



North American Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption

Green Economy Multi-stakeholder Dialogue Final Report

Wednesday 2 February 2011 – 9:00am – 12:30pm

Venue: Oxfam Offices Board Room, 39 McArthur Ave, Ottawa, ON, K1L 8L7

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About the Workshop

The North American Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption hosted a workshop dialogue on the green economy. Participants in the breakout session had just attended the 2-day [North American Sustainable Consumption and Production Workshop](#) on Green Buildings in Ottawa. The workshop was co-hosted by **Jeffrey Barber**, Executive Director, Integrative Strategies Forum and **Philip Vergragt**, Senior Associate, Tellus Institute, and was facilitated by **Vanessa Timmer**, Executive Director of the One Earth Initiative Society. This workshop was the first in what NARSPAC intends to be a series of similar dialogues in the future on the topic of the green economy in the lead-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro, June 2012).

Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together Canadian and United States government, United Nations, academia and civil society representatives as active members of the sustainable consumption and production (SCP) community and create a shared understanding of what is commonly referred to as the *green economy*. Used widely and cited often as a necessary alternative to the existing mainstream economic approach, the concept of a green economy has proven to mean many things to many people. The goal of the workshop, then, was to begin a conversation that would assist the participants in developing not a consensus, but rather a common ground about the idea of a green economy. In short: the aim was to determine what can be agreed upon, what is disagreed upon, and what action can be taken both as a group and as individual leaders to make the green economy a reality.

Design of the Workshop

The workshop was intended to build and expand upon the energy and enthusiasm carried over from the North American Sustainable Consumption and Production workshop on Green Buildings. As such, One Earth designed the workshop to be a collaborative, interactive and educational experience for participants. Vanessa Timmer, the workshop's facilitator, moved participants through the workshop's material fluidly; creating a dynamic atmosphere wherein participants approached the day's presentations, activities, and discussions from alternative, non-traditional perspectives.

Background & Context

At the beginning of the workshop, Jeffrey Barber set the stage by providing some of the broader context and background that led to the creation of this, the first of many workshops of the Green Economy. At the 2008 North American Sustainable Consumption and Production conference in Washington, a breakout session was held that sparked a new and emerging trend in sustainability: focusing on the creation and stewardship of a 'green economy'. The session generated good ideas, and lots of energy and enthusiasm surrounding a new branch of thinking through the underlying linkages between the environment and our economy. However, one of the challenges coming out of that meeting was an apparent lack of direction or presence of meaningful and concrete follow-up mechanisms. Many participants were unsure of how best to direct and channel their energy. Canada, it was determined, would host the next NARSPAC meeting, but until then it appeared a lot of waiting would occur.

As such, the workshop on the Green Economy, and the ones that will follow, stem from the desire to formalize the discussions, conferences, and informal meetings that have occurred since the 2008 meeting, with a focus on pursuing and furthering work on the green economy. Through a formalized partnership with UNEP, the different North American networks have now come together to create a working group of scholars, government officials and thinkers focused on advancing the green economy. To make this possible, NARSPAC partnered with four organizations – NASCA, SCORAI, RCEN and the Citizens Network for Sustainable Development. SCORAI, in particular, began two years ago based on the growing body of SCP literature. The focus was on making connections between what we consume and our environment – a link that underpins the basis of studying the green economy.

At a retreat in August of 2010, it was felt that workshops were required in order to come to a better understanding of what "Green Economy" actually means – as well as what it looks like, how it's formed, and what the biggest barriers are to achieving it. Therefore, the Green Economy Workshop held in Ottawa in February of 2011 marked the first what hoped to be many. It was, largely, experimental and a trial format to see what worked, what did not, and what kind of interest there was in generating this discussion. In short, the goal of the workshops is to determine whether or not – when it comes to the green economy – there is something not being said.

Green Economy: An Introduction

Why Green Economy? The term seems to have suddenly catapulted its way onto the political agenda, particularly in the lead up to the Rio +20 Earth summit in 2012. In the midst of the conversation though, it has become increasingly easy to lose site of what it actually means, and what different frames of reference inform its meaning.

