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On June 19, 2024, SDSN Switzerland and the Institute for Economy and the Environment at the University of St. Gallen (IWÖ-HSG) hosted a conference on the topic of regenerative economy. Supported by B-LAB Switzerland, the UN Global Compact Network Switzerland, and Purpose Schweiz, the event brought together thought leaders from business, academia, and civil society to explore how economies can move beyond traditional conceptualizations of sustainability to embrace a regenerative approach—one that goes beyond mitigating harm and restores ecosystems and communities.

Understanding Regeneration

Prof. Judith Walls, Co-Director of IWÖ-HSG, set the tone for the day, stressing the urgency of going beyond traditional sustainability models. “It’s not about mitigation anymore,” Prof. Walls stated. “It’s really about regeneration.” As the conference unfolded, discussions reflected both enthusiasm and curiosity about regeneration, underscoring a need to explore what the concept truly entails. Participants raised

insightful questions about how regeneration differs from frameworks like circularity or net-zero.

This distinction is critical. While circular and net-zero models focus on minimizing damage and closing resource loops, regenerative approaches go further by seeking to create net positive impacts. Regeneration seeks to actively improve ecosystems and societal well-being, reflecting a more ambitious, transformative vision for the future. It is about more than mitigating harm—it is about rebuilding and replenishing natural and social systems to a level where they flourish. Circular and net-zero strategies are important steps along this path, but the core of regeneration lies in a higher level of ambition, driven by systemic thinking and a focus on net positive outcomes for both the environment and society.

Key Takeaways

One of the key takeaways from the conference was the challenge of operationalizing regenerative approaches and outcomes. Unlike sustainability efforts that

focus on incremental improvements and aiming for “net-zero” impact, regeneration requires a fundamental shift in how we approach problems. A regenerative approach does not simply aim to reduce harm over time, but rather sets out to create a net positive impact and transform the way we live. For example, when addressing the intertwined biodiversity and climate crises, regenerative strategies recognize that these challenges must be tackled hand-in-hand. The goal is to restore ecosystems, improve human well-being, and ensure a socially just transition—all while striving for a net positive outcome.

As the day unfolded, it became clear that there was plenty of enthusiasm around the concept of regeneration. More challenging, was finding concrete examples of transformative regeneration, and participants noted that current business activity remains largely focused on harm reduction, not yet moving towards a net positive impact. This suggests that organizational leaders are well-versed in sustainability, providing a solid foundation for exploring the potential that regeneration offers but also that academics and practitioners alike still have some way to go. The Co-Creation Labs, as outlined below, provide valuable insights and were designed to inspire innovative, forward-looking solutions.

Despite the challenges, there were significant positive developments worth highlighting. There was encouraging progress in understanding regeneration within food systems and construction, where innovative practices are already creating net positive impacts. The discussion on these industries showcased successful models that could serve as inspiration for other sectors. For example, participants explored innovative approaches to regenerative agriculture that not only improve soil health

but also food security and community resilience. The conference also highlighted regenerative thinking in transport and health—areas that have traditionally not been associated with the concept of regeneration. Discussions included examples of transport solutions that prioritize sustainable practices and community health, as well as health initiatives aimed at promoting holistic well-being. The conference thus emphasized the necessity of cross-sectoral learning among pioneers, established companies, and the scientific community, creating significant momentum for embarking on this journey together.

With scientists calling for rapid change, regenerative practices stand out as a promising pathway to tackle today’s grand challenges. Although the challenges of operationalizing regeneration are yet to be fully identified and understood, the conference showcased regeneration as more than just an idealistic vision—it’s a viable, forward-thinking strategy that holds promise for the future. The event succeeded in motivating participants and equipping them with practical insights to begin translating regenerative concepts into actionable steps.

Moving Forward

This conference marked an important step in moving toward a regenerative economy, even as it highlighted the challenges of breaking free from the limitations of current approaches. The following summaries capture the key insights, discussions, and debates that unfolded during the day. We highlight both common themes we observed across the different sessions as well as summaries of individual topics. As we move forward, achieving a regenerative economy will require more than incremental

improvements, in the form of a deep transformation in how we think, collaborate, and act to restore both the planet and society. As André Hoffmann noted, “we should not run companies for shareholders, we should run companies for stakeholders.”

