

The *What If?* Report

Proceedings from the June 2020 Online Workshop on Climate Change and COVID-19 Response

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Location: Online Zoom Workshop

By Jimmy Jia

*With contributions from Carey Gersten, Ryan Hoover, Evan Taylor, Dennis West,
Jayleene West, and Amy Westrick*



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Executive Summary

The June 2020 Online Workshop on Climate Change convened a diverse group of stakeholders around four focal questions in the search of mutual actions. The What If Report uses the *Problems with Solutions* format, where each problem statement is paired with proposed solutions. Readers are encouraged to refine the problem / solution pairings rather than each individually.

Focal Question: *How will COVID-19 affect climate legislation of Washington State? A reflection by Washington State Senator Mona Das.*

- Be solutions focused. You have a problem, otherwise you're not going to come and see me. But you only have 15 minutes. What roadblocks can I remove for you?
- COVID-19 is top of mind for legislators right now. We are searching for solutions with co-benefits of environmental justice.
- "Make friends before lunch or eat alone." To be effective in Olympia, make relationships and bring people along.

Focal Question: *How will traditional views of increasing population density as a sustainability pathway be affected by the health benefits of low density for pandemic safety?*

- Density is only one factor of the spread of COVID-19 and some measures, such as masks, already reduce spread. Will pandemics change where we chose to live and raise a family?
- Keep an eye on demographic shifts due to the economy as well. Public health may emerge as an urban planning design criterion.
- There may be pockets of both increasing and decreasing densification. Be prepared to create centers-of-excellences of sustainability practices for both scenarios.

Focal Question: *Are we willing to pay the same costs for halving global emissions by 2030 as for solving the pandemic crisis?*

- The goals are shared among participants, but we differ in ways to achieve them. What could help improve consensus is data and modeling, partnerships, and a focusing on communities that are harmed by a transition to a clean economy (such as coal miners, etc.)
- Couple environmental sustainability and public health benefits as a means to achieve both.
- Turn the question around: how do we pay the same cost to halve global emissions as we pay to address the pandemic?

Focal Question: *What local partnerships do we need to achieve a global climate response?*

- Partnerships bring communities together to share in cost / benefit, risk / reward of an effort. The benefits must be clear for stakeholders to feel participation is valuable.
- Who should be involved? Always ask "who is not present?" Partnerships is more than just getting a seat at the table. It's about bringing the tables together.
- Local organizations have a great ability to generate data about their own communities. Can this be an opportunity to promote inclusion & equity?

About the What If? Sandbox

Through questions, inquiry and curiosity, the What If? Sandbox hosts programs that convenes diverse groups of stakeholders around question statements that challenge our society. Open to all, we nurture networks of relationships to achieve those possibilities.

- **What If?** – A question that has an expansive effect to unlock creativity.
- **Sandbox** – A place to continuously mold, play, build, rebuild and experiment.
- **What If? Sandbox** – A format that maximizes the serendipity for new ideas to collide.

About the June 2020 Online Workshop on Climate Change:

The climate will continue to change, even with the worldwide breath that COVID-19 is giving us. As we retreat to take care of our communities, we can also reflect on future innovations needed that can help us maintain a positive outlook.

Although it is known that we need to take a systems approach to tackling climate change, and companies are making progress in their internal plans, gaps still exist between sectors, providing ample opportunities for the innovation economy to lead the way. This cross-sectorial market opportunity is enormous to address the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals 6 (water), 7 (Energy), 9 (Innovation), 11 (Cities), 12 (Responsible Consumption), 13 (Climate Action) and 17 (Partnerships).



About the What If Report:

Ninety-five percent of problem solving is defining the problem with five percent designing the solution. Note takers were instructed to **write down every question that gets asked** so we could capture the inquiry of the group. This search for consensus of problem statements will inform the design of possible solutions and partnerships needed to achieve results.

The report use the Problems with Solutions format, where each problem statement is paired with proposed solutions. Readers are encouraged to refine the problem statement / solution pairings rather than each individually. This will help building consensus of understanding multiple lenses of the climate change challenge.

I hope these notes spur ideas for future collaborations and innovations.

