

ZAYED  
SUSTAINABILITY  
PRIZE



جائزة  
زايـد  
للاستدامة

# RAISING AMBITION, PROGRESSING INCLUSIVITY

A Summary Report on the Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum 2023





## CONTENTS

---

Celebrating Ingenuity and Optimism	03
A Record Year for the Zayed Sustainability Prize	04
Raising Ambition, Progressing Inclusivity	05
In Conversation with Adrian Grenier	06
Shaping Sustainable Communities	10
Bridging the Finance Gap	14
Voices of Youth	18
Impact Through Innovation	22
We Must Listen to What the Earth is Telling Us	27



# CELEBRATING INGENUITY AND OPTIMISM

---

Today, the world faces grave sustainability challenges. While they take different forms, they are intrinsically linked.

They are societal as well as environmental. They impact our food systems, our water resources, the energy we depend on, our life expectancy and quality of life, our livelihoods and the education we provide our children.

Few can deny the scale of our modern-day sustainability challenges. However, a growing community of groups and individuals around the world are confronting them head on, with astonishing ingenuity and optimism.

And it is this ingenuity and optimism that the Zayed Sustainability Prize has sought to recognise and reward since its inception in 2008.

With funding and mentorship from the Prize and its partners, dozens of small businesses, social entrepreneurs, nonprofit organisations and high schools have positively impacted millions of people worldwide.

The Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum celebrates the positive action that the Zayed Sustainability Prize has unlocked through its many winners and finalists.

Rather than dwell on the undeniably complex challenges of today's world, it invites us to imagine what is possible in the face of adversity, by providing a platform to those bringing about change at the grassroots level.

Held under the theme Raising Ambition, Progressing Inclusivity, the Prize's inaugural Forum brought together a distinguished audience including industry experts, thought leaders, and a selection of Prize recipients.



# A RECORD YEAR FOR THE ZAYED SUSTAINABILITY PRIZE

---

The Zayed Sustainability Prize, the UAE's pioneering global award for recognising excellence in sustainability, announced the winners of its 2023 cycle on January 16 at Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week.

The winners were honoured in the five categories of Health, Food, Energy, Water and Global High Schools. A record 4,538 applications were received, 13 per cent more than the previous cycle, from 152 countries.

Presenting the awards, UAE President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, said the UAE continued to lead on important global initiatives to create a better future for all, both within the UAE and beyond the nation's borders.

His Highness said the 2023 cycle was a historic year for the UAE, as it prepares to host the 28th session of the Conference of Parties (COP 28) to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change).

"Over the past 15 years, the Zayed Sustainability Prize has built upon the legacy of the UAE's Founding Father, Sheikh Zayed, and carried forward his bold humanitarian vision, ensuring that the resources of our great nation are used to benefit all people. Today, the Zayed Sustainability Prize stands as an internationally recognised award that mobilises innovators, social entrepreneurs and young people to accelerate positive change for our planet and all people."

The US\$3 million Prize recognises and rewards small to medium sized enterprises, non profit organisations and high schools around the world that are delivering impactful, innovative and inspiring solutions in health, food, energy and water. Through its 106 winners, the Prize has transformed the lives of more than 378 million people.



## RAISING AMBITION, PROGRESSING INCLUSIVITY

Countries across the developing world require direct investment to alleviate mounting sustainability challenges. Over the past 15 years, the Zayed Sustainability Prize has answered this call, helping to scale homegrown solutions through its funding and enduring partnerships.

The Prize has cultivated another key ingredient down the years: inclusivity. Sustainable development in those regions hardest hit by climate change requires strong community bonds, positive thinking and the resolve to overcome challenges as much as it does investment.

All stakeholders have a role to play in delivering inclusive climate action, particularly at the grassroots level. Women, youth, business, civil society organisations and governments must work together around the world to make a difference.

But how do we forge such collaboration? The Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum 2023 showcased the experiences and insights of experts in the field who are leading the way in promoting sustainability and creating a better future for all.

