **60 minutes** long conversations, where the **Ashoka Fellows** featured above are key input givers

# SIX ACTION STEPS WE AGREED UPON

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## 1. SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS IN THE GLOBAL CLIMATE MOVEMENT

——→ From an Ashoka All Fellows' survey that we conducted for our Thinking Differently report we learned that companies are the most important partner for the social entrepreneurs in our network, yet they are rarely the beneficiaries of the impact strategies driven by social entrepreneurs: they open their pockets, but don't transform their businesses. We debated these findings in the dialogues and agreed that we need to update urgently our global economic and financial system to rebalance the relationship between humanity and nature. Business and social leaders who attended the dialogues agreed that companies are scared, especially those that are reluctant or very slow in transitioning to a more sustainable way of doing business. It's not new. The willingness to work on transforming corporates, on the other hand, doesn't align with the good guys vs. bad guys narrative, which climate activists have held very dear for many years. "Usually, there is no such thing as bad guys. This attribute puts people in a corner. It's not the people, it's only the model." says Ashoka Fellow [Sebastian Groh](#), who is transforming how energy is being delivered and consumed through his game-changing peer-to-peer solar energy trading platform in Bangladesh. But what are the strategies that work and how can businesses make better choices which maximise the social and environmental impact of their work?

Throughout our ten dialogues, two possibilities for transforming large businesses started to emerge: putting climate change on the corporate balance sheet or/ and internalising sustainability at the leadership of the company. Businesses will have to make significant provisions in their financial reporting/ balance sheet to account for future climate effects. This will be the "new normal" of doing business in the immediate future, as Ashoka Fellows Mark Campanale from [Carbon Tracker](#) and [John Christensen](#) from the [Corporate Accountability Network](#) demonstrate, through the systems-changing principles they are getting corporations and investors to adopt. Another lever for change is the transformation of corporate leaders, in other words turning sustainability into a genuine C-suite key performance indicator (KPI). Either way it seems that companies can't change themselves completely from the inside. Therefore, they work with different actors, in many cases social entrepreneurs, to drive change both ways and to facilitate the internal acceptance of alternative, sometimes complex, business models. Ashoka Fellow [Melanie Marcel](#) has perfected this approach by turning corporate R&D into an open process driven by civil society. But let's be warned: if we only reduce and don't regenerate, it will not work in the long run. The new corporate KPIs must be radical.

## 2. GOVERNMENTS MUST ENFORCE GREEN TAXATION REGULATION AND PUSH COMPANIES FOR LONG TERM PLANNING

——→ The current framework doesn't work. Laws and regulations haven't created the incentives to drive markets in the right direction. As a matter of fact, social entrepreneurs and business leaders

alike, who attended our dialogue sessions, believe that the rules of the game have been geared in the wrong direction. Therefore, we need policies/ regulations that price nature adequately and accurately and follow through. What type of regulations? Such that would push companies to look at 100-year cycles, 'to work with forever horizons in mind' – says Ashoka Fellow [Cynthia Ong](#), whose model of consensus building in the Malaysian state of Sabah has turned around regular business and economic policy-making cycles.

When we look at frameworks that work it's puzzling to see why they are not scaled yet. Regenerative agriculture is the new buzzword. It's 'out there', but social entrepreneurs (and not only) are struggling to scale this as a solution. Why? "It's down to regulations" said one of our dialogues participants. Nothing else can drive hard changes as effectively as government regulations. We need to "step in immediately to stop what needs to be stopped" believes one of the prominent business leaders who attended our dialogues. Taxation is a big issue, attendants believe. Simply put, polluting activities need to become very expensive, and other restorative/conservationist activities need to become cheaper. It's in the hands of regulators to enact this change, but social entrepreneurs have a role to develop models, to bring these solutions to the regulators and advocate for them.

### **3. THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL SYSTEM MUST MOVE TO MORE SUSTAINABLE RISK RETURN RATIOS.**

——→ Yet, governments are too slow to respond. Until they take action to regulate and stop the climate crisis, civil society must mobilise in the absence of government regulation. Mark Campanale thinks the financial community is the key lever for change. There are funds that promote restorative capital and we are starting to see new ways of wealth distribution, such as the models promoted by community development financial institutions or impact investors. The impact investment space is in its infancy and big money is going to classical investments. We, as changemakers, need to give more examples of big money driving market changes and of solving multiple problems at once, by design. Profit-making is not enough any longer as a success metrics.

