



We will only survive if we change The inner dimension of sustainability

With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations has formulated several areas that must change in order for global society to move toward a sustainable way of life. But how do we need to develop as human beings to make these goals achievable? This is the question posed by the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) initiative, which researches and implements goals for inner development. We spoke with Jan Artem Henriksson, the project's director, about the inner dimension of sustainability.

evolve: *You have been leading a project to create inner development goals to go with the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs were passed by the U.N. and they represent 17 different ways that humanity needs to move in order to create a sustainable planet. Part of your point is that there's an inner development that needs to happen in order for these sustainable goals to be met. Can you speak about this project?*

Jan Artem Henriksson: I don't believe that the same people that we are today will be able to reach the 17 UN SDGs. We need a an update on our human operating system in order to get there. We will not be the same people when we truly collaborate on these goals. There is a blind spot in the SDGs, because we're not looking on the individual and collective inside of our personal skills and the culture that we are creating. That's why we truly need to use the most effective interventions for human development in order to help us grow, so we can reach the SDGs within the time frame that we have.

e: *How do you see that human beings need to be different? And which human beings are you addressing? Are you talking about all of us?*

JH: The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) speak from a big “US” perspective, it's all of us, not just the politicians or the leaders. We all need to embrace a developmental perspective. But the leaders that we choose often do not have the best skills and capabilities to collaborate with other people on complex issues. Sometimes we choose people who are very certain or explain things in very black and white terms. That can give us some comfort and a sense of false security. But that will not get us closer to the SDGs. So, we need to choose the leaders or politicians who have more of the qualities that we need globally in order to succeed. All humans are adaptive open systems and we can grow and develop. We know this for other areas of development. We invest in digitalization and the infrastructure of the internet. This also means teaching people how to use the internet. Governments and nations also have done huge progress with teaching most of the world population how to read and write, because we think that's essential.

And in this spirit we can also say: Look, we need to upgrade our operating system not only in the area of digitalization, but also with some basic emotional skills and capabilities. We need to become aware of our values not only to navigate a uncertain world that is unpredictable and complex, but also to be able to reflect on those values and collaborate with people with different values.

From the research that I have seen, only a minority of the leaders do that today. It is a huge challenge that we need wiser, more compassionate, holistic leaders. The good news here is, that these skills can be developed. It's something that we can grow throughout our entire lives with a lifelong learning and growth.

Starting a conversation

e: *You're talking about a big us and you're also identifying a number of different groups. You're talking about citizens and those citizens need to elect leaders who have different qualities. That would mean that the citizens themselves are recognizing these qualities. And when we are looking at the stuck points in terms of the SDGs, there are the people who are working in the area of sustainability, there are leaders and then there are the citizens. With this different kind of people – and this is a gross simplification – how do we create a mass shift in understanding what a mature human being is? Because that's seems to be the bottom line of what you're pointing to.*

JH: This is a big question. With the IDGs we intent te be at the front edge of this conversation. In our Theory of Change we made explicit that organizations can be the agents that quickly can adopt and prototype new practices. And we managed to get some big companies like IKEA, Ericsson, Spotify and the UNDP on board to try this out with us. Also, some governments are getting interested, like the government of Costa Rica that will in December 2021 sign a number of documents that states that they will implement the IDG framework in all of its public sector. But more about that another time!

We sent out questioners to many of the top leaders in big companies and organizations, asking them what qualities, capabilities or skills they think we need to develop individually and collectively in order to increase our chances to reach the SDGs. And I'm quite sure that there are many leaders who have never given that a thought. That why it is important to start asking these questions. We asked the top 300 managers at Ericsson this question and in itself it is an intervention! Just that question starts a reflection and maybe a dialogue. Or like the front runners at IKEA, who are going through their leadership principles, their values and culture, and ask “how can we align those with the IDGs”? This process will take time, but just

starting to reflect on it and talk about it is a big thing. We have talked about values and leadership principles, but many times they have been separate from our sustainability efforts. We have been working in silos and this has to stop.

