

# UNCONFERENCE

A time to raise your own issues



Facilitator Liane Fredericks introduces the Open Space principles

What can we learn when we take the time to inquire together?

## MAKING A SPACE FOR OPEN EXPLORATION

A moment within the busy schedule of the Planet Under Pressure conference for delegates to come together in inquiry around their own questions, concerns, issues & explorations

**Welcome to the Unconference!** One in a series of events designed to give us space for reflection, this session used Open Space as its operating system, offering each of us an opportunity to engage others in what we're most passionate about.

Sarah Cornell, Co-ordinator - Planetary Boundaries, at the Stockholm Resilience Centre in Sweden welcomed the group by saying: "What does it mean to enter an open space? It is a brave thing to step into a space of not knowing -- in a space of a conference where people are telling us what they know. It is our job to be curious, listen, explore ideas, The more conversations we can have to explore something new, the better off we are. We are grappling with how we link knowledge from different communities. We have some very discipline-bounded knowledge, we also have space for some radical ideas to be explored. Welcome -- thanks for unconferencing! I hope it will be a relaxing and

challenging space to a very full day. We are journeying into the unknown together and bringing our knowledge with us."

Participants were welcomed into Open Space as a place where they could bring the topics, issues, explorations and questions that haven't been covered in other parts of the conference. This was a time when they could put forward what they most wanted to discuss and invite others to join them.

There are four principles that operate during this process:

- **Whenever it starts, it starts.** If you call a session, it will begin when the others arrive.
- **Whoever comes are the right people.** Whoever shows up to your session are the people to meet with. Prepare to be surprised, as each participant brings their own unique take on things. So what if no one comes? Then you can either fold up your tent and join someone else, or consider



Sarah Cornell listening to convergence

Stepping into the space of not knowing can be easier when you carry both a question or a passion and a curiosity to find out. That's at the heart of great science. That's also at the heart of this Unconferencing process...

yourself a person well ahead of your time and take a quiet moment to deepen your thinking.

- **When it's over, it's over.** You might need to meet just for 15 minutes or it might go on for longer. So if the conversation is finished, go somewhere else, and if it's not finished, keep going.
- **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.** Rather Zen, but it works to help us keep curious about what we experienced.

These principles are matched by a law -- the **Law of 2 Feet** -- which says: if you are not contributing or being contributed to, then go somewhere you are. And that law creates two additional types of roles in the Open Space ecology (as well as topic hosts and all participants) -- **butterflies** (those who decide to take a quiet moment for themselves, but always end up having a fascinating time), and **bumblebees** (those who cross-pollinate between sessions).

Then participants were invited to post a topic in the "marketplace" and announce the conversations they were interested in hosting. Six topics came forward.

## The topics

- Action - at individual level & at community level - as well as ideas on creating solutions
- How can we be more inclusive while addressing global issues?
- Urgency. How can positive changes be made in a short space of time to meet the scale of challenges discussed at Planet Under Pressure?
- What's wrong with 'Sustainable Development' and what are the alternatives to this concept?
- What should we say to Rio +20? How should we define the international framework for sustainable development?
- ACTION (a second group on the same topic)

## Convergence -- what happened?

Participants were so engrossed in conversation they had to be encouraged out of their huddles. For the closing session everyone was invited to sit in a circle and to share what stood out for them in the conversations. What had shifted inside them and where were they sitting now?

