# Conversations about inclusive & sustainable communities

Six practices for creative engagement

Test Edition

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Making progress on inclusion, sustainability and climate change requires active partnerships between citizens and their local government. Partnership grows in conversations that create shared understanding and the will to act. **Practices for conversation** are an aid to these necessary meetings: six simple but systematic methods for generating productive engagement among interested participants which we hope local leaders will use, adapt and develop as they seek better ways to created valued futures.

Centre For Inclusive Futures
POLICY, ORGANISATION & COMMUNITY ACTION LEARNING
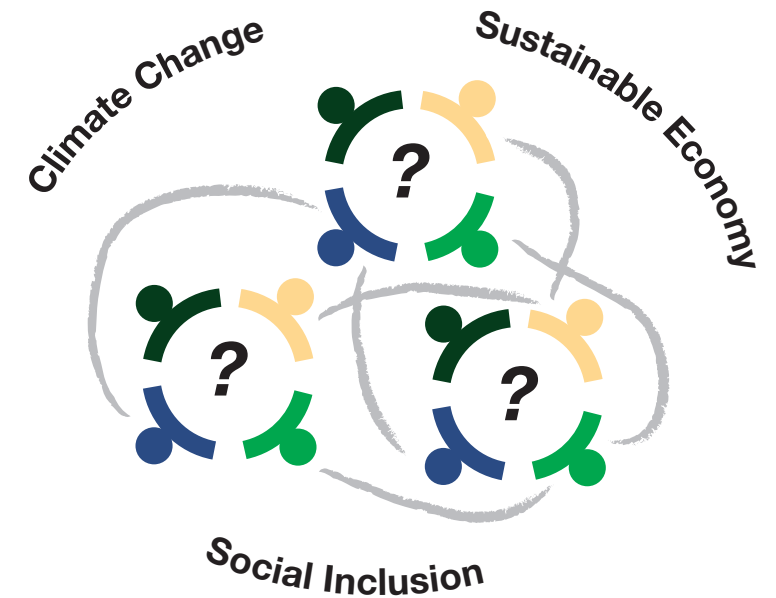
Living networks of conversation lie at the heart of our capacity as a human community to create the futures we want rather than being forced to live with the futures we get.

–Juanita Brown

Practices

If you want to…	consider implementing…
…discover more about local people's perspectives	How does it look to you? page 4
…bring different participants together to generate a richer shared picture	Talking together page 6
…establish good opportunities to deepen understanding of challenges	What does this mean to us? page 8
…strengthen the contribution that ongoing work makes to meeting the challenges of climate change, sustainability, and social inclusion.	Making connections page 10
…identify local assets which could contribute to progress but might be overlooked	Counting in local assets page 12
…engage an even greater diversity of people in thought and action	Who is missing? page 14

We developed this booklet with the support of the Barrow Cadbury Trust. It is based on reflections with elected members and civic and public sector representatives in Wiltshire, who have generously shared their experiences. We tried out How does it look? and Talking together in our work with people in Wiltshire, borrowed and adapted Making Connections, and borrowed the content of Who is missing… and What does it mean to us from local workshops and interviews. We are grateful to the people who gave us the benefit of their reflections and to Julie Martin and Sue Redmond who arranged our schedule and hosted our inquiry.

The six practices we outline here are not our inventions, though we have adapted them in our own work to fit our purposes and personalities. They are drawn from a variety of efforts to focus the judgement and creativity of people with diverse interests and perspectives on difficult social problems. Where we can, we provide links to more extensive descriptions.

To read about the context for this work, download *Conversations about inclusive & sustainable communities* from this site.

We would be happy to hear about how you use these practices and your suggestions for making this document more useful. To contact us:

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All citizens will be better off when our society can mobilize adequate responses to make significant local progress on three globally significant challenges:

- Tackling **climate change** with sufficient comprehension and effort to make a timely difference.
- Building a **sustainable economy** that makes good use of local resources to offer everyone a decent living within the limits of our planet.
- Cultivating the resilience and productive energy that results from respectful and affirmative efforts to increase **social inclusion**.