The Forum spotlighted the myriad actions being taken today – small steps in many cases delivering disproportionately large results. Its key finding was that we must listen to vulnerable communities instead of imposing solutions upon them.

Moderated by Eleni Giokis of CNN and Jim Stenman of Reuters, with Omar Butti as master of ceremonies, the Zayed Sustainability Forum hosted conversations with 11 exceptional sustainability leaders.

This white paper summarises their reflections and recommendations for the benefit of all.

## In Conversation with Adrian Grenier

# FROM ACTOR TO ENVIRONMENTALIST

---



The Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum opened with a fascinating conversation with US film actor turned environmentalist, Adrian Grenier, who delivered a passionate account of his deep commitment to leveraging impact investing, and of his growing bond with the natural world.

"I feel so privileged to have a platform to be able to communicate what's in my heart," said Grenier. "But communicating is the easy part. The real challenge is getting closer to nature.

"That's why I ended up moving to a farm in Texas. That was my way of saying: I need to find that connection with the earth, instead of it just being rhetoric and storytelling; we have got to walk the talk."

Grenier said he had always been an environmentalist, despite growing up in New York City. "My mother taught me to take notice of the land around us, and to appreciate our relationship with it, so it was just a natural process for me to make this move."

He said he has found managing his own farm both illuminating and humbling. "I am learning every day. I'm finding a newfound appreciation for those who create our food, for those who have the skill, passion and commitment to continue to face the ever-growing challenges to the environment."

Grenier admitted that before he became a farmer, the idea of growing crops was an abstract concept. "Now, I have a deep appreciation for what they do. And that has been my mission over the past few years – to get closer to those farmers. Can I really speak to them and work with them, so that I know what their challenges are?"

### Listening to the earth

Grenier said that solutions to the world's sustainability challenges can be found within nature itself, if we "listen to the earth and what it's telling us", instead of attempting to control it.

"At one point in our evolution, we separated ourselves from nature and bought into this idea that we can control it. My process is to listen to the wisdom designed in nature, and its ability to create stability and resilience. We must respect nature's design, not impose our will."

Grenier has been an active player in the sustainable marketplace since creating his impact fund DuContra Ventures two years ago. DuContra, which means 'rebel' in Portuguese, invests in companies whose activities further the Sustainable Development Goals.

---

**"I am learning every day. I'm finding a newfound appreciation for those who create our food, for those who have the skill, passion and commitment to continue to face the ever-growing challenges to the environment."**

---

### Yield beyond money

"We strongly believe in infusing capital into more sustainable lifestyles," Grenier explained. "We have identified two metrics for success. One is Return on Investment, and the second is 'YBM', Yields Beyond Money, the value we can derive from doing business that is heart-centred and nature aligned."

Another one of his projects is Blueland, a home cleaning products company that sends customers solid detergents to reconstitute with water. "It has a smaller carbon footprint when shipped, constitutes zero plastic and is non-toxic."



Grenier said his many ventures have taught him that people can choose projects that align with their values instead of working for the sole purpose of making a living. This realisation inspired the YouTube channel Earth Speed, where Grenier shares his own experiences and those of business leaders and environmental experts.

“It’s where impact investing meets application. How do we get into the rhythm of the earth? How do we start to align ourselves with what nature is telling us and bring investments into alignment with that spirit? [Earth Speed] is a tool to give individuals the opportunity to understand how money works, and how they can use it for impact.”

### **Practical solutions**

Thinking practically rather than idealistically is key, Grenier said, pointing to the plastic waste crisis. “Plastic is such a useful material. I’m not naive enough to think we should just do away with it. For me, it’s all about how we manage this very useful material, to keep it out of the environment and in the economy.”

Grenier founded the nonprofit Lonely Whale to do just that. It created a virtual reality experience to educate people about the life of whales, the dangers of ocean noise pollution and the toxicity of plastic waste discarded into the sea. Out of Lonely Whale came Next Wave, a consortium of 15 large companies, all big plastic consumers, such as Dell and HP, who have committed to buy mismanaged plastic destined to pollute riverbeds, shorelines and the sea.

