From Theory to Practice: Communicating Sustainability in the 21st Century, a Personal Reflection from the Yale Sustainability Leadership Forum

Steve Arowolo, Founder and CEO, Green Shift Africa
Cape Town, South Africa

October 2016

The profiles of Yale Sustainability Leadership Forum’s inaugural class of 2016 represent a paradigm shift regarding how sustainability can and should be communicated. In a world where most people prefer to work in their individual silos, the delegates’ diversity of professional and academic backgrounds highlighted the power of sharing knowledge and information across sectors, across disciplines, and across cultures. The collective experience and knowledge of the delegates is vast and diverse, each with impeccable academic and professional qualifications. Suffice to say that virtually all sectors of society were represented in the Forum: participants from policymaking to research and academia, civil society organizations, business and development sectors were all engaging with each other. I am so happy to be among this cohort of sustainability professionals and leaders.

The networking, the discussions and the lectures were all relevant to the work that my team is pioneering in Africa. Coming from Cape Town, South Africa, it was fascinating to meet people from other parts of the world, and to learn about the sustainability challenges from their regions and countries, and most importantly to learn about what they are doing to address those challenges. I learnt that while some sustainability challenges might be local, the overall effects are often global. Ultimately, my experience mirrored the overall theme of the forum: Sustainability as a Megatrend in the 21st Century.

Advancing the global sustainability agenda will require leadership, but it’s a different kind of leadership. It will be a leadership that will see synergy as a tool and not as a threat, a leadership that will be willing to connect the dots between top-down and bottom-up approaches in policy formulation and implementation, hence the need to train and support an integrated form of leadership. Having carefully studied the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 goals in total, I have discovered that the only missing piece of the puzzle is ‘leadership.’ I think we should be deliberate about naming leadership as part of the sustainability solution; it shouldn’t be embedded in other goals within the SDGs, it should be named explicitly. This missing goal, SDG goal 18, in my view should read: ‘Train and empower leaders who will advance the global sustainability agenda.’

While it is good to prioritize leadership, it is equally important for these leaders to learn how to communicate sustainability effectively. Communicating the concept of sustainability and the SDGs is key, and the overall success of these global initiatives depends on it. It must be stressed that among its many successes, one of the ‘failures’ of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was the manner in which they were communicated. In a survey released in 2015, only 4% of the UK public had heard of the MDGs (Eurobarometer). Therefore, the SDGs must be communicated in a simplified manner in terms that each audience can understand. This communication approach should translate theory to practice, and it should be able to bridge the existing gaps in knowledge. This is one of the lessons I gained from the Yale Sustainability Leadership Forum: that communicating sustainability effectively is at the heart of sustainability itself.
The challenges of the 21st century are unique and varied, and the way we situate the discourse of sustainability within the framework of these challenges will, to a very large extent, determine how far we can go in proffering solutions to these challenges. For instance, global youth unemployment is a serious issue; recent forecasts have shown that it is on the increase and forecasted to grow to more than 13% by 2019. In less advanced countries of the world, the issue has become a menace, and a worrisome situation. The companies of the 21st century must therefore devise sustainable means and methods of addressing this situation. The SDGs eighth goal stresses the need for good jobs and economic growth.

To address global youth unemployment, it must be stressed that there are enormous opportunities in the green economy sector. Our youth must be trained and empowered to harness these green opportunities. My NGO, Green Shift Africa, has pioneered an initiative that will empower green entrepreneurs under a project tagged Project GEO: Green Entrepreneurship Opportunities for African youth1. It is our way of training and empowering Africa’s young and aspiring green entrepreneurs. Through effective use of environmental education to drive the sustainability agenda, we are transitioning from ‘theory to practice’ by supporting green entrepreneurship on the continent. It is our hope that such an initiative, if well supported, will help address the challenges of youth unemployment in Africa in a sustainable way. Goal 17 of the SDGs stresses the need for partnerships and collaborations, and this is why I have opened up Project GEO to potential partners and collaborators who might be willing to support our work on youth green job creation in Africa.

The inaugural Yale Sustainability Leadership Forum might have come and gone, but the experience, knowledge and network remain personal assets to me and my organization in Africa, and we are well positioned to champion the cause of a more sustainable and prosperous Africa, in our own little way. In the 21st century, innovation and communication go together: we cannot innovate effectively if we cannot communicate effectively, nor can we communicate effectively if we cannot innovate.

Appreciations: I thank Yale University for awarding me the Scholarship to attend the Yale Sustainability Leadership Forum. I also express my sincere appreciation to the management of Green Shift Africa for their encouragement and moral support.

1 http://greenshiftafrica.org/projectgeo/