

EVENT REPORT

High Level Event on Regenerative Development of 11 April 2024



Rapporteurs

This report has been commissioned by the Belgian Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment and was written by Laura Winn, Nuno Da Silva, Constança Belchior, May East, Emmanuel Pauwels, piEt Haerens and Leen Gorissen.

This report is a summary of the event on 11th April 2024 and is best read in conjunction with [the study “Regenerative Development and Design – Its origins, practice and potential as meta-technology to elevate governance, innovation and planetary health”](#) for a fuller understanding of regenerative development and its implications for European policy.

Acknowledgements

The present document is a collaborative endeavour. We give thanks to the many knowledge lineages we have drawn from, and in particular to Regenesys Institute for Regenerative Practice. We also thank all the attendees of the event for their high level of participation and contribution to the recommendations which figure in this report.

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Executive summary

The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union hosted on 11th April 2024 a full-day event on the crucial role of nature and biodiversity in ensuring a sustainable future, through the concept of regenerative development. The day was designed around a central message: "Giving back to nature more than we take away", a core priority of the EU Biodiversity strategy, and explored how this can be done in practice.

The event opened with warm words of welcome from **M. Pierre Kerkhofs** (Belgian Federal Government) followed by an inspiring key-note speech by **Ms. Sandrine Dixson-Declève** (Club of Rome) and a presentation on the concept of regenerative development and its applicability in the European context by **Ms. Leen Gorissen** (Centre4NI). A high-level panel discussed the need to rethink our relationship to nature, and highlighted differences in perspective on regeneration from business, indigenous peoples, policymakers and practitioners. **Ms. Anna Chilton** (Nestlé), **Mr. Ben Haggard** (Regenesis Institute), **Ms. Elle Merete Omma** (Saami Council EU), **Mr. Humberto Delgado Rosa** (European Commission) and **Mr. Thomas Elliott** (Restor) offered complementary views and concrete examples of regenerative work in practice.

In the afternoon, participants at the event were invited to experience working with a living systems framework during four roundtables. Each group delved into one of the priorities of the Belgian presidency: Circular Economy, Just Transition and Adaptation and Resilience, as well as Nature Positive. Over three hours, people working in policy, business and civil society worked together to apply regenerative thinking to these thematic areas and offer recommendations to the Belgian Presidency.

The final plenary session offered a summary of the roundtables and reflections from **Ms. Aysu Ahmad** (Young European Ambassador) on the importance of actively collaborating with new generations. This served to galvanize participants towards taking their insights back into their work, nurturing curiosity, and opening up new lines of inquiry to further engage with regenerative development in their fields. The event invited participants to plant these seeds and let them grow, encouraging them to make steps forwards to rethink our relationship with nature.

Overall, the event enabled participants to start exploring and unpacking the concept of regenerative development. People were able to grasp how this concept includes and transcends the idea of sustainability as it aims for thriving by supporting living systems' capacity to evolve. The roundtables produced contributions to a roadmap for bringing regenerative development further into European initiatives and policy in the future. In particular, these include invitations to **reframe** the role of humans as an intrinsic part of nature, **reinspire** through connecting to how nature has regenerated itself over millions of years and humans are learning to do so again, **redesign decision-making** to include indigenous peoples, new generations and more-than-human considerations, and **redirect resources** to regenerative initiatives. The most remarkable driver at the end of the event was a call for more caring. However, the question remains: *What does it take to actively create the wisdom, willpower, and capability to become co-creators of a brighter future?*

I. OVERVIEW OF THE DAY

“RDD introduces new ways of thinking about how to assess and respond to the world ’ s living complexity as a source of innovation and evolution. ”

Mang & Haggard, 2016

Introduction and keynote speeches

The day was opened by **Pierre Kerkhofs, Director General Environment, Health & Food Chain Safety**. His speech set the scene by stating that “Healthy, diverse ecosystems are responsible for the air we breathe, the food we eat, and nurture our minds. Restoring and **reimagining our relationship** to nature are central challenges for the next decades.”

Sandrine Dixon-Declève, Co-président of the Club of Rome, offered a strong provocation to move **beyond compromise and ineffective decision-making** towards systems transformation. She showed “the speed of action on planetary boundaries is a function of the speed of action on inequality and poverty.” Being able to ensure the well-being of people and planet at the same time involves placing a value on them above short-term profits for the few. This requires strong political leadership, mobilization and the courage to **rethink the financial and economic architecture**.