The conference served as a dynamic platform for participants to exchange ideas on regeneration, showcasing innovative approaches to building a thriving economy and businesses while renewing ecological and social systems. Though the concept is still in its early stages for many, a desire for change across sectors was evident, with a clear vision emerging that diverges from the traditional business-as-usual mindset. Most notably, the Co-Creation Labs successfully highlighted both the barriers and opportunities that lie ahead in transitioning toward a regenerative economy. The enthusiasm and commitment displayed throughout the event provide hope that this will be the first of many steps toward a more regenerative a sustainable future.

About SDSN Switzerland

SDSN Switzerland is the Swiss Network for Sustainable Development Solutions to implement the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. SDSN Switzerland brings together more than 50 institutions, organizations, and enterprises.

About IWÖ-HSG

The Institute for Economy and the Environment (IWÖ-HSG), part of one of the leading European business schools at the University of St. Gallen, is a source of rigorous and relevant research on the topics of business sustainability and renewable energy management. IWÖ-HSG’s focus is on

educating tomorrow’s leaders and inspiring innovative solutions for sustainability challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, in business and the society.

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Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Overarching Insights

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

The following themes cut across most of the day's discussions and Co-Creation Labs. While they do not necessarily provide ready answers to how organizations can achieve regeneration, they do highlight areas that organizations and society at large need to tackle along the path towards transformation.

1. Regenerative business should take preemptive action and aim to recover and restore nature, through steward leadership and innovative business models that are scalable.
2. Regulation (or lack thereof) is both a barrier and a source of opportunity to promote and create incentives for regenerative economy.
3. Power asymmetry (e.g., between owners and managers; large and small companies) can prevent organizations/leaders from making changes “on the ground.”
4. A lack of awareness and/or too narrow focus prohibits businesses from taking a systemic approach, yet this is needed to drive transformation and leverage business as a force for good.
5. Investment plays a key role in enabling transformation.
6. Multi-stakeholder collaboration and involvement is essential to achieve regenerative economy, especially the inclusion of local communities and the Global South.
7. Changing consumption patterns/behavior is a necessary condition for regenerative economy, but this must be done in a way that is easy and convenient for consumers.
8. Measures of regenerative economy should build in complexity, multiple levels, and focus on responses and outcomes (i.e., impact).

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Business Case Development

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Challenges

- Many business models are degenerative, and businesses should move away from practices that exploit people and nature and instead benefit people and nature.
- Currently, the primary driver of business decisions is price.
- Most companies cannot account for all of the activities along their supply chains, making it very difficult to limit degenerative activities and contribute to regeneration.

A Vision for Business

- Business should be a force for good with positive outcomes for everyone, not just the business.
- An economy should be for the common good, and we need a recreation of values for business.

- Businesses should take a systemic approach that thinks beyond current paradigms.
- Companies should preemptively prevent degradation and provide more than they take from the system.

Achieving Regenerative Business

- Businesses should develop guidelines for regenerative practices along the whole value chain and implement through collaboration.
- Communities and other stakeholders (e.g., indigenous peoples, consumers, etc.) need to be part of the conversation for addressing these challenges through business.
- Focal companies should facilitate knowledge transfer and build trust for contributing to regeneration up and down the supply chain and across stakeholders.

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Defining and Measurement

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Defining Regenerative Economy

- A regenerative economy should enable and support life among systems.
- The economy should "thrive" to serve the ecological and social needs of individuals, organizations, and society.
- The holistic and systemic interconnections are both very important and very complex.
- Positive outcomes for the environment and society need to be integrated clearly into a definition.

Measuring Regenerative Economy

- There is not any one single measure for regeneration and several complimentary measures will be needed.
- We need indicators for both responses and outcomes, and then, for businesses, there needs to be financial value attached to those indicators.

- There needs to be careful consideration about which measures are on the company level versus higher levels such as industry, regional, or national level.
- A careful balance between generalized and specific (e.g., regional or industry) measures is needed.

Visions for Moving Forward

- There needs to be a valuation (i.e., putting a price on) of nature and social impact.
- Companies need to move beyond risk-based measures and also look at their impact on nature and how they can support regenerative outcomes.
- When developing measures for regeneration, there needs to be careful consideration for who these measures are for (e.g., CSR, marketing, etc).

