

Collaborative Climate Futures:

community and
academic approaches to
climate action

Session Outline



This collaboration was born out of our participation in the first cohort of the CIVIS University Alliance Master's Programme in Transdisciplinary Studies of Climate, Environment and Energy (TRACEE). The first semester of this program brought together 39 educators from CIVIS allied and partner universities to teach 16 students coming from different academic backgrounds to tackle climate change, resilience, adaptation, and apply transdisciplinary methods in the process. This session is our opportunity to highlight how we have already started to work together to solve these problems, and inspire other educators to join us in this mission.

Tackling the climate crisis is no longer up to a single academic discipline, profession, or country. From within a classroom, students can specialize in climate adaptation and climate change science, but tangible social and behavioral change comes from communities understanding their power to change the effects of climate change today, and advocate for greener tomorrows. How can we create this bridge between academia and the locality?

This session included the participation of Giulia Raffaelli and Susana Scott Ayala, students of the TRACEE Master's Programme in Study Track 8 and 9 respectively; the participation of Kevin Noone, Professor Emeritus of Chemical Meteorology at the Department of Environmental Science at Stockholm University; and Alasdair Skelton, Professor of Geochemistry and Petrology at Stockholm University, as moderator for this panel.

Session Summary

This session took place at the University of Bucharest Faculty of Law on the 11th of June. About 30 people (students, faculty, administrative) came to the session to listen and engage. The panel was divided into three main questions:

01

What does community action for climate change look like?

Diversity of project configurations, insight into the importance of context, differences in project timelines and applied tools

In this question we introduced three different projects and their contexts, hearing from established national organizations, ongoing confrontations with communities and local governments, and developing initiatives on optimistic paths. There is no single composition that defines community climate action. Though the understanding that the diversity of these projects and their applications can bring us closer to adaptation and mitigation, we can act collectively from different disciplines, audiences, and countries toward a common goal.

02

What did you grow from?

Lessons learned and ideas that didn't go through or had to be adapted

In this segment we highlighted an concealed element of climate action: resilience. Including these reflections on how to engage with difficult audiences, and navigate through climate skepticism and denial, but still actively participate in different projects shared the reality of this experience, and hopefully set up an uplifting platform for future projects to emerge. Understanding that not every initiative will succeed in its first iteration, and being able to adapt to conditions as they arise is a fundamental element of authentic community action.

03

What milestones do you want to celebrate?

Best practices, recommendations, and success stories from your experience

For the final section, each panelist shared success stories and achievements that have come from the engagement in community. We heard from the Thriving Earth Exchange's growth in the last few years; current and future outreach programs that Retake Roma has activated for the long-term care of the Aniene River; and capacity-building strategies focused on funding and public policy for youth projects in Latin America.

Session Highlights

KEVIN NOONE

What community action for climate change looks like to me is colored very much by my work with the Thriving Earth Exchange. With over 350 community science projects in more than 13 countries around the world, Thriving Earth Exchange turns doing science on its head in order to achieve results that concretely improve the lives of people now, and not in some possible future scenario.

Thriving Earth Exchange has developed a process of co-creation that starts with listening and learning. Representatives from a community with challenges, needs and dreams sit down with a representative (a Fellow) from Thriving Earth Exchange, and together work out whether science can be leveraged to help the community address its challenges. If so, the Thriving Earth Exchange Fellow then taps into the 60,000+ membership of the American Geophysical Union (and increasingly into the membership of the American Bar association for legal issues) to find a person or people with two distinct skill sets. One is the scientific (or legal) skills to help the community address their challenges. The second is a more interesting and in some ways rarer skill set: The ability to interact respectfully, collaboratively and ethically with non-specialists, and to respect the community members as equal experts in arriving at potential solutions to their challenges.

Thriving Earth Exchange views access to science and its tools and capabilities as a human right. Many of the communities that work with Thriving Earth Exchange are or have been disenfranchised in some way – economically, culturally, racially. Many have never before interacted with a scientist. Thriving Earth Exchange empowers both communities and scientists, enabling them to co-create solutions that positively impact lives.

That's what community action for climate change looks like to me.