As lead author of the study prepared for this event, **Leen Gorissen, founder of Centre4NI**, brought a positive vision for the future of Europe that is possible if we realize that “**we are the Earth regenerating herself**.” She advocated for the use of a rigorous and tried-and-tested *regenerative development and design* approach, and of our innate ability to imagine living images of potential futures. These capabilities have the power to transform the thinking behind policymaking in Europe.



Imaging future worlds. Photo: Theodore Markovic

A short film of a regenerative project “El Penon” in Mexico brought to life the possibility of rethinking success to embrace both financial returns and ecosystem health. The film was provided by Axa Climate and the Butterfly School who are [documenting case studies](#) in the field of regenerative business.



Live graphic harvesting of the first three speeches of the event, Mara Callaert, Visuality

Panel discussion

The morning continued with a high-level panel discussion facilitated by Tara Shine, Co-CEO of Change by Degrees, with

- Humberto Delgado Rosa, Director for Biodiversity, DG Environment, European Commission
- Elle Merete Omma, Head of the Saami Council EU Unit
- Anna Chilton, Biodiversity Specialist, Nestlé
- Ben Haggard, Co-founder and core faculty member, Regenesis Institute
- Thomas Elliot, CEO of Restor



Live graphic harvesting during the panel, Mara Callaert, Visuality

The panel discussion highlighted that there are different perspectives on the idea and implementation of regenerative development. From an indigenous perspective, regenerative thinking is aligned with the way **people consider themselves as nature**. It offers a shared foundation from which to move forward with rights-based reparations and new approaches to **land governance**. From a business perspective, the focus is on reconnecting business activities with the ecosystems they rely on, which will require **better knowledge of how these ecosystems work**, to be able to co-evolve with landscapes and ultimately become both more positive and more efficient. From a policy-making perspective, the call was to integrate more equity in environmental legislation for their acceptance. **Cooperation between high-level policy and grassroots initiatives** evolving specifically within unique places will be essential to working towards a regenerative economy.

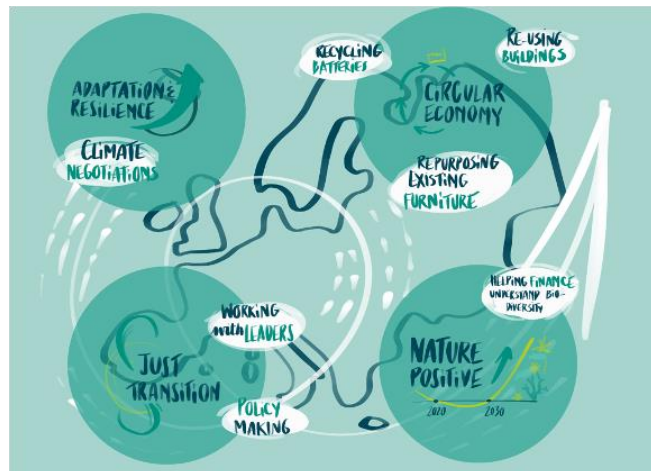
The conversation covered multiple levels, from the inner shift in **thinking and relating as nature**, to the worldwide movement for regenerative places and the need for collective effort in the transition towards a regenerative economy. The questions from the audience and responses from the panel showed that there are many questions to explore. and that there are different approaches about how to go about regenerative development in a European context.

Roundtable discussions

In the afternoon, roundtable discussions allowed participants to apply regenerative thinking to four thematic areas of priority for the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union:

- Circular Economy
- Adaptation and Resilience
- Just Transition
- Nature Positive

The groups were invited to use a living systems framework to help understand and manage the complexity of these thematic areas, and produce recommendations from the highest level of work: REGENERATE (see below).



Four roundtable discussions credit: *Visuality*

The Circular Economy roundtable discussed how to integrate material cycles with biological cycles to **function as living systems do**, and advocated for a shift from **competitive to collaborative advantage**. Regenerative thinking could encourage reconceptualizing and returning to the initial function of all commodities, **focusing on purpose rather than materiality or use**.