Thanks to the attendees and organizations for participating:

- LightWorks, Arizona State University
- ATS Automation
- Bartell-Barber Family Investments, LLC
- Center for Sustainable Energy
- CleanTech Alliance
- CleanTech Open
- Dropbox
- Energy and Environmental Management Institute, George Washington University
- JASmedia
- MIT Club of DC
- Northwestern Health Sciences University
- Omnidian Inc.
- Oxford University
- PGS Consults
- Presidio Graduate School
- Scope 5
- Solutions for Corporate Growth Inc.
- The Jia Group, LLC
- Tilt at Windmills, Inc
- United States Business Council for Sustainable Development
- University of Colorado at Boulder
- Buerk Center for Entrepreneurship, University of Washington
- Washington State Senator
- Washington State Department of Commerce
- Water Street Public Affairs

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Plenary Talk: *How will COVID-19 affect climate legislation of Washington State?*



[Washington State Senator Mona Das](#) was born in India, and moved to the U.S. with her family when she was eight months old. She spent her childhood moving around because of her father's job, living in eight states and three countries. She currently lives in Kent. She was elected to the Washington State Senate in 2018 and is serving her first term. She sits on the Energy, Environment & Technology and the Transportation committees.

On systems:

How many times do we get an opportunity to rebuild from the ground up?

On how to interact with your legislator:

Problem: Meetings with legislators only last for 15 minutes. How can you use the time most effectively?

Possible Solution: I know you have a problem. You wouldn't be here if you didn't. What's your solution? In many cases, people who come to see me already know what they want to do. It's my job to move obstacles out of the way and fix the systems that are broken.

Possible Solution: It's easier to pass things at a higher level if it's passed at a smaller level, i.e. County => State => Federal.

Possible Solution: No bill's ever dead until the last day. It can always be added to someone else's bill that's more likely to pass.

On the environment:

Problem: How can we make sure we have climate legislation as part of our COVID-19 recovery? How can we keep the environment relevant, when everything else is seemingly more important?

Possible Solution: Environmental justice, especially related to COVID-19 would be idea. (See *Discussion Forum 3* which explored partnerships.)

Possible Solution: What is going to save the company money? It is likely that the environmental thing to do will also save companies money.

On divides, whether between rural / urban areas, differing levels of engagement, etc.:

Problem: How can we better connect, build relationships, encourage voting?

Possible Solution: Bring people along with you. When ideas bridge the rural / urban divide, it gets a lot more traction. One example is action in the diesel / trucking industry, where there are equity issues between large and small fleet operators. Walmart can easily replace its fleet, but what about the family-owned business?

Possible Solution: It's all about relationships. "Make friends before lunch or eat alone." I've been branded around the single-use plastic issue. The "Single Use Plastics Warrior" brings me credibility and an area of expertise. You can't be an expert at everything. Find who your partners and networks are.



Problem: How can we connect this with environmental justice overall?

Possible Solution: Bring in new voices. I'm here to pull up as many people as I can. People of color disproportionately affected by environmental issues. Not many voices of women of color in the legislature so their problems are not heard. Engage the youth and engage the communities of color. Invite them. Ask them to participate. Bring them along.

Additional resources:

- <https://www.amazon.com/Terrible-Thing-Waste-Environmental-American-ebook/dp/B07F65ZFFV>
- <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=43675>
- <https://www.vox.com/podcasts/2019/12/16/21024323/ezra-klein-show-saul-griffith-solve-climate-change>
- <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/growing-the-economy/energy/ceta/>

Discussion Forum 1: *How will traditional views of increasing population density as a sustainability pathway be affected by the health benefits of low density for pandemic safety?*

 <p>Evan Taylor is a serial biotechnology entrepreneur with global experiences, who works on projects beyond sustainability and toward restorative models inherently improving the environment and local ecosystems. As Founder & CEO of a biotech company, he led a team developing microbial biostimulants enhancing soil health and improved crop yield from food waste from Food Banks. Originally from Boston, Massachusetts, he has lived and worked in Ghana, Bahrain and Arizona.</p>	 <p>Ryan Hoover recently received his MBA in Sustainable Systems from Presidio Graduate School and for the last three years has been working with Cleantech Open as their Western Region Events Chair. He has been working with them to transition to a program based online due to recent circumstances. He has also been doing consulting work on the side and is looking to further his career in sustainability. When he's not working, Ryan enjoys music festivals and has a passion for international travel.</p>
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On problem boundaries:

Problems: Is the COVID-19 crisis time-bound, or will it forever affect people's lifestyles?