“We can then take that investment and start paying waste pickers in countries that have a lot of mismanaged waste but lack the infrastructure,” Grenier explained. “We can build the economy to prevent plastic from going into the ocean in the first place; it’s mitigation at the source.”

### **Finding balance**

Grenier said he was looking forward to exploring solutions for ocean-bound plastic when the UAE hosts COP28. “Around 10 million tonnes of plastic go into the ocean every year. That’s an overwhelming number. But if you can put a single unit of plastic back into the economy, you can start to make a difference. You need to find that balance between the macro and the micro.”

According to Grenier, finding such balance is much easier when “world leaders come together and start rowing in the same direction, to seek the North Star of a carbon-neutral environment.”

“But what excites me most is seeing ideas put into practice,” he added. “I hope that the people who are making a difference can be part of the conversation at COP28.”

Despite his involvement in numerous worthy causes, as well as a successful acting career in Hollywood, Grenier prioritises the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance, promoting the idea that dedicating time to personal well-being and interests outside of work is crucial for achieving overall success.

“It is important to get a good night’s sleep because we have a lifetime of work to do,” he joked. “And if we are not thinking clearly, we’re going to make mistakes. So, I try not to let the world’s sustainability challenges keep me up at night!”

“Turn off your social media because there is a lot of misinformation around,” he concluded. “People have so much access to information that they feel they must join the conversation all the time. Sometimes, you must act ‘internally’ first; take care of yourself first before telling everybody else how to be.”



## ABOUT ADRIAN GRENIER

---

“What excites me most is seeing ideas put into practice. I hope that the people who are making a difference can be part of the conversation at COP28.”



Best known for his role as Vincent Chase in the hit HBO series *Entourage*, Adrian Grenier is an accomplished filmmaker, producer and director. He has also become a leading advocate for integrating sustainability into pop culture.

As co-founder of Webby Award-winning multi-media platform SHFT.COM, Adrian has created an online

space for people to connect and interact in a more sustainable and conscious manner.

On stage, Adrian makes the case for pursuing social good. Taking lessons learned from SHFT.COM, he provides helpful advice on living sustainably, from shopping to eating to encouraging others to support the cause.

# FORUM DISCUSSIONS

---



# EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AT THE GRASSROOTS

---

**The energy, food and human health impacts of climate change are closely linked. Small but ingenious actions at the community level are having an outsized impact, delegates attending the first panel discussion of the Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum heard.**

Exploring the life-changing benefits of scaling sustainable solutions in last-mile communities, the first panel discussion of the Forum, moderated by Jim Stenman of Reuters, welcomed Satya Tripathi, Secretary General of the Global Alliance for a Sustainable Planet (GASP); Tala Ismail Al Ramahi, Associate Director for Strategic Affairs at the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Court; and Kristina Skierka, CEO of Power for All.

Tripathi explained how his NGO has helped train one million women in traditional 'natural farming' techniques, which, unlike organic farming, use neither chemical nor organic fertilisers. Today, the programme in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh is the world's largest agroecology-based farming initiative.

"We call it restorative agriculture – agriculture which heals and regenerates ecosystems, which benefits people at the bottom of the economic pyramid, and which brings back public health with a vengeance, in a good way!"

Tripathi added that when action is taken at "systems-scale" instead of merely at scale, others are motivated to invest, citing the German Development Bank, which lent 300 million euros to the natural farming programme at an interest rate of just 0.5 per cent.

### **Promoting decentralised renewable energy**

Kristina Skierka shared her own experience of transformative change from Ethiopia, where Power for All has helped local farmers switch from diesel to

solar-powered water pumps. "We showed that with financing, farmers can own a system that powers itself, saves money and ultimately makes money, for the cost of a diesel pump."

Echoing the views of Tripathi, she stressed the importance of working at the grassroots level to encourage the shift to renewables, because of the inadequacy of the existing infrastructure. "In most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, up to 70 per cent of the population makes their income through farming. It is crucial to find ways to improve agriculture and productivity."