To engage these challenges both local and central governments take responsibility to join civic leaders in searching for better and better answers to these three questions:

How can we assure that there are adequate public funds invested in ways that keep improving local ability to offer all citizens the capacities to live as they would value living?
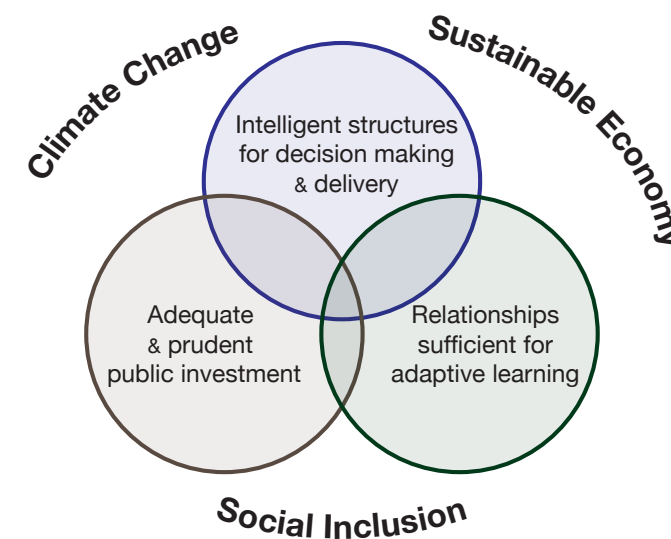
How do we design and operate structures adaptive enough to achieve their mission, take account of the three challenges, and open themselves to generate innovation based on local and global knowledge?

How do we develop relationships among people with differing roles, conflicting interests and different perspectives that are sufficient to make steady progress on learning to meet the three challenges?

There is abundant discussion of the three challenges from many perspectives and plenty of guidance about how to structure decision making and delivery. Following this guidance and engaging these challenges calls on civil society and public authority leaders to productively engage a growing number and diversity of people in thinking and working together, a task made more difficult by a climate of austerity and uncertainty. This booklet outlines six practices that can help develop relationships good enough to support the adaptive learning necessary to make and implement prudent judgments about public money and service design and operate intelligent government and civic structures.

Including one or more of these practices in local planning and development processes doesn't cost much money but it does take valuable time. Local leaders need to weigh the investment against the potential benefits of bringing new voices into conversation with one another and increasing mutual understanding of common ground and real differences as a source of ideas for action.

Adaptive learning matters because addressing the three challenges requires making sense of new and often disruptive information, generating new ways to proceed, relating productively to people with different interests, and changing personal habits and expectations. Without the support of good relationships that encompass different and often conflicting interests and perspectives, adaptive learning is seriously hindered.

Climate Change — Sustainable Economy — Social Inclusion

Intelligent structures for decision making & delivery

Adequate & prudent public investment

Relationships sufficient for adaptive learning

How does it look to you?

In an overscheduled world, most meetings must focus on navigating their agendas or persuading participants of the benefits of a course of action, most opportunities for public comment are managed to assure everyone a fair chance to speak, and many efforts to gather information are structured by carefully designed surveys and questionnaires. This practice complements these valuable, well defined and familiar processes by **purposely creating time to listen openly for another person's perspective on a matter of interest.**

Poor appreciation of other's perspectives and interests can lead to disengagement, unproductive conflict, and poorly designed structures and policies. Perspectives vary with different roles, different values, and different life experiences. Thoughtfully choosing someone who seems significantly different from you in those dimensions and listening carefully to discover how they see a local situation that matters can provide deeper understanding. The point is not to agree or disagree or to look for opportunities to teach or persuade. The point is to suspend judgement and personal agenda for an hour and seek to look at the situation through the other person's eyes.

Principles

Create transparency and trust about the purpose and the process of the interview.

Suspend your internal voice of judgment to see the situation through the eyes of the person you are with. What matters at this point is not whether you agree or approve but that you to learn to see the situation through the other person's eyes.

Access your ignorance. Dare to ask very few open questions. As the conversation unfolds, pay attention to and trust the questions that occur to you; don't be afraid to ask simple questions or questions you think may reveal a lack of some basic knowledge.

Listen appreciatively. What capacities and strengths are revealed by this person's account of their experience and conclusions? What values, different from your own, are important to this person? What aspects of the situation does the person draw attention to that you have not considered or considered and dismissed? What leads the person to judgements that conflict with your own?