- Is there actually a correlation between population density and virus spread?
- How much does working from home increase your ecological footprint?
- How many more resources are you now going to use? Suburbs can often be worse for the environment than in rural areas or big cities.

Possible Solution: Compile a study of the environmental / climate footprint of urban, suburban and rural lifestyles and overlay it onto a study of disease infections. If research studies exist, the data may not be well-known beyond the experts or researchers. If the data does not exist, then one should commission a study on the urban / rural effects of COVID-19 infection spreading.

On an individual's quality of life:

Problems: How do we make living a life compatible with sustainability goals?

- Where is it safe to raise a family?
- Where is it safe to go and live now?
- How much support will there be moving forward for shared/communal living?
- What is going to happen to downtown buildings?
- How do you navigate 75-story elevators?

- Are there certain telemedicine interactions we're not comfortable with? Some big telemedicine firms just got hacked.

Possible Solution: Perhaps a market study of how people are relocating, what habits they are adapting for the short-term and long-term will indicate how business and governmental services need to adapt and be developed.

On societal shifts:

Problem: What are cultural shifts that will happen due to COVID-19?

- Are certain problems going to persist as people leave populated areas?
- Does demand in the cities reduce to a point where it impacts restaurants and jobs?
- Where will growth go? We're not likely to tear down cities and more people will move to the suburbs. How do we manage the sprawl?
- Will we see a drop in funding for services paid for through the property tax?
- If we start to see big shift from cities to countryside, how do you distribute resources?
- What is the cultural effect of people wearing masks to the grocery store?
- Will we see more people wearing masks when they are sick like they commonly do in Asia?

Possible Solution: Cities already have to manage demographic shifts due to the economy. Governments may wish to consider public health as another factor during urban planning, community charrettes and design thinking exercises.

On planning for the future:

Problem: Given that there are pressures for both higher and lower density, what if both happens simultaneously?

- What societal and technological changes are tending towards increasing urban density?
- Before COVID-19, higher density was seen as a good urban planning approach, however, with many people working from home, is there less need for dense cities?

Possible Solution: Pockets of both high density and low density may emerge as individuals choose which outcomes and risks they wish to manage. Both approaches have strategies to be sustainable. Thus, create centers of excellence for both urban sustainability and rural sustainability. Governance structures need to set sustainability targets and enable each local community to achieve them in their own way.

Discussion Forum 2: *Are we willing to pay the same costs for halving global emissions by 2030 as for solving the pandemic crisis?*



Dennis West

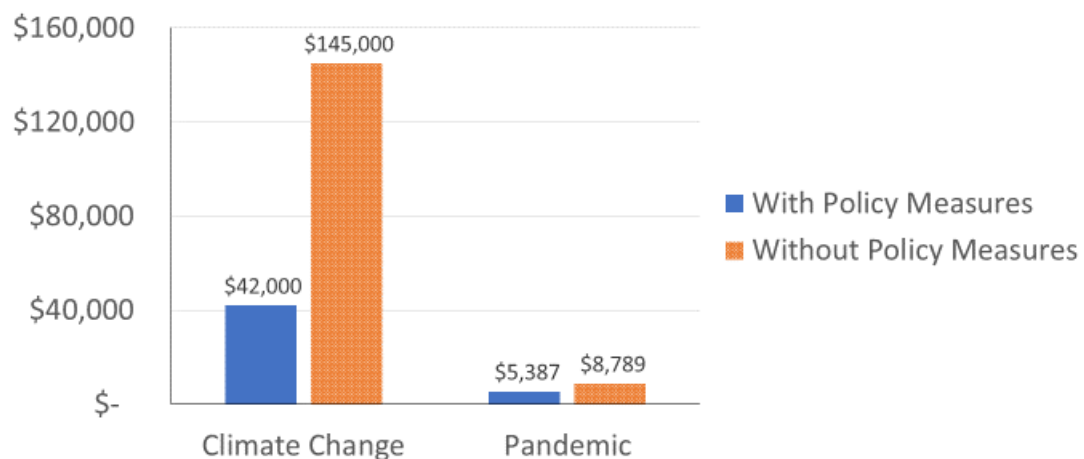
[Dennis West](#) is a founding member of Organising Innovation (OI). He is a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford in the field of organizations and governance and a researcher with the Saïd Business School Centre for Corporate Reputation and the Oxford University Centre for Socio-Legal Studies. He also teaches the undergraduate-level General Management course at Oxford University.