Understanding the green economy though means understanding that the most recent economic crisis is not necessarily the cause of a shift towards new economic structures, ones based on environmental sustainability – but rather a symptom of an underlying crisis, one that is similar to both the climate and energy crisis. It has been called the crisis of the cultural outlook of capitalism – or rather consumerism and competition – two values that have become permanently reflected in our everyday lives. In essence, the green economy is a worldview – one that means many things to many people, and attempts to address growing and interconnected financial and environmental crises together.

With such a wide variety of perspectives and opinions, one of the main goals of the workshop was to determine whether or not there were points of agreement within the overarching concept of the green economy. With so many different frames and lenses approaching a concept like the green economy, it is important to be mindful of these perspectives and lenses. But how do these deeply engrained worldviews and value structures come about? Socialization, education, professional affiliation, corporate sector, public sector, civil society sector academics – each of these different lenses inform our worldview. Developing a consensus on an issue like the green economy, then, is difficult to manage – but not impossible.

Therefore, at the very highest level, thinking about the green economy is ultimately underpinned by the fact that different people see different ways of solving problems. And this is partly exacerbated by the fact that people define the problem differently. The focus, then, is not on changing people's worldview, but rather how they define and solve problems. Therefore when it comes to a generating consensus around the green economy, we need to look at the different ways in which the problem – i.e. the current economic order – is defined. We see this being approached in two distinct ways:

Conventional Conception This traditional approach is simply to state that the economic order we have will suffice, it merely needs technology innovation in order to become more environmentally and humanly sustainable. The results will be a creation of more jobs, or greener operations and reduced impact on this earth. In essence, it is an argument for increased efficiency, cascading throughout all levels of economic activity that will solve the problem. In this way,

Transformative Position A more radical school of thought takes a far more critical look at the underlying functions of our current economic order. It posits

that there are problems and flaws deeply rooted in both the economic structure and subsequent culture we have built around it. Emphasis is placed on equity, local levels of economic activity, and a rewiring of our collective consciousness and relationship with one another and the earth.

While broad in scope, both of these approaches capture the ways in which thinkers around the world are currently framing the issue of how we collectively transition to a so-called green economy. Is it a minor tweak with improved commitments to efficiencies? Or is it an overhaul of our entire economic order? The global context of this debate is important, and cannot be stressed enough. Yet it is important to maintain focus, and at the meeting it was decided that North America – complete with participation from all relevant actors – would be the testing ground for green economy innovation. Again, the goal of workshop is to net out the things we can agree upon, understand what we disagree on, and ultimately find answers to three critical questions:

1. Does a stable green economy require a major structural transformation
2. If so what aspects of the economy need to be transformed, and how?
3. What role should different stakeholders play?

Key Questions & Collaborative Outcomes

Following the foundational remarks from Jeffrey Barber and Philip Vergragt, participants were asked to engage in interactive dialogue with one another. Vanessa posed a series of questions to the participants and their answers were collected and clustered.

What does a Green Economy look like?

With a new UN Report on the green economy slated to be released in Nairobi, Kenya, the conversation about what a green economy looks like has truly become global in size and scope. As well, there are so many reports and books already out there, and discussions take on so many different shape and manifestations. Each of them shape and direct the concept and picture of what a green economy is and looks like.

Indeed, the concept of a green economy is not necessarily new – nor is it a fad. And therefore many of the participants expressed a desire to learn from the past, not repeat or redefine the conversation that has taken place up until this point. Indeed, at a recent workshop, it was determined a green economy should:

1. Redefine what ‘good’ develop means;
2. Rework our concept on human nature;
3. Stay within ecological limits;
4. Address social concerns;
5. Promote resilience;
6. Appreciate diversity and respect human rights – namely those rights for those who do not have a voice.

As such, participants reported back on the following four themes:

Reformed Financial System: increased regulation, with emphasis on regulation, risk mitigation and smarter pricing, as well as the elimination of subsidies that creating an unequal playing field for green solutions.

Smarter metrics: moving beyond GDP, measuring wellbeing differently;

Infrastructure and markets: putting a price on carbon, increased investment in the renewable energy sector; and

Reframed values & paradigm shift: from growth to degrowth, innovative ideas like a reduced workweek, new education models, focusing on equity, a strong social safety net, and an overall focus on well-being.

How do we make it 'real'?

There was an overarching concern on how to effectively “sell” the concept of a green economy. Best practices, alternative scenarios and economic models need to be made attractive, either through smart advertising, non-traditional modes of expression and dissemination, all with the aim of making the concept accessible and attractive.