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Leadership

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Regenerative Leadership

- Active leadership is needed to contribute to regeneration.
- Leaders should be stewards of systems rather than controlling them.
- Collaboration within leadership is necessary for building relationships and learning how to contribute to regeneration.
- Successful regenerative leadership needs an ecosystem (e.g., team of leaders), not just individuals.

Barriers

- Leadership that wants to contribute to regeneration can have low power relative to others such as owners or stakeholders.
- Changing habits to achieve regeneration takes time.
- Regenerative practices cannot always be scaled up.

Regulation and Policy

- Incentive-based policies (e.g., subsidies) should be implemented to

encourage change. Incentives should move away from degrading the natural environment (e.g., fossil fuels) and towards regeneration (e.g., regenerative agriculture).

- Regulation should be made to improve transparency about company actions around regeneration.
- Mandates can enforce specific outcomes regarding regeneration with clear boundaries.
- Regulation and policy should drive transformation.

Opportunities

- Leaders can empower their employees to contribute to regeneration, especially in smaller organizations.
- Organizations should develop platforms for mutual learning and exchange to connect colleagues pursuing regeneration to more conventional colleagues.

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Food Systems

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Challenging the Status Quo: We need to...

- Recover and restore degraded land for future agriculture.
- Regulate of food and agriculture practices to consider environmentally and socially regenerative outcomes.

Role of Stakeholders

- Powerful companies along the supply chain drive what is happening in the food industry.
- Some of the key actors include: farmers, government, and consumers.

Enabling Conditions

- Powerful companies drive the distribution of resources “on the ground” which can have a significant influence on sustainability and which requirements are distributed regarding sustainability.
- Regulation also plays a significant role in food system industries such as agriculture through food safety, subsidies, etc.

Barriers

- Those who work the land often do not own the land so decisions around regeneration need to be driven by the companies owning the land.

- Many solutions/concepts to promote sustainability in food systems are not scalable.
- Oversimplification of environmental challenges with a primary focus on CO₂ which overlooks other major challenges.
- Certification (e.g., organic, sustainable) is an expensive process. The price should instead be put onto those that are unsustainable.

Opportunities for Moving Forward

- Multi-stakeholder collaboration can bring forth new regenerative solutions and support for those solutions.
- The global south needs to be brought into the discussion as many global companies source agricultural and food products from these countries.
- Nutrition should be a focus in the food sector to better promote both human and planetary health.
- Regenerative practices should be compensated and incentivized within the system (e.g., through regulation).
- We need to change consumption practices to be more sustainable (e.g., through education) to increase demand for these products.

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Healthcare

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Challenging the Status Quo: We need to...

- Focus on prevention-based healthcare approaches, including increasing education on nutrition, well-being, and health.

Role of Stakeholders

- The lobbying power of large pharmaceutical corporations has a large influence on healthcare policies in some countries (e.g., the United States).
- Some of the key actors include: doctors, hospitals, insurers, pharmaceutical companies, governments, policy makers, and patients.

Enabling Conditions

- Promoting greater resources for people to become more educated about healthy lifestyle choices can increase prevention.
- More efforts to educate the populace can enable transformation.

Barriers

- Treating medical issues and diseases are more incentivized in our current systems than preventative medicine. We currently have “sickcare”, not healthcare.
- There is lack of education and awareness around good nutrition and health habits, and patients are not educated about preventative healthcare options.

- Mental health needs to be considered in addition and together with physical health.
- Air pollution is a large public health issue that needs to be addressed on a large scale.
- There is a lack of policy and government and intervention for setting rules for guiding healthcare and corporate lobbying interference is high.
- Medical misinformation is increasing leading to trust in fake science and a lack of trust in actual science.

Opportunities for Moving Forward

- Healthcare should focus on prevention, well-being, behavioral changes (e.g., healthy lifestyle choices and habits), nutrition for positive health outcomes among people, and on nature as a source for recovery and prevention worth protection.
- The intersection of food and healthcare cannot be overlooked, and there should be a focus on education efforts and further research.
- Mental health should be better integrated into health care along with physical health.
- Incremental improvements in the healthcare system can go a long way in impacting health.

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Construction, Built Environment & Infrastructure

Post-conference Co-creation Lab Summary

Challenging the Status Quo: We need to...

- Go beyond the current focus on net zero and climate change and build resilient and regenerative infrastructure through nature-based solutions.
- Integrate circularity in the construction and infrastructure sector.