Jayleene West

[Jayleene West](#) is an MBA candidate at PGS. Currently, she works as a processing specialist in the EV Transportation department at the Center for Sustainable Energy, San Diego. Jayleene also holds an M.S. in Environmental Management focusing on Energy Systems and Climate Change. She hopes to use her background to manage relationships between the private and public sector in advancing sustainable technologies and equitable programs.

**Economic impact of
Climate Change and Pandemic (in Billions)**



Sources: ADB, Yale Drawdown, IPCC, World Bank

On Consensus:

Problem: The goals are shared among participants, but we differ in the ways to achieve them.

- How do you spend money on solutions?
- How do you raise the money, such as carbon pricing?

- People and organizations need to pay for emission reduction measures. Who makes the decisions?
- How do we couple the outcome of investment decisions with real reductions in carbon?

Possible Solutions: What could help improve consensus:

- Data and the power of modeling.
- Partnerships (*See Discussion Forum 3 on Partnerships*).
- State-level as experimental space and modeling.
- Focus on different concerns and harms, such as coal miners, and other communities that are harmed in the transition to a clean economy.

On Urgency:

Problem: Climate change isn't as urgent as the pandemic, not at a large scale. How do we address it and engage people who don't see the effects firsthand?

- How can we help people find climate as an immediate threat, rather than one that is farther off in the future?

Possible Solution: We can understand the health effects of climate change and the health benefits of more sustainable practices. Several medical studies have been done on the climate/health nexus.

Problem: Will we activate a response to climate change only after it's too late?

- How do we get people to stop debating climate change and start discussing it?

Possible Solution: Fire/smoke in the U.S. West Coast stops most from being ignorant to climate change effects. It will be harder to ignore as more people are affected by climate. *However*, we run the risk of it being too late.

Problem: A reframing of the question: How can we pay the same costs for halving the global emissions by 2030 as for solving the pandemic crisis? How can we connect the two?

Possible Solution: The pandemic is showing us willingness of trillion-dollar proposals. There may be an opportunity for investment in infrastructure – particularly green infrastructure, if leadership emerges. Without the ability for states and municipalities to utilize deficit spending, stimulus funding is our best option.

On Community:

Problem: What is the most important form of gathering voices?

- What kind of collective action is needed?
- How do we have these conversations with our families?
- What can we do individually?

Possible Solution: Community organizers have to manage similar issues on a regular basis. Who has done organizing work and what have they found effective?

On Systems:

Problem: Is there a large-scale system that enables disease?

- Can we build large-scale systems as a response?
- How do we move away from this pandemic and understand the health effects of climate change as well as the health benefits of more sustainable practice?

Possible Solution: Both pandemic and climate response will require global coordination. Can we utilize the networks created by the pandemic experience to tackle climate-related issues?

Problem: How to keep the environment relevant when we have the other problems at bay?

Possible Solution: Environmental systems intersect with all other systems so one can search for co-benefits that makes both systems better.

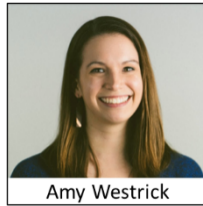
Discussion Forum 3: *What local partnerships do we need to achieve a global climate response?*



Carey Gersten

[Carey Gersten](#) brings a career of over 30 years developing markets and deploying leading edge business solutions ranging from Fortune 100 to start-ups. He

has been a National Outdoor Leadership Educator and has served on the boards of several not-for-profits that have helped to improve local and regional community including the Washington Water Trails Association and the Food Forest Collective.



Amy Westrick

[Amy Westrick](#) is a sustainability consultant and 2019 graduate of Presidio Graduate School's Sustainable Systems MBA. She specializes in systems-

thinking and stakeholder-centric approaches to a broad range of sustainability topics, combining expertise in design, sustainability, business, and leadership. She is based in Seattle, Washington.

On the benefits of networks:

Problem: Why do we want to create partners?

- *Positive example:* Bringing two communities together around building a park. How do you make it so that the people that live in a community can benefit from it?
- *Negative example:* Do partnerships also hold things back? Example of a "one company town" where the one company is a refinery.
- What stake do people have? Depending on your stake, are you stepping on the accelerator or breaks for changes?

Possible Solution: the benefit / objective of the partnership needs to be clear to all stakeholders. The fingerprints of the solution need to be tailored to the locality. Strengthen local entities and organizations to take care of their own needs.