A concern was raised in regards to our collective ability to control and steer the direction of the green economy’s development and implementation. We are indeed moving in the right direction – and in fact accelerating, making meaningful progress at all levels. Yet definitions are still in flux, and as we broaden the conversation outward, we run the risk of losing sight of specific root causes, removing the green economy from its origins of focusing on environmental and human rights concerns. In this way, making the green economy real hinges on how tightly focused we are able to make its priorities, goals and intents, even as more and more governments, corporations and other societal actors become involved. The example was given that, in Denmark, green growth is a key theme, so much so that out of 26 ministries, 4 are working on the issue. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Environment is not one of them. In this way, concepts of ecological thresholds and environmental expertise are left out of the discussion.

In this way, making it real involves combating forces that are already “circling the wagons” to protect the current economic order and hinder transitioning to a green, sustainable economy. Yet economic transitions have happened, and come about through necessity. This is what is currently happening – a necessary transition, with powerful forces at play to ensure it does not occur.

Hope though lies in the various unacknowledged social and technological revolutions that have taken place over the past 10 to 15 years. To give a concrete example of how economic transitions take place – in conjuncture with technological innovation – one participant recalled the shift from North American youth vying for their own car (which meant freedom, mobility, transport, etc) to now desiring cell phones and connectivity devices (which mean social networks, connections, etc).

Automobiles were the iconic symbol of maintaining social networks physically. In 10-15 years, that has changed completely, where it has now been gone virtual, and subsequently entire generations of social behavior have changed with it. With this technological innovation – powered by social interaction – we have become less automobile dependent, and more open to collaboration and efficiencies because of it.

Where do we go from here?

The common idea of a green economy, in order for it to become a reality, requires deep engagement of power brokers, decision makers, key allies and other partners in collaboration. Participants were encouraged to branch out and become leaders in their own networks in stimulating the dialogue about and getting more people engaged in the green economy.

Next Steps

At the end of the workshop, there was considerable enthusiasm and interest amongst participants to direct the positive energy coming out of the session into a series of tangible, active outcomes. Some suggestions were:

More Workshops: NARSPAC committed to hosting future workshops on the green economy, encouraging participants to spread the word in their networks about the value of these discussions.

Listserv Collaboration: a number of participants expressed interest in starting and utilizing a green economy working group email listserv, wherein participants at the workshop could remain in contact and collaborate on spin-off initiatives.

Green Economy Newsletter: it was suggested that the group produce a series of writing projects stemming from ideas put forth by the participants, either in the form of a newsletter, a series of journals collections, or other various written products.

Contact

For further information please contact **Jeffrey Barber** at jeffreyhbarber@gmail.com or **Philip Vergragt** at pvergragt@tellus.org.

ABOUT NARSPAC

The North American Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption seeks to promote dialogue, understanding and collaboration among different stakeholder groups within North America and with other regions, with the goal of catalyzing the transformation of society to sustainable production and consumption patterns.

Partner organizations

- North American Sustainable Consumption Alliance (NASCA)
- Citizens Network for Sustainable Development (CitNet)
- Canadian Environmental Network (CEN)
- Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI)

Worldwatch Institute and SustainUS are affiliates.

Objectives of partnership

1. To establish a working relationship between the initial four networks and to expand this relationship to include a number of other stakeholder networks as well as representatives of the two countries.
2. To develop a set of communication tools by which to exchange information and promote discussion and collaboration (e.g., email listserve, website, social networking sites, teleconferencing, webinars).
3. To organize a series of workshops, panels and presentations in different locales on agree topics of interest.
4. To provide qualitative regional input into the CSD, the UN Marrakech Process, the 10 Year Framework of Programs and Rio+20.
5. To raise the level of public awareness, understanding and action.

Encouraging public participation

The North American Roundtable represents a vehicle to support discussions between civil society, academic, and other groups including government and business in North America around sustainable consumption and production. This process-led partnership builds on the discussions and exchanges already taking place formally and informally at the regional level. It is intended to serve as a platform to discuss sustainable consumption and production-related issues to provide input into the UN CSD, the North American Workshops on SCP, the Rio+20 process, and the development of national sustainable development strategies.