The Adaptation and Resilience roundtable highlighted the importance of **inner resilience** for individuals and organizations including public authorities. They identified **resources in the form of funding and time** that will be needed to develop new capacities. From a regenerative level, this will require bringing back the value of care and compassion in international negotiations and all other forms and levels of decision-making.

The Just Transition roundtable explored a shift in the conversation from what we lose in the transition to what we value and what we could become. This implies changing the nature of the conversation and **who is involved**. They explored the **enabling conditions** for this shift to happen, with a focus on increasing people's capabilities in economic, political or deliberative power.

The Nature Positive roundtable discussed how **being nature regenerating herself** is different from being nature positive as if humans were separate. Considering that this mindset is different from that of decision-makers today, they advocated for practical ways to bring this forth through **making decisions about nature IN nature**, not in meeting rooms, and through appointing representatives of land and marine ecosystems to **governance structures**.

Recommendations made by the groups for furthering regenerative development in policy in Europe consistently pointed to four patterns: **reframe**, **reinspire**, **redesign decision-making** and **redirect resources**. These recommendations and their implications are developed further in the final section of this report.

Closing remarks

The day was closed with summaries from **Tara Shine** and **Laura Winn**, and a reflection from **Aysu Ahmad, Young European Ambassador** who called for leaders to engage in collaborative partnerships with young people to engage transformative positive change with the new generations. **Stephanie Langerock, Head of Biodiversity & Governance, FPS Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment**, invited all participants to plant the seeds that came out of conversations and explorations started during this inspiring day so as to keep them growing and expanding.

II. ROUNDTABLE INPUTS & OUTPUTS

“Over time, sustainability paradigms have evolved from meeting human needs throughout time to improving human wellbeing and the viability of ecological systems. Regenerative sustainability, the next wave of sustainability, includes and transcends these goals, aiming for thriving living systems in which whole-system health and wellbeing increase continually.”

Gibbons, 2020

In order to understand the recommendations produced in the afternoon from a regenerative mindset, it is necessary to explain the thinking process that supported them to be developed during the roundtables. All four groups used a living systems framework to rigorously guide their thinking towards new strategic insights for the four thematic areas.

Inputs

The roundtable discussions were facilitated by four senior regenerative practitioners: **Nuno da Silva**, **Emmanuel Pauwels**, **Constança Belchior** and **May East**. The *Levels of Work* framework was used in all the groups, ensuring a coherent experience for all participants at the event. The concepts being introduced were actively applied in a very concrete manner to the work the participants are actually doing in their professional roles.



Levels of Work framework
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adapted by Visuality