Skierka said that a market-based approach can help advance sustainable development. "We focus on avoiding path dependency, which means rejecting electrification based on fossil fuels like kerosene, diesel, coal and charcoal. The idea behind a market-based approach is that people can own their own energy. They buy into these systems that pay back to them instead of putting in more of their own money."

Skierka added that real change will occur when electricity is decentralised and democratised. "We have been trying to get countries that have energy poverty issues to create energy policies that not only set ambitious targets for universal access, but also provide carve outs for decentralised renewables, such as rooftop solar and mini-grids."

---

**"We are trying to set ambitious targets for universal access, including for decentralised renewables like solar and mini-grids."**

- Kristina Skierka

---



“The more room we make for the market to grow, the more local jobs we create, especially for women,” she said. “In fact, twice as many women are employed in the renewables sector than in the traditional fossil fuels industry.”

### Reaching the Last Mile

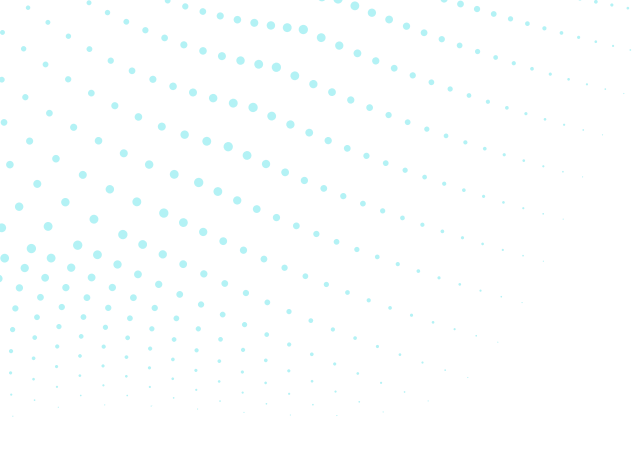
Improved access to clean food has slashed the incidence of preventable diseases in developing countries. “Poor people can never go to a supermarket to buy organic food,” Tripathi said. “But when they grow it themselves, they can ensure they have to enough eat. So, you’re helping to transform the entire social infrastructure.”

Reaching the Last Mile, a global health initiative funded by the UAE President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, is going a step further to help eradicate disease in less developed countries, according to Tala Ismail Al Ramahi.

Inspired by the UAE’s founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who seeded a partnership with the late US President Jimmy Carter to eradicate guinea worm, the initiative mostly serves remote communities in Africa, where healthcare is either non-existent or woefully inadequate.

“Last year, we announced that there were only 15 human cases of guinea worm worldwide,” said Al Ramahi. “There are many other successes we can point to, and by focusing on disease elimination, we’re strengthening global health systems at the same time.”

“We recently celebrated Niger becoming the first country in Africa to eliminate river blindness,” she added. “People usually think that disease elimination is an unreasonable goal, but through committed partnerships and investments with philanthropic partners, big wins are possible.”



---

## Climate change is the biggest threat to human health

Disease eradication efforts are only a drop in the ocean, however. The World Health Organization has declared that climate change is the biggest threat to human health. “The air we breathe, the water we drink, our access to food, and our vulnerability to disease are all tied to the health of our planet,” Al Ramahi said. “If our planet is in crisis, so are we.”

Extreme weather events have increased fivefold over the past 50 years, Al Ramahi added. “This has killed over two million people and caused over US\$3 trillion in economic losses. One in five deaths worldwide are due to air pollution, and many of the victims are children.”

Changing weather patterns also impact vector-borne diseases like malaria. In 2020, Reaching the Last Mile launched a pilot programme in Odisha, India, with international non profit organisation Malaria No More, to predict malaria outbreaks more accurately using weather and Earth observation data backed by artificial intelligence. So far, the initiative has reduced the incidence of malaria in the state by 90 per cent.

The Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence is the project’s lead technical partner.