One simple, yet tricky step that the financial sector can take is to think long term. Price is a relative term and when we put it next to something like an ecosystem, it's impossible to really assess what damage one creates, taking into account economic, cultural and social wellbeing. People in governments and in the corporate sector don't think holistically enough. "The ecosystem is everywhere and nowhere. How do you put a price on air?" aid one of the participants in our dialogues. Investors are increasingly looking for the best return ratio, not the highest profit. Nature provides everything and shows that a better business model is a long-term one: one which may provide a lower internal rate of return, but also lower risks. Ashoka Fellow [Andreas Eke](#) from [Futuro Forestal](#) is deploying a new business model in global forestry, which exemplifies precisely this radically better risk-return ratio. To obtain a more sustainable financial system, investment managers must measure the ecological impact of their actions and calculate the risk profile appropriately. Social entrepreneurs are showing them the pathway.

## **4. SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS MUST TRANSITION FROM SHINING INDIVIDUALLY TO WORKING COLLECTIVELY. AND FUNDERS MUST REWARD THIS.**

——→ During the conversations we hosted it became apparent that, apart from governments and corporates, social entrepreneurs have their own role in mitigating the climate crisis. Unfortunately, often they lack capacity and resources to work on proper impact measurement. Therefore, not too many social entrepreneurs measure their impact in terms of the contribution they are making towards emissions reduction. At the same time, their intervention is often much more complex and holistic and cannot be reduced to an emissions reduction metrics. While acknowledging the need to work on better impact measurement metrics at the level of individual social entrepreneurs, the way forward for the social entrepreneurship movement and its funders is to focus on collective approaches, renouncing the idea of individual shine and glory.

Social entrepreneurs show that in between experiential and formal knowledge, there is another layer: a middle ground of complexity. The Sustainable Development Goals are at the top and cannot traverse that middle complexity, while people at the grassroots don't do the transversion upwards either. And here comes the role of social entrepreneurs - playing the role of the middlemen, speaking both the language of the indigenous communities and of the United Nations officials.

## **5. ASHOKA AND OTHER ECOSYSTEM ORGANISATIONS MUST USE GLOBAL, CONNECTED DATA SETS.**

——→ Naturally, as the dialogues brought together Ashoka Fellows, friends and partners, we questioned from the very beginning our own role in the global climate movement. We have the potential to become a powerful network of networks that. To do that, participants believe, we need to aggregate and analyse datasets across our network. At the same time, we, and other networks of networks, must understand the crucial role of coordination and work with the interconnectivity between existing initiatives. We must look not only broad, but also deep: at the hundreds of new Fellows we bring each year into our network, supporting them for life. Are they climate changemakers? Are they applying a climate lens to the work they are doing, whether it's addressing girls' education, migration, healthcare access or public interest journalism? If they don't, we must do a better job at ensuring they all start to develop one at the earliest. As Christiana Figueres says, "Climate change is an everyone-everywhere mission in which we all must individually and collectively assume responsibility."

## **6. WE MUST USE CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION TO SHIFT BEHAVIOURS**

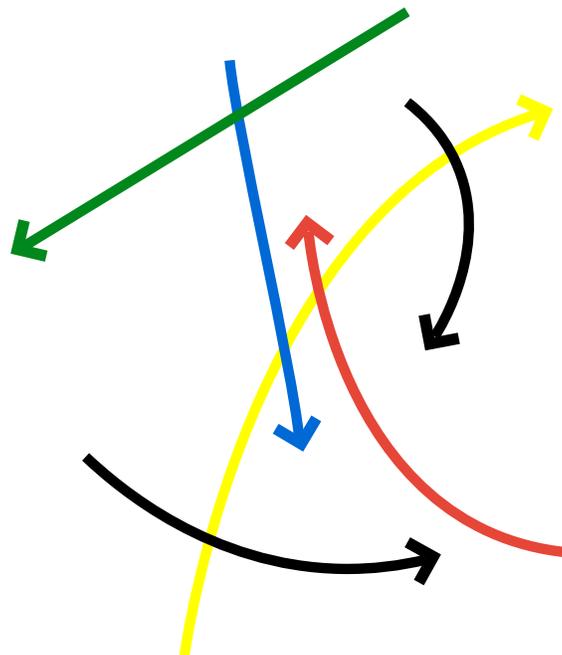
——→ Throughout the dialogues series we realized how much momentum has been built around the solutions and actions available to us to rebalance our relationship with nature. Climate sceptics still exist, but they are becoming marginal, and most stakeholders seem to be "on board". A general awareness of the problem is there, so why is there a gap between awareness and action? Because we are lacking empathy for the planet. What are the specific ways that we need to shift our mindset and how?