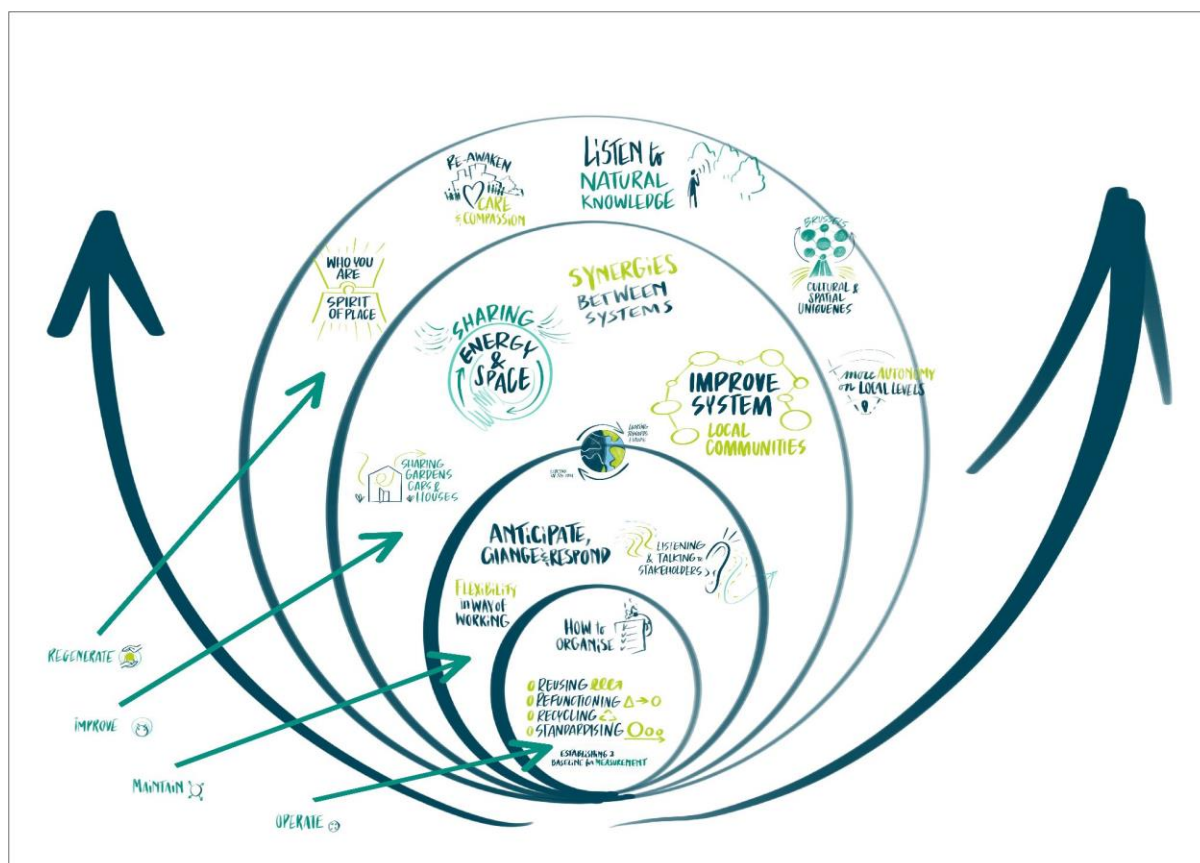
The framework depicts four Levels of Work that are essential to any living system’s continuing evolution. The lower levels are focused on current existence. To *Operate* is to increase the efficiency of energy and material use. To *Maintain* means to be concerned with sustaining the desired effect and effectiveness of operations in the face of perturbations and environmental uncertainty. The higher levels are focused on potential. To *Improve* involves increasing the capacity of human and natural systems to meaningfully contribute. At the level of *Regenerate* the work is designed from the uniqueness of each living system and its unrealized potential.

To enable evolution of living systems, the understanding, aims, and goals developed at the regenerative level need to guide the work at the other levels. Currently, most contemporary sustainability practices develop strategies in response to an existing problem or opportunity.

Each of the four roundtables worked through all four levels, with input from an expert on the thematic area at hand.

Outputs

The work of the four Roundtables was followed closely by an internal rapporteur in each group, and a team of harvesters tasked with pulling together the thinking and insights across the four groups, to reflect the outcomes of the process as a whole. What follows is an essentialized play-back of the key thinking and experience of following the Levels of Work process. It is written from the perspective of the participants in the event and was shared in the closing remarks, to encourage a sense of community and agency.



Levels of work across Circular Economy, Just Transition, Adaptation & Resilience, Nature Positive
credit: Visuality

We are working with leaders in politics, finance, business, civil society... and with policymakers and citizens. We work on (international) climate and biodiversity negotiations, reusing buildings, recycling batteries, writing policies, consulting communities, educating finance about biodiversity, transforming organizations... and more.

For all of our systems to **operate** well, we focus on efficient use of resources, space and time. We set up standardised processes and create baselines to measure from. We manage offer and demand, redirect existing funds, and spend time convincing people how to behave. This work is difficult and we always seem to start from a worse-case scenario!

To **maintain** our systems' effectiveness in the face of a rapidly changing environment, we need to keep in touch with what else is going on and respond to resisting voices from the outside. We focus on not letting the community down, and on learning to improve from COP to COP. We spend time convincing people to keep on liking old stuff, as we adapt and mitigate negative impacts in multiple domains.

As we engage with **improving** the wider systems we are part of, so there is a shift in energy. We start to work from potential, and see best-case scenarios. We notice the shift from product to people, from building to community, opening to a wider whole. So we can adopt a long term perspective with new energy, shifting our relationship with time towards future generations. We include children and our plant and animal neighbours in our considerations. We focus on the purpose of the system, and develop empathy and well-being. We bring new thinking and new questions, like "how can a new road contribute to the purpose of this place?".