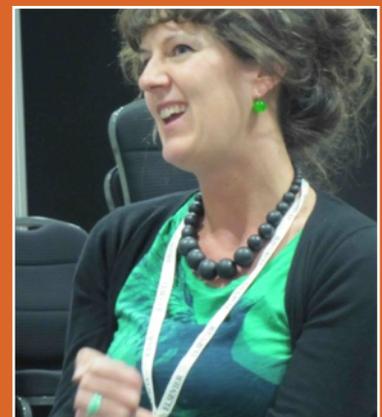
Some of the offerings:

- Valuable alternatives to "Sustainable Development" are part of the conversation here in this room. I'm looking forward to getting them on the agenda for the larger, more traditional conference.
- I saw the sign 'Open Space' and I was curious. When I looked in, I wanted to go out again but then I was ushered in and I stayed. I've been inspired by the approach of giving people the chance to bring their own agendas.
- It was an interesting group. Think of action in the context of your competencies and within the field of your influence.
- Which comes first, the Action or the Awareness?
- An inspiring and humbling experience being here in contrast to the emptiness present in some of the plenary sessions.
- The conversation in these groups is reflective of the way that conversation is occurring in the world at large - namely unstructured, and lacking direction and leadership. Somehow the ideas are not getting across and translating to action.
- A very interesting discussion to have. Uncoordinated in many ways with no process for defining the content or leadership. Met some really interesting people with whom I look forward to staying in contact and continuing this conversation.
- The concept of action versus raising awareness. It's interesting to see how the emotional engagement to the conference went up in here.
- I was walking past a table and I got sucked into a conversation. I wonder what conversations we are not having. We don't put love and power in the same continuum, but they are. I wonder how we include everyone in these kinds of conversations.
- Not many people came and talked about what I wanted to talk about. Maybe I framed the question in the wrong way. It is interesting to listen to the frustration people are having. I found my conversation with Nick a really valuable one.
- I didn't feel like talking at all today. But I have a question and what you asked was

# OPEN SPACE



Facilitator James Ede (right) joins in



## What happens when you open space?

Another name for this way of working might be "participant led sessions", an opportunity for anyone to propose the topic of a conversation session and see who might come to contribute their expertise and thinking. Often we are surprised at how much we can expand our thinking when we think together. More:

[www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org)

# WHAT CONVERSATIONS ARE WE NOT HAVING?

**“I’ve been inspired by the approach of giving people the chance to bring their own agendas.”**



what I wanted to explore anyway. I did a lot of reflection and I got a lot out of it - like naming the processes. It was just so good to talk to people and to listen to things other than presentations. We had so many good things happening here at the same time. Too many! It's so relaxing to finally talk to people and have some laughs. Maybe tomorrow we'll talk more.

- I like discussions! From discussion, you take things home in your heart, and then you can do what inspires you. This is what makes change possible.
- I'm really glad for the opportunity for the chance to share my topic. I really want to push people to act now and to influence the change that we want.
- It was funny to see that our group was formed out of frustration. We are at this conference and finding that we are still not getting to the key points. This is entering the process from a negative point where it's hard to move towards seeing things from a positive point of view. We are the key actors... we can do many things and we are not always aware of these things. Everything starts with enthusiasm... I hope we can keep things moving in this direction.
- I came with frustration about how conversation has been happening, but I think we have approached it through the divergent/convergent process here. I'm inspired to see that there are people here willing to take this on. If I hadn't come to this session then I would have gone away with a different perspective of the conference.

- I have a desire for action, and inspiration growing out of frustration. I was transformed through this process. Thank you all for sharing.
- This way of working needs to be at the Rio+20 meeting!

**We get a sense of spaciousness & grounding meeting each other around what we're really passionate about. These connections help to strengthen the rest of our conference work.**



Cindy Sundborg & Liane Fredericks harvesting



**What is it you are most passionate about?**

## Bridges to the Future

How would you make use of the intellectual power of 2500+ of the world's leading experts on global change, sustainability, development and resilience?

Amidst the traditional conference keynote addresses and breakout sessions, we piloted interactive sessions designed to provoke dialogue between business, policy and science and generate novel solutions to pressing problems. But we must also develop fresh perspectives on how social sciences and natural sciences interact. These participatory sessions

are called **Bridges to the Future**. In comparison to a scientific presentation, these sessions happened in conversation and were recorded in that way.

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For more about participatory process and the Art of Hosting practice:

[www.artofhosting.org](http://www.artofhosting.org)