Some of the dialogue participants were very honest and confessed that, at the end of the day, we are all humans and a mindset shift cannot be accelerated mechanically, without the time to digest it. Universities' role, especially the world's leading business schools, is critical here: they are the places where new generations of business leaders are coming into being and are hungry for acting ethically.

Ashoka Fellow [Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquín](#) says that a substantial problem of humanity is our colonising mentality: dominating and disrupting nature. He believes we must build a fundamentally new relationship with nature. After all, this is what he does with hundreds of farmers in the United States, whom he is convincing to shift to regenerative agriculture not through transactional benefits but working from the very beginning on their cultural and spiritual transformation.

Before engineering solutions for the future, the mindset must come first: how can we support healthy people on a sick planet? It's not about creating less harm but being involved in broader healing. This is what Ashoka Fellow [Gary Cohen](#) is doing, by nurturing a global network of healthcare practitioners to return the global healthcare system to its rightful mission: healing us. This means healing our planet, too.

Language plays a powerful part in the process of climate changemaking. On the one hand, not speaking English keeps many grassroots groups isolated. On the other, much of the language used to describe our climate crisis perpetuates negative connotations. Dialogue participants talked about the fact we should stop emphasising words like “reducing” and “mitigating” and instead promote a culture of positive words like “added value”, “healthier alternatives”, “sustainable living”, “wellbeing”, etc. Because, in fact, this is what drives the ambition to innovate and change – not the fear of extinction and doomsday, but the gritty hope of a healthier and better future on this planet.



# APPROACHES WE AGREE TO DISAGREE ON

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The beauty of deep conversation is that no matter the background, consensus does emerge. As we tried to synthesize above. But we also agree to disagree. What are some key elements where Ashoka Fellows, allies and friends are not on the same page?

## 1. TO TECH OR NOT TO TECH

—→ In the All-Fellows survey that we conducted to substantiate our “Thinking Differently” report, we probed how Fellows in our network use advanced technology. Surprisingly, close to three quarters of our Fellows don’t use advanced tech in their work. Some do, however, and the solutions they opt for range from AI to GIS software. Yet, they all say strategy is more important than technology and that one must not fall in love with the tool. We bumped into this topic further in one of the dialogues, where we ended up debating how to transform our food systems to make sure we rebalance our relationship with the planet. Somehow, food production has become separate from nature, due to the technological revolution. We force nature to produce food for so long and in such a counterintuitive way, that we’ve reached a point where we’re poisoning both the environment and us. In this context it’s good that regenerative agriculture, which postulates our return to indigenous and vernacular food growing techniques, gets traction globally, promoted among others by Fellows like [Allan Savory](#), [Durukan Dudu](#) and [Reginaldo Hasslett Marroquin](#). But artificial food is also on the rise, from vertical farming to meat alternatives (after all, Ashoka Fellow [David Yeung](#) is spearheading a global plant-based meat revolution in Asia), and this new revolution in food is enabled by even more technology use.

Still, fellows whose models come in close contact with the global carbon market believe tech won’t be the solution for climate change. With voluntary carbon markets worldwide driving up the carbon prices from \$7/ton less than twenty years ago to \$35/ton now, the economics of carbon will drive behavioural change faster than any technology.

## 2. FOCUS VS THE BIG PICTURE

—→ Throughout the dialogues two perspectives confronted each other. One from social entrepreneurs who work holistically by developing models which target all ranges of stakeholders, from government officials to young people to the scientific community, like [Beto Verissimo’s](#) work in the Amazon or [Sena Alouka’s](#) work across Africa or [Gladys Zikusoka’s](#) work in rural Uganda. Their motivation is that “we start to see traction only when we are solving issues in this way”. The other approach - “one sector, one stakeholder” - has proven to be highly impactful for other Fellows. Mark Campanale, the Founder of Carbon Tracker, focuses on the global community of finance professionals for example, instead of lobbying governments or raising consumer awareness.

