

The Sustainability Fair: Building a Grassroots Movement Around Community

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Abstract

People everywhere should be doing everything they can to be more sustainable so that climate change can begin to be mitigated. We are already feeling the negative effects of climate change, and they are thoroughly documented. Despite this people are not changing to be more sustainable fast enough. Many either reject the idea of climate change, do not know what they could do, or are unaware of how climate change affects them. Sustainability also impacts more than just climate change. Living more sustainably can have positive impacts economically as well as positive impacts on human health. In a world that is so connected and with such a wealth of information, we can no longer afford to have communities in the dark. Leaders need to rise on a community level to make a difference. Leadership is an aspect of an organization or a project that can elevate it to new heights. A leader is not everything, but the difference a good leader makes is universal. In this paper I will teach you about organizing a sustainability fair that educates and engages marginalized communities that typically are not included in the conversation on how to save our world.

My Epiphany to Sustainability

My parents got me my first passport shortly after I was born. From then I traveled with my family to visit relatives in El Salvador every other year or so. The memories I have of visiting my father's family in a small lake town and my mother's family in a small village with a creek running through it are some of my fondest childhood memories. However, in the early 2000's we stopped going and I did not visit again until 2015. With the rose-tinted glasses of childhood removed I saw something very different than what I saw growing up. The environment had changed, and you could see how environmental degradation had negatively affected people. I then understood why so many people leave for the United States to find a better life and that a lack of sustainability principles, that if embraced years ago, could have made a difference in how much damage was done.

Many people from El Salvador, and countless other nations now live in the United States, but no country is immune to climate change. Sustainability is and can be for everyone, regardless of national origin, and people need to make sustainable changes that will make a difference for humanity and for the planet. This can save them money and reduce their carbon footprint so that they can live better lives. My community is one of many that is a part of the shifting demographics of the country and "more than eight in ten Latinos (84%) think global warming is happening" (Leiserowitz, Cutler, and Rosenthal 2017 p.3). However, according to the same study by Leiserowitz, Cutler, and Rosenthal, 71% of Latinos have never been contacted by anybody trying to reduce global warming. There is a great potential to make an impact on sustainability attitudes in the United States through a grassroots movement that will inspire and teach people in marginalized communities to reduce their carbon footprint. They have the right to feel empowered and take change into their own hands by first starting at home.

What can people do?

To help people become more conscious of their lifestyle you need to engage them in a way that makes sustainability mean something to them. People need to see that sustainability is valuable in their lives. A strong case for integrating sustainability into the lives of the community needs to be able to be tailored to the specific nuances of any community. With this in mind I came up with an idea that can blend educational presentations with fun and engaging activities. The idea is to do a Sustainability Fair; the inspiration came from my parents and how they told me that growing up the whole community would be excited for the holidays because that's when

the festivals happened and when there was a fair in town. A fair brings people together and is an opportunity to let them walk away enriched. Some examples of the activities you should consider are a clothing swap, a grocery dash, and DIY home sustainability projects just to name a few. Later in the paper I will elaborate more on how to execute the activities but here is a brief overview of their purpose. The clothing swap would highlight the impact of what we wear and how extending the life of our things helps the planet. The grocery dash would show that what we eat has its own impact, and that reducing environmental stress can be healthy and nutritious. You can also have a station on energy usage and demonstrate how small adjustments to homes can make them more energy efficient and help people save money through a DIY video showcase with demonstrations. These are some of the baseline activities every sustainability fair should have as they are relevant to just about every community. From there you can structure the activities to better fit any marginalized community you are working with. For the remainder of this paper I will be focusing the fair examples that are culturally relevant to heavily Latin American communities, but the principles and ideas can work anywhere and will be effective in your communities too.