Listen for possibilities. Be open to insight: new ways to understand what the situation calls for. Notice new ideas or the seeds of new ideas. Notice questions and challenges worth pursuing

further in your own work.

Respect the power of presence and silence. One of the most effective ways to learn is to be fully present with the other person —and not to interrupt moments of silence.

Structure

Members of a task group identify people who hold a variety of roles and views and each do one or two interviews singly or in pairs. The group devotes an hour or two to making sense of what they have learned.

Process

Share a clear statement of your purpose with the person you have invited to help with your inquiry. The aim is for you to get a better understanding of the person's perspective on an issue that matters to both of you and the experiences and thinking that shape that perspective.

Agree on a place to meet that will support good listening. Allow about an hour.

Bring note-taking materials.

Arrive in time to relax, review the way you want to start the conversation and an opening question.

Imagine the best possible result of the time you have with this person, for the other person and for you.

During the interview, listen deeply, take notes, follow the principles. Notice distractions –your voice of judgement, a desire to offer advice or disagree, a feeling of defensiveness– and bring your attention back to listening for the other's experience.

Take some time immediately after the interview to reflect and write down your immediate impressions:

What struck me most?

What surprised me?

What touched me?

Is there anything I need to follow-up on?

Send the person you learned a thank you note or e-mail.

Variation

Listen to someone who depends on what you do in some way: someone you serve or supervise or contract with or collaborate with (This can be dif-ficult when the person has a very different sense of your contribution than you do.). Ask:

What is your most important objective, and how can I help you realize it? (What do you need me for?)

What criteria do you use to assess whether my contribution to your work has been successful?

If I were able to change two things in my area of responsibility within the next six months, what two things would create the most value and benefit for you?

Talking together locally about what matters

Many people share a common place with others but have few if any opportunities to think with them about the quality of their lives and the possibilities for action. Work and family demands can fill up our time and tire us. It's easy to be too busy or too reticent to begin a conversation about questions that could matter to our common life. It's easy to ride free by delegating responsibility for improving things to government or others who seem to enjoy or benefit directly from civic activity. This practice, **The World Café**, creates a simple structure that **intentionally invites a diverse group of people to discuss questions that matter**. The World Café provides an open framework that can increase understanding of common and divergent interests, surface and sometimes energize possibilities for shared action, and offers a chance to meet people in new ways.

This practice is an exercise in hosting: making person-to-person invitations; creating a comfortable setting for conversation; creating questions that invite divergent connections; and avoiding the temptation to try and use the practice to push the details of your own agenda.

Purpose

To bring a diverse group of local citizens together to explore questions that matter to building a more sustainable and inclusive community. This provides a chance to make sense of some of the interdependencies that shape local quality of life and may indicate possibilities for shared action.

Principle. When people turn to one another in their role as citizens and listen thoughtfully to one another's concerns, visions, and ideas, a sense of the whole community that orients positive action can emerge, often together with the energy to support this action.

Preparation

Time. 3 hours or more

Space. A comfortable and accessible place with round tables for groups of 4-6.

Materials. Paper suitable to write on to cover each tabletop (butcher's paper, flip chart paper, or sturdy paper tablecloths). Several different dark colored markers for each table. An outline map of the local area and a supply of sticky notes so people can locate where they live. Light refreshments.

Participants. Seek a diverse group of people from the same locality who are active in different ways on different issues. Think about people who are active in civil society and people who play informal leadership roles as well as those active in politics or local government and its advisory bodies. Personal invitations from a known and trusted person work best. If space allows, a group of up to 50 is not too large.

Questions.

The conversation is guided by questions that open opportunities for participants to talk about what they care about and listen for possible connections among their concerns. For example, this sequence of questions has been effective in exploring social inclusion from the point of view of older people and people with disabilities.

I. What is good about community life here and how do these good things work for older people and people with disabilities?

II. When we think about a good future for everyone in our communities, what do we want to keep and what do we want to be better?

III. How can we advance from here? What can citizens, and community and voluntary organizations do? How can the public sector help?

Etiquette

The conversation will be rich and interesting if people follow these guidelines:

> Focus on what matters
>
> Contribute your thinking
>
> Speak your mind and heart
>
> Listen to understand
>
> Link and connect ideas
>
> Listen together for insights and deeper questions
>
> Note key ideas and draw out connections on the table covering.