To be **regenerative**, however, we need to think differently again. When we connect with places, where people come from and materials are sourced, we can work on a level that encompasses everything else and connects to a deeper source. We are able as humans to be an expression of living systems, and take care of ourselves and our places as living beings. As we bring back into the work our care for the uniqueness and singularity of our places, this empowers people locally, developing relationships that can bring potency to Europe as a whole. We understand that relationships are not passive but a practice. We actively create reciprocity and make resources available for something bigger than ourselves. As we invest in longer-term policy horizons we can bring everybody along and grow hope, committing to serving life as it evolves.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A ROADMAP

“The outer development of urban and rural places must always be matched by an inner development of those that inhabit them.”

Mang & Haggard, 2016[4]

The experience of the event showed that a regenerative development approach is different from other sustainable development strategies in that it is meant to align with and enable sustainability-oriented approaches to be more systemically effective and to reach beyond the constraints imposed by a more narrow problem-solving orientation, to be able to create more beneficial effects on multiple scales.

At the end of the roundtables, participants offered recommendations for creating a roadmap to further apply regenerative development in future policy making in Europe.

Four areas of recommendations and implications for policy

The recommendations shared by the four thematic groups transcended the themes. These generic recommendations fall into four categories, as described below. As a complement, the study includes specific recommendations on each thematic area of priority of the Belgian Presidency.

Re-frame

Core to the idea of regenerative development is the need to reframe the challenges we are addressing and redefine the role of humans as part of nature. The roundtables produced recommendations for reframing EU policy across the board with three key notions:

- Humans are an expression of nature, a part of nature and can have a value adding role in it,
- Maintaining the status quo is not enough. Europe needs to move beyond sustainability and become regenerative,
- Regeneration is not an end in itself but a process. More a verb than a noun.



Re-frame: exploring mental models
Photo: Theodore Markovic

To do this implies engaging in deep listening with European stakeholders who are already living and campaigning from this standpoint. Ms. Elle Merete Omma of the Saami Council EU Unit highlighted in the morning panel discussion the role that Europe’s only recognized indigenous peoples could play in this respect. Aysu Ahmad in her closing remarks as Young European Ambassador invited policymakers to listen to new generations and their demands to go beyond sustainability. This reframing is also supported by many contemporary scientists, thought-leaders, business innovators and practitioners across Europe.

The event is a first step in introducing this reframing in all conversations across environmental, social and economic policy in Europe. To go further will require supporting policymakers and politicians across the board to integrate this shift in thinking and reframing in their work and roles.

Re-inspire

The difficulty with bringing in new thinking is that it can feel too ambitious, the transformation proposed can seem unrealistic. This is where the importance of showing inspirational examples and proofs of concept are essential. In the case of regenerative thinking, it can be helpful to remind ourselves that nature has been doing this all along, and humans were much better at knowing how to work with complex living systems although we in the West have mostly lost this ability over the last few centuries. All four roundtables produced recommendations for developing more inspirational content to support the proposed reframing to take root in reality. Correlated to the three reframing messages, there are three broad approaches for inspiring change:

- Amplify voices sharing what nature does and can do, and therefore what humans can do as part of nature.
- Share examples of regenerative initiatives, businesses, places across Europe.
- Build the will and opportunities for ongoing development of people, teams, institutions and organizations to bridge the capacity and capabilities gap to better harmonize human activity with the natural systems we are part of.

This could imply a role for the curation and wide sharing of content already being produced across Europe and other geographies. Indigenous knowledge has a wealth of wisdom to be shared. Contemporary Western scientific research is increasingly showing the power of nature to restore and regenerate living ecosystems. In parallel, innovative companies and initiatives are harnessing this capacity to respond to human and social needs. They have made great strides which can serve as inspiration, if concurrently there is also a recognition that there are great strides still to be made.

From a regenerative perspective, curating inspirational content requires careful attention to not create catalogues of solutions but rather lift up the inherent capacity of nature to uniquely evolve and develop in each place, inviting replication of regenerative thinking processes not the solutions produced, which will be expressions of the bio-cultural-uniqueness of place.

Redesign decision-making

There was consensus across the roundtables that new thinking needs to be implemented with renewed decision-making structures that give pride of place to the voices of nature, indigenous peoples and youngsters. Recommendations were made for governance structures in both consultative and voting settings:

- Invite more different views - including indigenous peoples and young people. Engage in deep listening towards people and nature.
- Give non-human life and future generations a place at the table, through a representative with voting rights.
- Re-imagine and re-design governance structures and dialogue spaces more aligned with living processes.
- Nurture cultures of care and compassion.