“A lot of the data we receive is from the Global North, but to do our work most effectively in the countries that need it most, we need data that is inclusive, equitable and applicable to the communities we’re trying to serve,” Al Ramahi explained. “That is how we approach our work. We want to ensure the UAE is part of the solution.”

**“If we fix our food systems, we will fix the climate problem. We must go to where the impact is, where the lives of real people will be affected the most, to transform the world.”**

- Satya Tripathi

---

## Fix our food systems to fix the climate problem

Tripathi said that pricing carbon fairly would scale sustainable development to unprecedented levels. “If we follow the right path, we can incentivise 120 million smallholder farmers in India alone, creating prosperity where it matters and improving public health exponentially.”

“There are a billion people employed in agriculture,” he said. “Assuming an average family size of four, that’s four billion people, or half the world’s population. If we fix our food systems, we will fix the climate problem. We must go to where the impact is, where the lives of real people will be affected the most, to transform the world.”

Tripathi said he was inspired by the climate action of the United Arab Emirates, describing it as a pillar of strength. “The UAE has helped to bring down the cost of renewable energy through its projects in the developing world. Solar energy used to cost 25 cents per kilowatt-hour, now it’s around 2 cents, beating coal and all other forms of thermal energy. That’s the power of intervention.”

“And that’s why I’m so optimistic that the UAE is hosting COP28 because it has the motivation, the inclination and the resources to make it a COP that matters,” he added.

A portrait of Satya Tripathi, a man with grey hair and a mustache, wearing a grey suit and a blue patterned scarf. He is looking slightly to the right.

**Satya Tripathi**

Secretary-General, Global Alliance for a Sustainable Planet, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

“I am optimistic that the UAE is hosting COP 28 because it has the motivation, the inclination and the resources to make it a COP that matters.”



**Kristina Skierka**

CEO, The Power for All

“There’s a great opportunity for renewables to radically improve productivity for small holder farmers – and that is a community of 500 million farmers around the world. What we see in the renewables sector, including the decentralised sector, is women have more jobs, in fact, twice as many by percentage in the renewables industry than in the traditional fossil fuels industry. We need a renewable energy generation that sees renewables as business as usual.”

A portrait of Tala Al Ramahi, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black jacket over a white top. She is looking slightly to the right.

**Tala Al Ramahi**

Director, Reaching the Last Mile

“The air we breathe, the water we drink, our access to food, and our vulnerability to disease are directly tied to the health of our planet. If the health of our planet is in crisis, so are we. If we don’t begin to address and create more sustainable solutions to addressing global health problems, the situation will all only get worse from here. But we’re optimistic and I would say through Reaching the Last Mile, we are trying to think about innovative ways to address global health and disease control programs.”

## Bridging the Finance Gap

# FINDING THE AMAZON INC. OF CLIMATE ACTION

---

**With an estimated US\$2-3 trillion of extra investment needed annually to realise the Sustainable Development Goals, financial institutions have much to do to bridge the climate finance gap. The Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum heard from two contrasting voices on this critical issue: a sustainability expert changing attitudes within the conservative world of banking and an Indian venture capitalist betting on the climate unicorns of the future.**

"We're in Code Red," observes Elenis Giokis of CNN, getting straight to the point in her conversation with Swapna Gupta, Partner at Avaana Capital, and Jérôme Ponrouch, Head of CSR and Sustainability for the Middle East and Africa at BNP Paribas.

Pressure to accelerate climate action has exposed a widening gap between pledges and action on climate finance, with as much as US\$3 trillion needed annually to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The banking sector has been slow to react to the looming crisis, a situation aggravated by the 2008 economic downturn. However, Ponrouch insists that the industry is today better equipped to make an impact, highlighting BNP Paribas' commitment to mobilise more than 350 billion euros by 2025 for environmental and social causes.

---

**"Public money and blended finance need to be deployed more quickly to help lower the risk of sustainable investing."**

- Jérôme Ponrouch

---

"The ability to deploy capital where it's needed has never been greater, and the ability to scale innovation and technology has changed dramatically," he says. "We think of the banking industry as a system which lends, but our first responsibility is to understand risk, and climate change is an obvious risk. It's the elephant in the boardroom, and an absolute driver of our strategy."