Role of Stakeholders

- Engagement with investors and the public is key to educate on the importance of regeneration in construction and infrastructure.
- Some of the key actors include: concrete/building environment producers, building asset owners, building users, investors, and supply chain actors (e.g., designers, architects).

Enabling Conditions

- When considering the long-term, circularity can pay off both sustainably and financially.
- Investors in construction-related companies, such as cement, are increasingly considering their impact on biodiversity and water.
- There is a desire to develop better measures for understanding regenerativity and norms, standardization, and regulation needed in construction and infrastructure.

Barriers

- High up-front investment is needed, and circular products are expensive.
- Current policies in some countries restrict the ability to effectively implement nature-based solutions in construction (e.g., use of natural clay or wastewater).
- Measuring ongoing progress towards achieving regeneration in construction and infrastructure is currently limited. This includes measuring the value of these practices.
- More technical knowledge is needed about the types of nature-based solutions that can be implemented and how to implement them.

Opportunities for Moving Forward

- Companies can become more involved in supporting policies that enable regenerative and nature-based solutions in construction.
- Companies, NGOs, and academics should collaborate to develop better measurement and public policy around regenerative construction and infrastructure.
- Clients, investors, and the public should be educated about financially viable construction options that are circular and the longer-term benefits around these products.
- Companies should move beyond just risk-based indicators in construction and infrastructure.

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Transport and Mobility

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Challenging the Status Quo: We need to...

- Improve transportation to improve social and economic well-being.
- Develop solutions that address how people behave as technological solutions may not be the most effective route to improve transportation and mobility.
- Improve availability and accessibility to mobility such as public transport and cycling.

Role of Stakeholders

- Organizations should develop collaborative solutions with consumers especially when it comes to public transport.
- Focus should be on improving the customer experience around the use of public transportation.
- Some of the key actors include: customers/consumers, scientists, and city governments.

Enabling Conditions

- Improving the convenience and experience of public transportation will increase usage.
- The mobility sector includes movement of both people and goods, and both should be considered and discussed when it comes to impact.

Barriers

- The potential of self-driving cars may drive individual mobility over public transportation causing more sustainability challenges and hinder progress towards regenerativity.
- Some countries have political and policy obstacles to improving public transportation.
- Infrastructure is needed to make the cycling experience safe.
- Complicated processes for purchasing tickets for transport reduces accessibility.

Opportunities for Moving Forward

- We need to create resilient and regenerative infrastructure for mobility.
- Companies can fund transport passes for employees, locate in areas accessible via public transport, and increase virtual options.
- We can extend what we learn from improving public transport to the transportation of goods.
- We should communicate and market the benefits of better mobility and transport. We need positive examples of people that rely on alternative car-free transportation methods.

Tackling the Shift to a Regenerative Economy: Finance

Post-conference Co-Creation Lab Summary

Challenging the Status Quo: We need to...

- Rethink and transform our current financial system to achieve regeneration.
- Change how we look at performance and include social and environmental performance.
- Put a price on both destroying and regenerating nature.
- Fund new instruments for new business ideas that are nontraditional, “brave,” and aiming to contribute to regeneration.

Role of Stakeholders

- Stakeholders need to be engaged on multiple levels in order to achieve systemic change for regeneration.
- Communities can nurture and develop novel ideas for financing and achieving regeneration.
- We should collaborate with philanthropists due to their experience with developing and implementing unique, boundary-spanning ideas for financing.

Enabling Conditions

- Blended finance, alternative financing (e.g., microloans, crowdfunding), and philanthropy may all be potential avenues for driving change.
- Regulations (e.g., changes in the tax code) can be a key enabler of change towards financing regeneration.

- Proper leadership must enable the shift towards new financial systems to contribute to regeneration.

Barriers

- Current practices, including traditional banking, ownership structure, and relying solely on financial performance.
- Current actions act as if infinite economic growth is possible when it is not.
- Fiduciary duty does not consider environmental and social performance.
- Regulations around transparency, reporting, and spurring new innovations in finance are lacking.

Opportunities for Moving Forward

- A regenerative financial system should serve life and not the other way around. As part of this, community involvement is key.
- We should aim to bridge the gaps between humans, finance, and nature and how they affect each other.
- We need to take a multi-stakeholder approach to collaboratively build solutions and engage the “big players” (e.g., large banks).
- Enable new ideas, knowledge transfer, innovations, and technologies in finance.