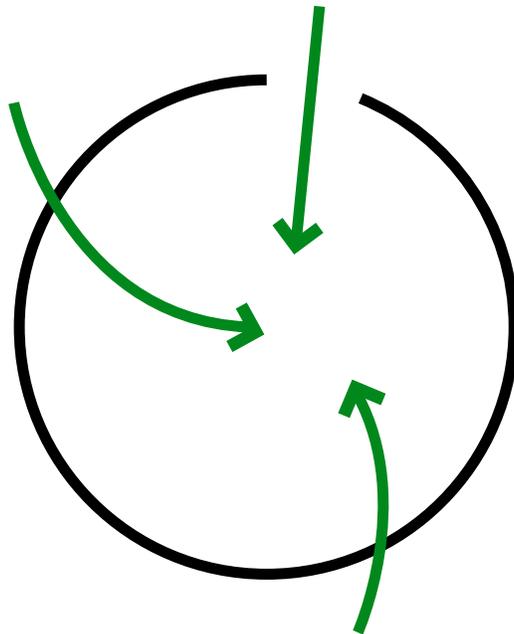
### 3. WINNERS, LOSERS, POWER GAMES VS CO-BENEFITS

——→ Our reflections in “Thinking Differently” were leading us to believe we need to move beyond the old narrative that climate action means trade-offs and sacrifices and see instead that good climate solutions can bring multiple other benefits, from wellbeing and healthcare to jobs and air quality. In general, participants in our dialogue sessions agreed with the “multi-solving” approach and pointed out it’s easier to implement such a strategy in cities, because at the interface between humans and urban environments, the benefits of climate action are evident: more beautiful spaces, cleaner air, healthier inhabitants, less time wasted in traffic, etc.

Yet, other voices pointed out that the scale of the transformation required is massive. “Who is going to pay for all of these changes?” thus becomes a question about equity and redistribution. Profits will accumulate slower, and some will outwardly lose. Money will change hands, and this means power will shift. How will we make this transition? It is still not fully clear.

### 4. EMISSIONS REDUCTION IS HITTING THE TARGET BUT MISSING THE POINT. BUT IT’S OUR BEST PROXY TOOL

——→ Many Ashoka Fellows, partners and allies are involved in different “net zero” movements, from pledges to turn organisations towards zero emissions to global coalitions who wish to halve emissions by 2030. But is emissions reduction a good surrogate for being climate friendly? Dialogue attendants pointed out that a single-minded focus on emissions reduction will have us hit the target but miss the point: we will not reverse biodiversity loss or create a more equitable economic system. “We can reduce emissions and still do a lot of nasty things to the planet”, one business leader who attended the dialogues concluded. Still, in front of daunting complexity, many believe, net zero is still the best Northern Star so far.



# CONCLUSIONS: WHERE ARE WE HEADING AS A NETWORK?

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With Next Now, Ashoka has decided for the first time in its history to galvanize the strength of its entire network of Fellows, business partners, philanthropic partners, young changemakers and academics around a handful of topics. Planet & Climate is one of them.

We are still exploring, in genuinely open and candid conversations with key changemakers in our network the paradigm shifts we'll stand behind, as the world's largest network of changemakers, to rebalance humanity's relationship with the planet. Working with Fellows and partners we seek to design a new decision-making architecture which underpins all human - environment interfaces, from forests to air. We know that a new mindset, based on expansive empathy in the relationship between humanity and the planet, is needed and hopefully it's one all children will learn about in schools. We also know that people of all backgrounds will need to have access to a toolkit for decision-making that maximizes planetary and human health. In addition, it's clear we must move towards frameworks that enable multiple use for all environmental and planetary resources, able to function in our ever changing, yet finitely resourced world. Reformists and revolutionaries, need to meet in the middle, because we are getting to the tipping place where the future of economy and investment cannot be anything but sustainable. How can we involve multiple actors in this process?

We will continue to amplify the patterns and work of our Fellows. And we will also break down silos and bring together teams of social entrepreneurs, business leaders and young people around bold paradigm-shifting goals in Planet & Climate.

**Join us on this journey! What comes next must start now.**

From time to time, we send invitations, news and insights about our work on Planet & Climate straight to your inbox. If you don't want to miss any of these, sign up [here!](#)