### **Technologies of the past won't solve the problems of the future**

Gupta agrees that marrying technology with capital can be the catalyst for change in developing nations. Her company is investing in 20 clean tech start-ups in India. "Leapfrogging is the only way to move nations forward, and that mostly happens when technology becomes part of the equation," she says. "But technologies of the past can't solve the problems of the future."

With around a fifth of the world's population, India plays a dual role in climate change as both a contributor to the problem and a potential part of the solution, a fact which underlines the significance of Avaana Capital's work.

"Ninety per cent of the emissions in countries [like India] are from three sectors: supply chain mobility, energy and food systems; and these sectors also contribute between 70 and 80 per cent of global GDP. If we're able to find solutions here, we'll be able to find solutions to climate change sooner rather than later. But the truth is, everyone is sleeping at the wheel. Somehow, innovation must happen in a way where the big corporations and entrepreneurs work together."

Scaling such innovation needs four things to happen, Gupta explains. First, it needs solutions accessible to all countries. Second, it needs early adopters of these solutions, particularly large corporations willing to work with start-ups. Third, it requires supportive policies and regulations, and finally, the right academic infrastructure to bridge from the laboratory to the production line.

---

Capital is an essential ingredient in each of these stages. Investors like Avaana Capital are helping to build the start-up ecosystem. “We are partners in the journey,” Gupta says, “to help them one day achieve a scale where they could be acquired.”

But what happens when sustainable development is either not profitable enough or too risky to attract private funding? How can we ensure that the billions of dollars in climate finance pledged each year at the UN Climate Change Conference, also known as COP, translate into action on the ground?

### Counting the cost of climate risk

According to Ponrouch, public money and blended finance need to be deployed more quickly to help lower the risk of sustainable investing. “We sometimes feel in the banking industry that we are misunderstood, but every day, we have dozens of regulators to contend with, and millions of customers who count on us, today, tomorrow and in the foreseeable future.”

“They count on us not to make any mistakes or lose even a single cent,” he cautions. “So, the cost of risk is extremely important, but we’re not giving up. And what you see in the industry today is that the best performers are adapting their offering.”

Ponrouch highlights the evolution of his own bank. “The way we engage with the private equity world is dramatically different today compared to 10 years ago. We are much closer to these institutions these days. We have developed various funds that we seed with our own capital. So, while we’re not involved in venture capital, we are involved in private equity. And we work closely with the European central bank regulators and the multilateral development banks.”

Last year, BNP Paribas closed a social bond to help finance a university in Morocco, in partnership with another French bank in the country and the support of the World Bank. “We’re not giving up on blended finance,” Ponrouch insists. “We’re just saying that it is ripe for retooling to support what banks [like us] can offer.”





---

"We believe in banking with those who take climate change and ESG seriously because they are looking to the future," he adds. "Do we want hedge funds or speculators as our shareholders? No. We prefer pension funds and committed investors who believe in our business model."

Can BNP Paribas bring others with it? Its vast balance sheet, which at 2.6 trillion euros is the same size as the economy of a G7 country, suggests that it can. "Our services are deployed in accordance with our sustainability strategy. That's a very powerful governance characteristic. And when help over the last mile is needed, that's when we step in with philanthropy. We have committed around 200 million euros in philanthropic money as part of our strategy."



Venture capitalists like Avaana Capital arguably have a more optimistic attitude to risk, Gupta explains. "When we build portfolios, we invest in around 20 to 25 companies during a fund's lifetime. Of course, some will be mistakes, but imagine if five of them work. These are your North Stars."

"Every company is a start-up before it becomes a large corporation," she continues. "Typically, we step in during that zero to one part of the journey, where it's risky and it may fail. But if it does work, the potential impact is huge."