Sustainability should be for everyone

The principle of this endeavor is to show that sustainability is for everyone. So why focus on marginalized communities as opposed to making a standardized sustainability fair that would be ready to be packaged and distributed everywhere? In the United States there are so many varieties of cultural and social groups that have participated in and are participating in sustainability efforts. Research has shown that of countries surveyed, grassroots sustainability efforts, have been led by an overwhelmingly white majority. Having a homogenous effort can be detrimental to spreading a message of sustainability for all and can create barriers to participation in communities that differ from the majority group. The lack of diversity also makes it so that the majority group is less capable of relating to, less likely to interact with, and potentially less likely to be accepted as an authority in the target community. The theories behind these barriers to entry “integrate aspects of cultural and material explanation...[and] assume that environmental values are similar across groups, and that differences in participation are driven by histories of oppression and exclusion, bias within...movements, and feelings of powerlessness among marginalized groups” (Ferguson and Lovell 2015 p. 2-3). A big part of the sustainability fair concept is to strengthen communities that have a lot of members that are a part of marginalized

minority groups. Diversity in sustainability efforts are essential if real change is going to be made. The interests of organizations need to better reflect the people they aim to help and not just the people that started the organizations. The hopes of bringing people together under the banner of sustainability will strengthen sustainability efforts and really make sustainability for everyone.

Grassroots Sustainability benefits from Diversity

Hispanics and Latinos are the largest growing demographic group so for the purpose of the sustainability fair I have decided to focus on topics that are salient to a Hispanic and/or Latino community because they are also one of the most heavily impacted groups when it comes to the effects of climate change. These communities are left out of the conversation far too often considering that “minorities are more likely to live in areas that are burdened by extreme pollution... [for example] of the 6 million people living within three miles of America’s coal-fired power plants, 39 percent are minorities” (Hertsgaard 2012 p. 4). The percentage is disproportionate to what the percentage of the nation’s population is made up of minorities. The cruel irony of this is how many people that are minorities are in favor of mitigating climate change and how many people see it as an important issue and a threat to their livelihoods. Research shows that the attitudes of Hispanics and African Americans are overall “the most ardent supporters of climate and energy policies and are more likely...to voice support for these policies even when it means personally incurring greater costs” (Elias et al 2018 p.2). This same body of research goes on to state that Hispanics are more likely to say the Earth is warming because of human activity and that Hispanics view climate change as a legitimate concern and support policies related to combatting climate change. The statistics of people affected by the impacts of climate change are disproportionate in more areas than just living near coal-fired power plants as well. Research has also shown that “people of color have been found to be disproportionately susceptible to heat waves, extreme weather episodes, environmental degradation, and labor market displacements” (Elias et al 2018 p. 2). These are just some of the impacts of the many symptoms of climate change. The last reason I will give for why it is important to engage Hispanics and Latinos on matters of sustainability is because of how ubiquitous this group is in American society. With at least 50 million of the United States’ roughly 300 million residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino, it is an unwise decision to continue to allow this group to be underrepresented.

If an organization can tap into Hispanics and Latinos to form grassroots movements, the effects would be noticed as significant because of how unique it is and because of the potential volume. Grassroots movements are ideal for a bottom-up approach that seeks to engage people at the community level because they “may be able to innovate and adapt to changing conditions in ways and at a pace that the inertia of large institutions rarely permits” (Ferguson and Lovell 2015 p. 2). With this in mind, it is important to consider your stakeholders and partners in your efforts to create a successful community-based sustainability fair. By working with your community, you need to keep in mind that you will not only be distributing knowledge, but you will also be collecting and creating knowledge with your community that will advance your goals. As you get to know the community you work with, you will “[uncover] meanings, identifications, and how the innovative activity weaves in and out of people’s lives” (Smith and Seyfang 2013 p.828). Just as the sustainability movement needs to embrace diversity, your movement needs to be diverse as well. Sustainability movements need to improve their demographic composition, but because the focus of the sustainability fair is to include underrepresented groups you will need to make sure to bring extra attention to ideological diversity as well as a diversity of needs. Different perspectives and ideas on achieving different goals strengthen any movement. It allows for another level of creativity that can produce results that a single person or a narrow scope of thought would not be able to conceive.