Sequence

As people arrive, greet them and ask them to locate themselves by placing a sticky note on the map.

Welcome people, review the questions, and introduce the etiquette.

State question **I**, ask people to introduce themselves to the others at their tables and spend 20 minutes on the first round.*

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*You can decrease the amount of time required by having fewer questions, fewer rounds, or somewhat shorter rounds.

Ask one person to remain as table host and the others to move to a different grouping. The table host welcomes travellers from other conversations and very briefly shares key insights from the previous conversations so that the newcomers can link and build their own ideas. Spend another 20 minutes on question **I**.

Invite a whole group conversation for about 10 minutes. Avoid table summaries; ask people to say what they have discovered or been reminded of that is especially meaningful. Record the key points on a poster.

Ask the table hosts to remain and others move to a different grouping. Introduce question **II** and repeat the process of two rounds of conversation and 10 minutes of large group conversation.

Call a 15 minute break. If wall space allows, ask groups to hang up the paper from their tables so that others can see the images of what has come up at the table.

Introduce question III and repeat the process of two rounds of conversation and 10 minutes of large group conversation. Ask people to clearly note possibilities for shared or mutually supportive action that they have identified.

Invite comments on what has come from the conversation.

More from…

For a detailed guide, download *Café to go* from /www.theworld-cafe.com/tools.html This site offers many other resources on conversational leadership.

What does this mean to us?

Good efforts to inform people about government policy and the three challenges produce a continuing flood of directives, ideas, data and efforts to persuade and influence.

Directing policy concepts –"The Big Society", "Personalisation", "Co-production"– rise and fall in currency. Thoughtful recommendations based on careful research and tables of potentially relevant data accumulate. Good use of the web and the creation of easy-read documents make more information than ever easily available to anyone with access to an internet connection and time to study. Simply keeping up with the flow is difficult, especially for people whose conviction that joined up action is necessary to progress leads them to track developments in several areas at once.

Beyond dealing with the volume of information, much of what's available is disruptive. Many key ideas can seem unfamiliar and abstract and getting our heads around what they mean and what action they call for benefits from time to talk about them without the immediate pressure of completing a task. Implications of the news about climate change, peak oil, and the future of the economy for ourselves and our children are troubling to contemplate. The persistence of many of the difficult problems of social inclusion and sustainable economic development, despite considerable investment and some progress, can be discouraging. This distance between the best practice called for in policy and the capacity to make it real in most people's lives is daunting. Plans to decrease public investment invite dismay if not cynicism born of distrust.

The pace of demand to respond to new information, the attention given its packaging and delivery, and accountability to meet deadlines make it easy to overlook an important reality: people need **opportunities to make sense and meaning of information and directions before they can act on them with commitment and imagination.**

Taking time and space to make sense would be a luxury if the three challenges could be met by following a proven blueprint to a well known destination. However, the three challenges demand social as well as technical innovation, call for changes in social norms and personal habits, and raise threats that motivate avoidance.

Taking an hour to map existing opportunities and supports that local people have to think with others about what the big ideas and flows of information mean for them can lead to creating more chances to build shared understanding and commitment to action.

Process

Gather a cross boundary group of active people for an hour meeting.

Ask people to identify opportunities that local people have to think and talk together about key ideas related to the local implications of the three challenges. For advisory groups and committees, think beyond the existence of the group to specifically identify how members engage in making sense and meaning of the ideas.

Each group member works alone for 2-3 minutes to generate a list of local opportunities by writing a brief description of each, one to a sticky note.

Collect the opportunities, reading them one at a time and roughly locating them along a continuum from thinking about the ideas themselves to identifying local practical examples. The poster on the facing page illustrates.

Take the remaining time to consider these questions:

> *How can we actively engage even more people with the opportunities we have?*
>
> *What additional possibilities are there for inviting local people to make sense of the three challenges?*

Thinking together about guiding ideas

Sponsor local presentations by people with well defined -even controversial- positions on key ideas

Widely debate locally meaningful statements of priority for local government investment & activity that interpret key ideas

Encourage & assist application for grant funds & recognition in national demonstrations & engage many in preparing applications

Engage a cross section of desired users in testing a digest of local data relevant to planning tasks for their relevance & usability

Assure that communications from local government make explicit links to accessible statements of key ideas

Offer awards for exemplary practical action on a key idea. Create a broadly representative committee of selectors

Make grant funds available for small local initiatives that implement key ideas. Engage many in review & selection on criteria that reflect key ideas

Assign & commission diverse people to prepare case studies of key ideas as they affect everyday life

Learning from current practical examples

Making connections

The three challenges are everybody's business but the press of routine creates the possibility that most people will assume that action is up to someone else.