I come from leadership development and worked with creating and implementing leadership principles and values for many years. And I think we need to do what some companies have been good at doing in their organizations on the national and global level. To really consciously build cultures and skills in millions of people. We need to start to have the dialogue on what skills and culture we need and how do we build it. And of course, we will not all agree, and it will not be easy to find ways to scale this up. But by starting to have the conversation we maybe can agree on some of the qualities, some interventions and so on.

e: *Why did you start with companies?*

JH: Three years ago, we gathered a number thought leaders on the Island of Ekskaret and said: Look, we all know that there is this blind spot of human development that could make a difference in society. How would it be, if we would popularize this human development, simplify it and reach out to leaders in different fields. Then the question would be, who are the best agents to take this out into the world? Who could be fast enough to adapt and try this out and maybe even show some benefits? And we realized that it's not schools, not government, not the nations. It's big organizations, like IKEA or Ericsson, they are global and could take the lead. In these organizations, there are people who are concerned about global issues and who have the power to implement the IDGs in systems with hundreds of thousands of people. So, they could be prototypes.

e: *There's a certain genius in bringing together inner development and sustainability and bringing it into corporations, because they do a lot of inner development work in terms of leadership training and skill development. But sustainability often is a completely separate project in large organizations. There's the sustainability department and then there's human resources, leadership training and organizational development, but those are not engaged in together. Bringing them together like that is confronting inner development with a certain urgency.*

JH: Yes. And it's also making inner development more meaningful because it can otherwise be quite narcissistic. There are all these inner development initiatives, but for what? Just for me to feel better, to navigate complexity better, to be a better leader, to optimize my life, our profit, our nation? With sustainability in focus, inner development gets a bigger purpose! By showing some of the most important skills that we need to build and showing some interventions that are based on a good scientific method and evidence base, we can help professionals who are new and somewhat skeptical to it, to navigate the field of inner development better. This is the holy grail, to get the people who are not already part of the quire to try out this new song.

We've put more than seventy five thousand people through different developmental programs, we've been collaborating with a lot of research institutes and got funds from the Swedish Innovation Fund to do randomized trials and see what programs really have an effect. I see the anxiety of many H.R. managers when they are creating leadership development programs. There are all these people propagating different methods and interventions. I used to be one of them. So, knowing what really has scientific support to help us become better human beings that care about larger wholes can be very important.

That can also broaden our perspective on what human development means and how it can be supported. Because some people, for example, are fond of mindfulness and are in the IDG sphere of “Relating” and work a lot with maybe the skills of presence and compassion. And these are very important skills to build. But in these practices you rarely look into system thinking or complexity awareness or other things that are a bit more cognitive. And for other people it is the other way around. They engage in cognitive development but do not do enough of the IDG categories of “Being” or “Relating”. Or they never take it into actual “Acting”, like in prototyping action labs or practicing bubble hopping or other interventions that bring you out of the comfort zone and through doing learn new things. So, it can be useful to have an overview, where you can see the different spectrums of human development and how different interventions can contribute to the larger whole.

Becoming capable of action

e: With this work, you also are potentially developing human beings that have the integrity within an organization to point out when the organization is falling short of being sincere about sustainability. The organization is caught in business demands and priorities, but that priority is being placed before the care for the planet.

JH: I think it's important to look at our human history and how we have become more and more deliberate in our choices and our agency. But not without resistance from the people in power. It was very scary for monarchs to give the power to the people. It was for sure scary for many conservatives to allow females or people of color to vote. But step by step, we have historically empowered more and more people to take their own decisions and grow in our agency. But we still have not fully understood that we can and should also build the capacity for qualities like perspective seeking, inner compass and systemic thinking. And these skills and qualities we can build on scale, and through out the lifespan, and not only teach this in school. We have the digital and physical tools to help individuals to be a more mature versions of themselves and also dare to encourage all to see and act when their organizations or governments are not doing what serves the whole. Then we all can help each other to reflect and grow to better navigate the wicked issues that we have in front of us and not like now become bitter and point fingers or develop defense mechanisms that deny the problem.

e: It is an important capacity to face an existential threat and not deny it, become filled with despair or nihilistic. To be able to still engage at that point seems to be an incredibly important skill or capacity, for us to develop and particularly for people who are working in sustainability. How do you see the IDGs enhancing people's capacity to stay productive in the face of such a threat?

JH: The IDGs are not new, we are building on a lot of existing research. There is quite a lot of research in stage theories that point to different so called “stages” where people become less and less orientated towards the norms, political games or power games. They are internally led by values and become more “self-authoring”, like Robert Kegan calls it. But with time we need to grow even further to become cross systemic or transformational leaders that see what is needed to get the systems to work in a new and ways. Then I guess the question is more: What is needed here?, rather than - who am I? There is also a capacity that John Keith called “negative capability” which means holding the tensions that we see or

experience. But when we talk about these different theories, for the majority of people it's way too abstract and detached from reality. You need to do a lot of reading and have a strong interest in psychology, philosophy and even epistemology to truly get and be able to navigate stage theories.