Possible Solution: Partnerships are key, the basis on which we find connections, we're all deeply connected as human beings

On when to use partnerships:

Problem: What local climate impact needs, social justice issues, and signals help uncover networks of collaboration?

Solution Example: Bring in concepts of design thinking into how to create networks. For instance, COVID-19 is changing how to collaborate with each other.

Problem: Can we come to conclusions about key partnerships we've found that have helped us?

Possible Solution: When there's a goal to convene people around. What are the goals of your organization? Benchmark current situation. Does the benchmark change the goals & objectives?

Solution Example: From the non-profit side, if you have a big idea how are you going to fund it? Partnerships are necessary. In the Cleantech sector, the UW Clean Energy Institute is a good example of industry & research working side by side.

On stakeholder involvement:

Problem: Who should be involved? How/what do they look like? How do we elevate the voices of those who are historically left out of the climate issues?

- **Problem Example:** Residential solar programs incentivize homeowners but leaves out people who don't have a path to home ownership.
- **Problem Example:** Affluent people electrifying everything leaves out non-affluent covering the costs of a declining system.
- **Problem Example:** As more people commute into the city to work, there is less of a need for gas stations inside of the city.
- **Problem Example:** Indigenous peoples, BIPOC, underserved communities usually are not included in environmental and climate conversations. Their existing work on the matter may not be recognized or acknowledged.

Possible Solution: It's important to always be asking "who is not present?" It is more than just having a seat at the table, it's about "bringing our tables together". The approach can't be prescriptive, can't support tokenism and needs to focus on listening. If we don't see each other in a room, we don't know what each other is doing.

Possible Solution: Bring people along (returning to Senator Das' theme). If we're in a position of power at the helm of an institution, we can reach out and use our privilege for others.

On organization-scale issues:

Problem: Do we have shared values as a nation? Is the economy the default value system of the US? Can we shift our culture of money? What are our values?

Possible Solution and a New Problem: Government was meant to be the great arbiter, bringing people together. However, our government doesn't seem to have that broad base representation. Is it really for the people anymore? How can we make it representative again?

Problem: How do organizations set standards for the values they represent in their stakeholder community?

- Are there standards for representation in partnerships?
- Standards setting organizations have a lot of power, is there a way to bring representation into those groups?

Possible Solution: “Data gives you voice.” However, one needs to gather data with broadly reaching social support networks. One can’t use data that’s already racially biased as it will further broaden the gap. **A follow-on problem:** how to make the data available. AI is dominated by governments & companies that want to sell you stuff you don’t want

Possible Solution: Local organizations have a great ability to generate data about their own communities. Can this be an opportunity to promote inclusion & equity?

Plenary and Summary

Appreciations:

- To Mona Das, for sharing insights and to the facilitators for hosting the forums.
- To attendees, for jumping into these tough conversations.
- For the different perspectives & thoughtfulness from people in the groups.
- For participating virtually.

New Information:

- Check out Braver Angels for red/blue conversations
- Rebecca Motola-Barnes is interested in starting a book club on sustainability with the first book being [A Terrible Thing to Waste](#). Please contact her at rebeccamb@gmail.com.

Puzzles:

- Do we really have enough information to plan for trends/changes in the future?
- Individually, we really do want to invest in climate change mitigation, however we are concerned that there is no collective will across the US. If each of us want it to happen, why can't we make it happen together?
- What can folks do individually to join collective movements of environmental change, racial justice, and environmental justice?
- How can we evolve the trend of people moving out of urban centers to make it more environmentally sustainable and equitable?
- How do we prepare for the next time? The pandemic we're going through now was predictable & predicted, but wasn't widely understood. What's next?
- What's our societal resiliency? How can we change how we work & live to support this?
- How do we get more people to talk about the issues versus debate the issues?

Problems with Solutions:

- How do you develop standards for evaluating data in an equitable way?
- What kind of community will people live in when they move away from cities? Are villages a model we can pursue? Low impact communities that are climate and COVID-19 friendly.
- How can we continue to hold businesses accountable? → Ask how many people of color are on their boards & in leadership positions

Hope and Dreams:

- Hope for environmental issues to be brought further into the public discourse.
- Hope to get systems thinking into the workplace more.
- I hope we don't lose momentum after today. I hope the passion & energy people have today can sustain us to a point where we can actually see change.
- Hope & dream to make efficiency sexy again!