Session Highlights

SUSANA SCOTT - TRACEE TRACK 9

In 2022, Viaje al Microcosmos de Nuevo León, a local community group, started visiting the Santa Catarina River in Monterrey, Mexico. This overlooked natural heaven is trapped between two of the most transited streets in the center of the city and has limited entry points due to the perception of unsafety and abandonment of the area. In our first visits we found a green refuge for riparian birds, a stable population of endangered turtle species, kilometers of green algae braiding a habitat for fish, all hidden in plain sight.

To answer the panel question, *what did you grow from?* I talked about an experience in learning from our mistakes and redefining what your climate activism would look like. As a first prototype in the process of bringing people to understand the hidden beauty of the river we decided to create a 'portal' into the river with natural elements collected there. We organized leaves, rocks, weeds, and algae samples into a 'Tipi' and placed it in the center of the city, inviting people to enter this hut and experience the serenity and coolness that we were granted in the river visits. Then the problems arose. Monterrey has an average summer temperature of 34°C and this immersive experience quickly became a dark and smelly cave that sustained the generalized perception of the river we were trying to combat. This experience gave us the capacity to reframe the mission and further actions we designed to stay true to our experience.

Our group aims to bring people to the river, bringing the river to the city defeats the purpose of curiosity, independence, exploration, and sense of place. Growing from this experience, and promising never to trap people in a river sauna again, we have ratified the Santa Catarina River as a place to unite, with more 3,000 people participating in these events since we started.



Session Highlights

GIULIA RAFFAELLI, TRACEE TRACK 8

I volunteer with Retake Roma, an association that works on urban regeneration and environmental education through a bottom-up approach. The idea is that citizens and volunteers take care of their own neighborhoods while also building a stronger sense of community. Today there are more than ninety local Retake groups across Rome, and the project has also spread to other Italian cities



In the third question, If I think about what I'd like to celebrate, is that we're learning to focus more on long-term projects of environmental education, working with the same classes throughout the school year instead of meeting them just once. This makes a real difference, because when you spend more time with students they start to trust you, they feel freer to ask questions, and they get more involved. It also becomes easier to bring in teachers and parents.

One of the projects we're working on right now uses storytelling as a way of exploring the students' own neighbourhoods. They walk through the area, listen to local volunteers, collect waste, and gather stories about the history and social life of those places. Through this, they end up seeing familiar places from a completely new perspective, and I think that shift in perspective is exactly what we need if we want to tackle the environmental crisis.

If there's one thing I've really understood along the way, it's that changing a place physically isn't enough to change how people relate to it. You also need to change their perceptions and their emotions, and that only happens through community engagement and by building real relationships.

Audience Engagement

Engaging with the audience that would end up assisting this session was a priority in the planning stage, which is why a Mentimeter tool was applied to collect questions from anyone, at any time of the session, and to be able to answer them collectively in the last section of the panel, and share them afterwards. Including this element allowed us to understand the expectations of the audience, and come closer in the experience of facilitating best practices for climate action through community engagement. The following questions are those received through the tool during the session, answered after the event.

WAS THERE A TIME WHERE YOU HAD TO FACE LEGAL CONFLICTS/CONSEQUENCES? HOW DID YOU HANDLE THAT?

When working in Latin America, the risk perception around legality is very present. Something that has helped us to continue our action is working under a movement and not under individual identity. With this 'strength in numbers', it is easier to protect each other and still partake in political activism, rallying, and public policy.

WHAT RELATION BETWEEN COMMUNITY PROJECTS AND PUBLIC AUTHORITY?

Community projects are glued together by a necessity. That could be social support, security, or solving a particular challenge that could be related to climate change, or not. The foundation for community work then becomes 'we want to solve this problem that affects us'. There could be positive or opposing forces within public authority towards solving the problem. Starting at a level as close as possible to the challenge can strengthen the community. Like with a neighborhood group rather than the Mayor's office.

HOW DO YOU STAY MOTIVATED WHEN THINGS KEEP GETTING WORSE?

Besides community, joy and celebration can keep us afloat during hardship. Looking back to see how much your project or initiative has grown, changed, and adapted through the years and sharing those milestones with others is part of sharing that motivation and will to keep going. Even if things seem stacked against you, getting together is something worth celebrating.