That's why we want to together with all the IDG co-creators play with the concept of "inner development" in a similar way like with the SDGs. It's not that the world consists of 17 problems or areas, those 17 boxes don't really exist. They emerged from some people coming together and saying: How can we put this together in a way that make sense and is simple enough for people to grasp and engaged with? And we are trying to do the a similar journey. We all have our different paradigms, language and there are many different researchers from different fields who have contributed the framework of the IDGs. We always have open surveys on our web page (innerdevelopmentgoals.org) and I want to invite the readers to contribute on this journey. We try to find a language that is accessible for everybody and the current version boils down to 23 skills in 5 different categories.

Transformation of the systems

e: COP26 has just finished and there's a lot of skepticism about that the outcomes. I just read something about the ideas of net zero and how corporations are using that to play a waiting game. The time to really make a difference is very short and we're dealing with the Earth, which is a massively complex system. How can we think about human development in a context that is so time sensitive?

JH: No matter, if we still can turn this around or if we are beyond some thresholds in time already, the project of building skills and qualities like humility, compassion, presence and connectedness is from my point of view more important than ever. And actually even more important if we have passed those thresholds. Imagine you will have to compete for some very basic needs with some people. Would the qualities they have be of any interest or importance to you?

So, this is a really urgent initiative, because if we want to see some effects within five to ten years, we need to start now. I've seen capacity building programs that have scientifically proven effects after just six months, like for instance in developing self-compassion and inner compass. Because if you have more self-compassion, you will be more compassionate to others and you will create more trusting environments with more psychological safety. This will make it easier for both you and others to be ethical and values driven.

But with all of this there is a warning flag because this initiative can also be used for "human development washing". You could say, let's now build our capacities and let's just sit and meditate and feel that we're doing something. But then we are not facing the complexity or take the hard decisions or actions that we need. The IDGs can be misused like everything else, where it becomes an excuse not to act. And this is, of course not what we're saying, because we need to do both, the inner development needs to support the actions and hard work toward sustainable development in the outer world.

e: In some ways you are inviting large organizations to take on creating human beings who are in a network of support that allows them to do the right thing. And you set the context that the SDGs are that right thing. It's not right for the shareholders simply, it's right for the planet, for the world as a whole. This is probably going to create a lot of conversations that may be very uncomfortable, but in a context that is supportive. In companies this

development is often undermined by the hard competition. I wonder if we're getting to the point where businesses are going to create a pact with their competitors in order to be able to move forward in a way that is going to allow all of us to survive, not just the shareholders on some mythical planet that will not exist any longer.

JH: That also speaks to the values and practices of the larger systems we are in. Because even if people would develop all the skills in the world, I don't think we can reach the SDGs without major policy changes and new broadly speaking “structures” in organizations, institutions, nations and so on.

I'm very humbled from growing up in a very broken system in Ukraine and moving to Sweden with a quite well-functioning social system. And I wouldn't say that the Ukrainians lack the skills and it is their fault or that they get the politicians they deserve. There are historical reasons going back to for example wars, sacrifice and trauma that have us in our grip and we need to work both with the structures, institutions and the specific policies, but also with the inner dimensions both individually and collectively. This often makes it hard to trust, collaborate and innovate across not only companies but often also departments and even groups of people.

This said I do agree with you that IDGs can help people find meaning, purpose and an ethical direction, no matter what system they are in and can encourage both individuals and organizations to collaborate. Living and developing the 23 skills can be more or less hard in different contexts that offer more or less healthy mixes of the challenge and support we all need. My hope is that we will see people from all over the world from public and private sectors, academia and NGOs coming together and realizing that in the field of human development, where people change jobs every 3 years, even if we are competitors, we all win if we collaborate. We all win if we systemically develop the skills that matters the most to the planet. We all win when we see both the challenges and opportunities here, and create the structures to help the progressive organizations and nations to go first. And the rest will follow.

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The Inner Development Goals

How do we need to develop – individually and collectively – to create the sustainable world we long for?

Jan Henriksson, Executive Director of the IDG Initiative, and Elizabeth Debold, editor of *evolve* magazine

Online event in English
Friday, 30 September, 7 – 10 pm



Elizabeth Debold



Jan Henriksson

Info and registration: <https://www.evolve-magazin.de/evolve-live/>

Jan Artem Henriksson is a Swedish-Ukrainian thought leader in the field of adult development, faculty and senior lecturer at Stockholm Schools of Economics Executive Education. He co-founded two Self Leaders in 2009 and Relate in 2017. Jan has contributed to more than 75 000 people having gone through leadership development programs and several of them have been evaluated with scientifically proven results. Today Jan is the CEO of Inner Development Goals initiative and board member of Ekskaret Foundation.
www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org

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