Re-design decision-making: deep listening
Photo: Theodore Markovic

There were also recommendations to reform decision-making processes to encompass long-term, transdisciplinary and reconciliatory approaches:

- Start from a shared long-term vision.
- Work across silos, connecting policy domains, with a transdisciplinary approach.
- Work on shifting political decision-making from negotiations and compromise to reconciling through potential.

Governance structures are historically constructed and difficult to change, and a decision-making culture based on negotiations, trade-offs and compromise is deeply ingrained in the European political system. As citizens and their political representatives go about changing governance structures, they need to develop new capabilities for working together, and for growing each other's capacity to meet a future that humans have never encountered before.

At every level from the EU to member states to local regions, there is the opportunity for policymakers to shift roles from dictating outcomes to enabling the people who are working in the system to become thinking partners for policy, while simultaneously becoming better at what they are trying to do. In a complex world, decision-making is best distributed so that decisions are being made by people who best know the living systems on the ground. At the same time, the European context can guarantee high levels of ambition and working on a scale that is commensurate with the challenges we face globally. Integrating high-level coherence with local relevance is key.

Again, this may seem wildly ambitious. The conversations at this high-level event showed that the potential to start implementing these recommendations within environmental and biodiversity policies lies in their professed alignment with the nature of living systems, whose restoration is crucial to the success of these policies. Bringing regenerative thinking into these policies first can be a way to learn how to do this well.

Redirect resources

The fourth group of overarching recommendations relate to the use of European Union's and government resources at every level to support regenerative initiatives. Considering the role of public policy in ensuring the health and wellbeing of citizens and ecosystems people depend upon across Europe, there is a high level of coherence in the redirecting of significant resources towards businesses and citizen-led projects that aspire to the same goals.

Resources include but are not restricted to funding; social, political, cultural and ecological capital can be mobilized effectively together. Indeed, funding is not the most important resource: nature's capacity for evolution and renewal is, and when people see themselves as nature they can develop anew this capacity themselves. Funding is, however, often essential to enable other less valued resources to come into play.

Recognizing that regenerative development is a relatively new area of innovation and implementation, the recommendations from the roundtables particularly focused on the funding of pilot initiatives, capacity-building and action-research into viable business models for regenerative work:

- Finance pilot initiatives in places and businesses with some existing regenerative capability, coupled with ongoing capacity building.
- Increase support to regenerative business models.
- Finance the regenerative transformation of businesses and institutions.

There were also specific suggestions relating to current EU programs, for example integrating regenerative development into Interreg in a holistic manner and through co-creation at every EU community level.

One of the key implications of funding regenerative initiatives is the necessary rethinking of evaluation metrics for the success of these projects. Regenerative work always has indirect effects on the wider ecosystems a project is nested within. Hence traditional metrics focused on the results and outcomes of the project itself are unlikely to demonstrate the true systemic effects being produced. Equally, returns on investment will occur across multiple forms of capital (social, ecological, financial) and across longer timescales than usually accounted for. Regenerative development frameworks can be applied to discern which evaluation approaches have the potential to actively support the effects aspired to.



Re-direct resources: creating conditions for life
Photo: Theodore Markovic

CONCLUSIONS

The high-level event on regenerative development hosted by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union enabled over one-hundred people in policymaking, business and civil society to come together to think differently about the positive role humans can play as part of nature in response to these times of transition. It was an opportunity to plant many seeds for future action and generate motivation and commitment.

Practice and policymaking will need to be intertwined to bring the recommendations presented in this report to life. Collectively, there will be a need for more gatherings like this one that centers shared learning towards potential rather than knowledge transfer from the past. People will need to step forward to nurture the seeds that have been planted, and work together to help them grow into influential action.

Individually, we can all make it a habit to stop and reflect. As we work through our challenges and differences, we can start bringing regeneration into our daily work by consciously creating moments that bring in a new spirit to awaken our care for each other and for the Nature we are part of, so we can work together, with an open heart and mind, towards a future to which we all belong.

"Awaken the spirit of unity,
care deeply and share openly,
to shape a future where all belong."