Stakeholders, the DNA of the Sustainability Fair

One of the best ways to build up a diverse set of ideologies within a community is to approach a variety of groups that have different interests and objectives regarding the well-being of your selected community. An example of this is to have participants, and partners from all walks of life in your community. The first group you will want to approach is the general population of your community. The everyday people that may or may not be affiliated with larger groups. These people serve as the DNA of the sustainability fair and can help guide the direction of the fair or show what values are most salient in that community. You will want to approach local small and medium businesses, regardless of whether or not their owners reside in your target community. Local small and medium business owners and leaders have often invested their livelihoods into the community and they share space and values within your community. They may also be a source of employment for members of your community or provide them with services. Small and medium businesses live at the will of their community and

it is an opportunity for them to be involved and build a different kind of relationship. Another set of groups that should be approached are local religious organizations. These organizations are often pillars of their community, not only as a place where residents gather; but also as a source of guidance and as a fountain of community driven efforts. For example, religious organizations may often already have existing projects to help the poor in their community and do work through charity. These are projects that sustainability principles could be applied to and would be a way to engage this part of your community. The next stakeholder you can pursue is any other organization that is focused on any specific issue. This means secular charities, local environmental groups, an any interest groups that gather around a singular objective. These groups will enrich the ideological diversity of the coalition you are building. The last group I will mention can either be asked to join or can serve as a resource to consult. This is local and municipal government. The reason this group is not one of the core stakeholders is because of the way they operate. While they may be extremely helpful in operations; their intents and purposes may be politically driven. It is important to tread carefully around the issue of politics because sustainability to mitigate climate change does not need to be a political issue.

Grassroots movements work

Some researchers have stated that grassroots efforts often succeed because they embody a “culture composed of democracy, openness, diversity, practical experimentation, social learning, and negotiation” (Hossain 2016 p. 975). Hossain goes on to write that what makes grassroots efforts different, and what will also make your efforts different, is that the goal is to fulfill a social need, the effort is based in an ideological commitment, it is protected by values and culture, it is owned by the community, and more. Participation from all of these organizations will also help them be successful and give the opportunity for new partnerships amongst themselves. Part of the project requires stakeholders to form a coalition, but they can work together on more than just making the community sustainable, executing a successful sustainability fair has several levels of value that it can add to a community.

Building a Fair

The execution of a sustainability fair is not as simple and straightforward as it may seem. Within the greater concept of the fair there are many smaller tasks that must be completed before you can move to the next phase of the project. I have broken these tasks into five phases. The first phase is getting to know the community. The second phase is finding and choosing partners.

The third phase is planning the actual fair, with the help of partners and stakeholders. The fourth phase is addressing the logistical concerns of hosting a fair. Lastly, the fifth, is executing the sustainability fair.

Step One: Know your community

The first phase in creating a sustainability fair is perhaps one of the most important. This is getting to know the community so that you can share a vision with them. Going into this effort the vision is that sustainability is for everyone; no matter who they are, where they're from, or what they do. The vision can change and adjust to better fit the community, but it is important to be on the same page. It may seem simple but the relationship you build with your community is what will carry your project and without them the sustainability fair would be impossible. Building those relationships within the community and earning the trust of your target community will prove to be difficult because you will “need support not only on one occasion but also all along the value chain” (Hossain 2016 p. 977). Essentially, the community will be providing this support at every step of the way. When you need to build partnerships, they will come from or be nominated by the community. When it is time to plan your fair, these and other members of the community will be the ones helping you as well as attending the fair. When you are figuring out the logistical details your community will be one of the biggest factors. You will need to accommodate them so that everything happens when it needs to. Lastly, is the actual day of the fair. That day will be all about your community and your joint efforts to make things better.

Finding reasons for getting to know your community is simple. The real work in this task comes in how you will accomplish a potentially daunting task, especially with the knowledge that a bottom-up approach relies on community input for success. One method is networking. Grassroots community efforts such as the sustainability fair are not led by a central entity. The leadership structure is not hierarchical, instead it is more lateral where there are multiple opportunities for people to steer forwards. The strength of networking is that it “helps to lobby, to know best practices, and to develop standard and institutionalize learning” (Hossain 2016 p.977). Networking effectively will require a strong communication strategy and preparation so that when the time comes expertise, confidence, and charisma can be expressed. Networking can be done in person or online, formally or informally, and with individuals or with groups. With a plan it is possible to integrate the community to form a successful coalition.