There clearly are big decisions about land use, economic development, and transportation that have big impacts on sustainable local economies, social inclusion, and carbon footprints. And it is worth capturing the progress that becomes possible when people across a locality develop the habit of asking, **"How can we achieve our objectives in ways that address the three challenges?"**

This practice encourages everyone who makes an explicit plan for their department or association to consider connections between their particular objectives and the three challenges and make explicit commitments to pursing objectives that have a positive impact in ways that address each of the three challenges.

Purpose

This practice introduces a step after objective setting in the planning that local government departments and many civic organizations routinely do. It asks planners to stop and consider how achieving each objective can contribute to addressing each of the three challenges.

This question focuses decision maker's attention on both the potential effects of the achieved objective on the three challenges and on the way the department or association will go about pursuing the objective.

Process

Record each major goal or objective in the left column of the template on the facing page.

Orient yourselves by briefly reviewing your understanding of each of the three challenges.

Review each plan objective by asking…

> *When this objective is achieved, how will the results contribute to progress on increasing the sustainability of the local economy, increasing social inclusion, and tackling climate change?*

> *Is there any reasonable revision of this objective that would contribute more?*

Record a summary of your answers on the template.

Then look at each objective again and ask…

> *How can the way we implement action to achieve this objective contribute to progress on the three challenges?*

Record a summary on the template.

Objective	Sustainable economy	Social inclusion	Tackling climate change

Counting in local assets

The benefits of co-production are more and more widely recognized. Some of these benefits can be realized with changes in structure, procedure, information flow and incentives that can be planned and implemented with limited direct involvement by local citizens. In these situations, local government or service provider action sets new conditions and citizens adapt by behaving in new ways.

This practice takes co-production another step by **inviting local citizens to act as co-designers** of the means of making local progress on the three challenges while contributing to achieving objectives that promote public good. The aim is to map local knowledge of particular conditions and assets onto broader objectives and specify the roles local citizens and their associations can play in benefiting from their achievement.

Purpose

This practice involves local citizens in identifying assets relevant to meeting the three challenges and describing the roles those assets can play in making progress.

Process

Identify a locality that it's inhabitants identify with –typically a village or a neighbourhood (be careful of choosing political or administrative divisions that local people identify exclusively with local government).

Identify a host or small hosting group and a suitable place and time to meet for an hour and a half. Hosts agree to personally invite a diverse group of local people, including but not limited to "the usual suspects" as well as giving public notice.

Select an objective that is intended to positively affect the local community and is likely to address the three challenges (use the results of Committing to connections if you have them).

If there are more than 6-8 people, seat people in groups of 4-6 around tables with 3 sheets of poster paper and some pens.

Welcome people and briefly introduce the objective and the three challenges in no more than 5 minutes.

Ask the groups to take 15 minutes to discuss…

> *What would achieving this objective mean for our community? What could be gained? What might be lost?*

Record key points on a poster.

If there are multiple groups, take up to 10 minutes to hear key points from the group discussions.

Ask the groups to spend 15 minutes identifying local assets that could contribute to achieving the objective in a way that addresses the three challenges and listing them on a poster. Don't worry about whether or not these assets will commit to action, just identify who could contribute if they chose to. Think laterally about how these kinds of local assets could make a positive difference…

…local organizations and associations, both formally organized and informal (think beyond the obvious: associations usually are good channels of information and support for those involved; organizations can make decisions about

their own resources and services that can make a difference to many objectives)

…the knowledge and skills of local people (think about people whose capacities may be under-used as well as those currently engaged)

…the local economy (formal and informal) and local people's participation in the economic life of the area and nation

…the physical environment and those who take responsibility for it

…government investments and interactions at the local level

…others you can identify

If there are multiple groups, spend up to 10 minutes looking at the asset posters others have made.