IN WHAT WAY CAN YOU BUILD TRUST WITH A COMMUNITY THAT DOES NOT BELIEVE IN CLIMATE CHANGE? ARE THERE CONCRETE ACTIONS OR THINGS YOU CAN DO?

From experience in the Thriving Earth Exchange, Kevin found working with core values (like honesty or responsibility...) that I may share with the audience may unlock and even open the door to further conversation. Similar to this experience, in Mexico we work with leisure, curiosity, and above all, respect towards people trying to break their own perceptions of climate change. With this common ground it's easier to talk.

Audience Engagement

HOW CAN WE BEST COMMUNICATE TO PEOPLE SO THEY START LOOKING FOR COMMUNITY ACTION?

A personal, close to home example is a great inspiration toward action, and easy find as a cascading effect of the climate crisis. Getting involved in solving climate change might seem like more than one person can take on, but getting together to act against water scarcity, biodiversity loss, increasing inequality, or climate disinformation allows for local impact towards a global problem.

HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY CHANGES IN WORKING IN COMMUNITY ACTION/SCIENCE IN THE PAST YEARS? ARE PEOPLE MORE WILLING TO LISTEN AND PARTICIPATE OR THE OPPOSITE?

In the case of Italy, COVID-19 presented a new challenge in volunteer participation. In Mexico and in the US (in the context of the Thriving Earth Exchange) participation is accelerating. Climate action has a strong foundation in community. Part of what has moved people to participate has been their own encounters with climate change science, political clashes regarding climate policy, and the identification of the cascading effects on health, economics, food availability, and inequality. Advocating for climate change is now in the best interest of everyone, which has fueled a lot of local projects.

DO YOU SEE COMMUNITY SCIENCE AS A GAP BRIDGING INSTANCE TO DRIVE AWAY FROM CLIMATE DENYING IN POLITICS?

Community science can certainly help climate denial, but isn't a guarantee of success. Sometimes people will be more interested in the problem at hand (water scarcity, rising temperatures, more frequent wildfires) and will still refuse to relate it to climate change. Meeting over a foundation of trust, and respect can open up the conversation around climate change. Interacting with people where they live, and not in some ivory tower, does make you more trustworthy as a communicator.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR WILL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION NOT ONLY CHALLENGES YOUR INTELLECTUAL, BUT ACTUALLY THREATENS YOUR LIFE?

When working on environmental action, understanding the risks to personal and collective safety can endorse the application of preemptive security measures. Personal information, addresses, financial details, and planning documents should always be protected or encrypted if communicated online.

Understanding that these measures protect you and the people around you is not meant to be discouraging, as it will reinforce the base on which you and your community can work on collectively, trusting and caring for each other is as important as fighting for change.

Closing Statements

BY ALASDAIR SKELTON

ACTIONS FOUNDED ON CARE FOR OTHERS ARE STEPPING STONES ON A PATHWAY TO A BETTER FUTURE FOR ALL.

In the early days of TRACEE, when a Master's Programme in Transdisciplinary Studies of Climate, Environment and Energy, created by educators from 13 universities across Europe and Africa, for (and now with) scholars from a multiple academic backgrounds, was no more than a wild idea, I could never have imagined the joy of moderating such an inspiring session - a session that was co-created by scholars and educators in the spirit of TRACEE.

In the race against the climate crisis, caring hands-on actions, such as Viaje al Microcosmos de Nuevo León, Retake Roma and Thriving Earth Exchange, extend far beyond solving a community challenge. Their benefits not only reach the communities themselves and the volunteers who work together with them to co-create meaningful solutions, but also to the many who listen afterwards to stories of successes and failure, of sadness and joy, and of fear and hope. These are the stories we shared in that space in the fair city of Bucharest. We who share in these stories, find within them, our own calls to action.

And actions, founded on care for others, are stepping stones on a pathway forward from a mindset of nature-culture duality to one of nature-culture entwinement - a mindset that will ultimately protect all that we love.

My heartfelt thanks to the panel participants, the audience, and the wonderful people of Bucharest, Romania.