Step Two: Make some friends

Now that you know your community it is time to proceed to phase two of making a real sustainability fair. Finding and picking the right partners will be helpful in continuing the momentum achieved from getting to know the community. Forming partnerships has the potential to provide your coalition with resources, ideas, and credibility. Ideally your partners will be leaders in the community or members of the community that are interested in or care for your cause. Pursuing these types of partnerships will strengthen your attempts to win over the community but also these types of partnerships typically are not as difficult to form. Some examples of partners are local business leaders, group or organizational leaders, and members of existing institutions in the community. By institutional leaders I mean members of local educational institutions or leaders from religious institutions. Members of a larger whole that have autonomy in how they are free to express themselves. Adding existing leadership structures to your coalition will make it stronger because of the diversity in thought as well as the increased legitimacy within the community.

However, earning the alliance of community leaders will require expertise. It is essential to not only be an expert in sustainability, but to show the leaders why they should join you. You need to be able to teach them about sustainability fairs before you can ever have the first one. If your partners are business leaders it is important to show how their participation will be a financially wise decision. When you seek out local groups and organizations it would be helpful to reach out to interest groups that already align with your mission. They can be a driving factor when recruiting other leaders, they may already have other leaders in their ranks, and they may even be able to offer advice and assistance with approaching other leaders. If your partners are members of an organization or an institution it is best to appeal to their values and show how sustainability aligns with that.

Step Three and Four: Plan, Plan, and Plan

Phase three of the sustainability fair is to meet with your coalition of leaders and plan. This phase also combines with phase four, which is figuring out the logistical details. At this point of the sustainability fair you should have an idea of what you want to accomplish, you should be able to see as a group that everybody in the community can embrace sustainability principles and that sustainability is for everyone. During this phase it is important to define goals as well as the milestones that pave the way to the goals. Some of the logistical details that need

to be considered are when the sustainability fair will happen, the location of the sustainability fair, and the activities that will be a part of the fair.

Teaching the members of the community is the most meaningful part of a sustainability fair and the ultimate goal of this endeavor. Education through action will ultimately change the perception on of their ability to impact the world around them. Education through action has the power to change their reality. Some of the activities mentioned earlier in this paper are a clothes swap, a grocery dash, and a DIY video showcase on making the home more energy efficient. These activities are all designed with the marginalized minority community in mind because they are relevant to saving money or getting more for your money. A large appeal of sustainable practices is their ability to save money and have a positive impact on health. Saving money on clothes, especially for families, is something that is easy to learn. The way a clothes swap works is that participants are asked to bring a few garments they no longer need, that no longer fit, or simply do not want. At the sustainability fair there will be an opportunity for participants to trade garments, thus giving unwanted or gently used clothing items a second life. Sustainable dietary education is another one of the important activities that can be underlined in every community. Research has shown that in the “United States...food related GHGe (Greenhouse Gas Emissions) only account for 8-19% of the total [emissions]” (Auestad and Fulgoni 2015 p.34). While the contribution of each household varies, and it may not seem like food contributes heavily to greenhouse gas emissions, it is important to note that a reduction in multiple aspects of life are the objective. It is important to look at sustainable living habits as a holistic method of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. To further show the importance of a holistic approach is the impact that comes from total household consumption, “In the United States, GHG emissions associated with household consumption have been estimated to account for over 80% of total US emissions” (Jones and Kammen 2011 p. 4088). This number increases significantly if emissions data is adjusted for import items. The sustainability fair aims to teach people and promote more sustainable lifestyles because “recent studies suggest that voluntary consumer-oriented programs can reduce household carbon footprints by 5-20%” (Jones and Kammen 2011 p. 4088). It will not change some of the fundamental problems that are shaping climate change but the aggregate impact of communities reshaping themselves will help foster innovation and create a new future.

While choosing a date sounds simple enough, it can actually prove to be quite difficult. It is important to take into consideration any other potential community events, holidays, time of

day, and day of the week. It is important to note that this endeavor focuses on community, and the building block of a community is the households and families within it. A weekday might be a more affordable option if there is a space cost, but a weekend might yield a higher turnout of families. Based on the logistical issues the nature and frequency of the sustainability fair would have to be considered. Some questions to consider are how does this most impact my community? Is it better to reach more people at once and then let communicate trickle for a year, or is it more sustainable to continue a discourse throughout the year with a smaller group? After completing phase one and two these will be questions that will be easy to answer with the advice of your fellow coalition leaders.