Take 15 minutes to make a poster that identifies the different roles local people and their associations could play and actions they could take in achieving this objective in a way that makes progress on the three challenges. Don't worry about whether people or associations will commit to play these roles, just imagine what they might be.

If there are multiple groups, take 5 minutes to find out some of the discoveries people made by doing the poster.

Thank people and offer them a few moments for any comments they want to make on the meeting.

Collect and review the posters; make a summary of what the meeting discovered and distribute it to the participants.

Who is missing and how might we engage them?

Social inclusion is powerfully influenced by large scale economic and social structures. These structures shape everyday interactions: Whose voice is heard when priorities are set, policies shaped and plans made? Who is expected and supported to do the work of innovation necessary to meet the three challenges?

Meeting demands for consultation has diversified those at the table, but without conscious effort by those currently doing the work, a few people will hold responsibility to fully represent the interests and perspectives of many.

It can be easy for people who have found their way into civic participation to assume that the pathway to participation is smooth and well sign-posted. But many potentially important voices belong to people who don't see themselves as contributors.

It can be good to **practice social inclusion at the scale of local life**.

Purpose

To experience the benefits of practicing social inclusion on a personal scale.

Process

From time to time stop and ask…

> *Who do we talk about without their presence among us?*

> *Whose voices are least likely to be heard about the work that concerns us?*

> *Who is not present as an active contributor to our work?*

Then ask…

> *What steps can we take to make our work more directly inclusive?*

The pathway and list of supports on the right provide a way to review your current level of effort and some possibilities for action.

Invitation	Hospitality	Orientation	Roles
❏ We reach out person-to-person & ask clearly for involvement	❏ When necessary we assist people with transport & family care arrangements	❏ We offer necessary support so people understand how to be part of our work. Participation includes both contributing to the tasks & being involved as the person desires in the social dimensions of the group	❏ We identify something meaningful & useful to do for everyone who wants to remain involved with our work
❏ We lay a foundation for invitation by spending time listening to people in places where they are comfortable to discover what their interests & capacities are (see How does it look to you on page 4)	❏ We are purposeful about welcoming newcomers		
	❏ We attend to accessibility for people with sensory & mobility impairments.		
	❏ When we are uncertain about respectful ways to take account of cultural, disability related, or other differences we ask the people involved for guidance		

Knowledge	Practical help	Channels	Connections

- ❏ There are clear and manageable ways that people can contribute their ideas about the way the work is done
- ❏ People can get the background information to understand the group's work & how things work in the systems that shape the work

- ❏ We figure out how to match the person's capacities to the work that needs doing
- ❏ If desired, we make sure that people have access to a more experienced person who will act as a guide or coach

- ❏ We support people to see connections between their interests & capacities and our work as it will progress through time
- ❏ When it is possible & desired, we link people with others they identify with who are more involved in our work

- ❏ We prepare people to be well informed ambassadors and advocates for the work
- ❏ We encourage people to build their personal networks based on their involvement with the work
- ❏ We encourage people to reach out and bring others into our work

Supports that may be needed anywhere along the pathway

Adjustments
- ❏ When necessary we modify environments, procedures, & routines to provide what is required for people to participate effectively.

Personal Assistance
- ❏ When people require personal assistance we assure that they receive it in a way that does not take away from their dignity or diminish their participation.
- ❏ We honor people's preferences about who they choose to assist them & how they prefer to be assisted

Learning
- ❏ If necessary we offer people assistance in developing their knowledge & skills

Encouragement
- ❏ We hold high positive expectations that people will find ways to contribute.
- ❏ We help people to see their real abilities when lack of confidence might inhibit their participation.
- ❏ We encourage people to stretch a bit outside their comfort zone.

For more…

Designers have developed many useful practices for engaging diverse groups of people in exploring current experience, collaboratively defining socially worthwhile challenges and generating and testing new approaches . For a sampler, download a free copy of The Stanford D-School's **Bootstrap Bootleg** at http://dschool.stanford.edu/use-our-methods.

Margaret Wheatley (2009) T*urning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* London: Barrett-Kohler provides an approach to fruitful exploration of issues related to action on the three challenges through conversation and includes guides and resources to begin these conversations.

Join our conversation at http://inclusiveandsustainable.ning.com.