Choosing the location of your sustainability fair is not something that could be taken lightly either. This choice should reflect your mission in a way and is an opportunity to add to your message as well as connect with your community. Your fair location should be somewhere that is accessible to the members of your community, both physically and in a way that is not intimidating. You would not host a sustainability fair for a low-income community at a downtown penthouse. In the case of the sustainability fair for the Hispanic and Latino communities it is an opportunity to take values into account. Many Hispanics and Latinos value family and community. A large portion of this community also tends to be religious in some sense and values being in nature. With this knowledge some samples for fair locations would be in a church gathering hall, a local public park, or some other kind of community space. Some ways to use your location as an extension of your message is by choosing a place that aligns with sustainability value. For example, favoring a building that makes it a point to show it is a sustainable structure versus one that is not. Or choosing a location that encourages the use of public transportation to get there. Put thought into choosing the location of your sustainability fair, these details will be noticed, and they will show how committed your coalition is to your cause. Consider it a way of showing that you live your values.

Step Five: The Big Day

The fifth, and final phase of creating and operating a sustainability fair is the event itself. The previous sections of this paper have discussed the need for the sustainability fair as well as how to execute it. In this final phase the task is to culminate what has been learned, and the relationships that have been built. At this point there should be people from all over the community involved. Management of the different activities should be delegated to members of

the community. Leaders in the community should be the key speakers. The focus of a successful sustainability fair has been the target community from the beginning and that is not something that changes at the end. It is important to have appropriately educated the members of the community that helped work on the fair. This is the embodiment of a bottom-up approach. This gives the sustainability fair the credibility it needs to spread the intended ideas and lessons. The participation of members of the community will help diversify the field just a little, but as they teach their peers and guide them towards more sustainable lifestyles the field of sustainability will become more diverse. The ideas and values that are a part of a community focused sustainability movement will be reinforced in the community and eventually develop into a paradigm shift of thought. As the information continues to spread within the community and as more community members add their voice to the cause, sustainability will become a part of the DNA of the community. It will come that much closer to the goal of helping others live sustainable lives.

Conclusion

In any effort to make change there will be resistance, people do not like being told what to do. Sometimes they simply will not be as enthusiastic about the project and share that interest. Businesses may be reluctant to participate for fear of it being a financial loss, a burden, or a waste of effort. Groups and organizations may not see it as worth their time or may feel that somebody else will focus on the issue. Because of all these reasons you need to start small. You need to capture the hearts and minds of a few people so that they can tell their friends and family about what they have learned, and about what you can all accomplish together. Your community is the greatest asset to share the vision that sustainability is for everyone, including them.

As the many cogs of an event like the sustainability fair start to come together one can see the potential for something special that can work anywhere, and that is not only people doing things in their everyday life more sustainably. You will see communities coming together; residents, small businesses, and organizations; to do something new. The cornerstone of any sustainability fair is the community and their support. Through their participation they bond with other members of the community and create a network that will give your cause the forward momentum it needs. They will share their stories and have a dialogue from which everyone can learn from each other. However, one sustainability fair is not enough, stopping with one may yield success but it will not yield change. There will always be members of the community that

have not had the opportunity to participate, to learn more, or to share what they know. You will need the continued support of the community, participation of businesses, and help from organizations to make sustainability fairs a regular occurrence in your community. Relationships need to be forged and nurtured, and as people learn and tell others about it, it will grow to be a force for good in the community.

I hope that through this experience others are empowered to work with their neighbors and protect the planet with their everyday decisions. There is a myriad of grassroots efforts that are important for advancing sustainability in the United States, find what makes the most sense for your community and the issues that are salient for them. If we are to make the changes we need to make, they need to start from the bottom up. Everyday people are the key and we all have a part to play. The sustainability fair has the ability to become a reality through planning, building relationships in your target community, and reaching milestones that pull you closer to the event. Now take what you have learned and turn it into action.

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