---

**"Why can't you create an Amazon of climate? Or an Uber, or a Pinterest? Warren Buffet, Larry Fink, Bill Gates, all the big investors say the next 1,000 unicorns will be in climate tech."**

- Swapna Gupta

---

### **Profit versus planet**

According to Gupta, one unicorn in the making is its investee company Terro.do, a social networking platform catering to India's climate workforce, which could number over 100 million within the next 10 to 20 years. "Why can't you create an Amazon of climate? Or an Uber, or a Pinterest? Warren Buffet, Larry Fink, Bill Gates, all the big investors say the next 1,000 unicorns will be in climate tech. That's the reason why we're doing what we're doing."

Gupta sees no conflict between making a profit and saving the planet. "Why can't they co-exist? You can build profitable start-ups that also serve the planet. That's our fundamental investment rationale. And we're thinking globally as well as locally. We're asking what these companies can do for the world."



**Swapna Gupta**  
Partner, Avaana Capital



---

“In developing countries, nearly 90 per cent of the emissions are from three key sectors - mobility, energy transition and food systems. If you can find solutions across these three key areas, we can solve climate change sooner than later. And I believe that the next 1,000 unicorns will be climate-tech.”



**Jérôme Ponrouch**  
Head of CSR and Sustainability  
Middle East and Africa, BNP Paribas

---

“Blended finance is public money meant to derisk and catalyse the deployment of private capital. The way this public money is being deployed to accelerate the mobilisation of private capital is not happening quickly enough.”

## VOICES OF YOUTH

### **Sustainability is our greatest opportunity**

The climate challenges of today will be fought by the generation of tomorrow. Two alumni of previous Zayed Sustainability Prize Global High Schools category winners, Toby Thorpe, Australia's youngest elected representative, and Kenyan Jackline Wambua, currently studying economics and political science at Stanford University, delivered inspiring monologues on the lessons they have learned during their short, but eventful, journeys as sustainability leaders.



Toby Thorpe

## NEXT NEVER STOPS

---

Since my school won the Zayed Sustainability Prize in 2017, I've been on a journey that was ignited by a passion to learn about sustainability and to act. Coming to Abu Dhabi exposed me for the first time to climate change and what it means to people's lives. You see, I live in a community in Tasmania surrounded by some of the most pristine landscapes you could ever come across. Being in Abu Dhabi, connecting with people, seeing what they were doing to make an impact was incredibly empowering. But understanding what that meant in my own backyard at home was really challenging.

Until I flew back to Tasmania, to communities facing wildfires and to an evacuation centre. That was when climate change hit home.

When I left school, I went to Bali in Indonesia to work with other young people on sustainability projects. There I learned that sustainability is not just my generation's biggest challenge, but our greatest opportunity, to change the world with solutions. That's the power of making an impact on the world.

So, I worked throughout Southeast Asia. I learned many things, but I felt disconnected from my generation back home. I wanted to make an impact there too. That's when I started the Climate Leaders Program, the biggest project I've ever worked on. It came from the passion of connecting with other people, and the conviction that if I was feeling disconnected, perhaps there were other young people out there who felt the same way.

Today, the Climate Leaders Program engages with thousands of students across Australia and the world on sustainability solutions, igniting their interest in helping their communities. It's something I'm incredibly proud of.

---

**"I learned that sustainability is not just my generation's biggest challenge, but our greatest opportunity, to change the world with solutions. That's the power of making an impact on the world."**

- Toby Thorpe

---

The importance of connection and empathy is underrated. We can't make progress, we can't impact people's lives for the better around the world, unless we talk about empathy and connection.

After university, I decided to do something a little crazy again. On my 21st birthday I was sworn in as Deputy Mayor of the Huon Valley, the youngest deputy mayor in Tasmanian history, and one of the youngest elected representatives in Australia.

One thing I've taken from this year's Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week is a comment made by Dr Sultan Al Jaber, the UAE's climate envoy, that 'next never stops'. I don't know where next is for me, but I know that next week, I'm moving my first climate motion as an elected representative, in calling for climate action and sustainability to be the core business of my municipality – to continue to inspire the next generation of leaders in Tasmania and Australia.

# WE MUST PRACTISE SEEING EACH OTHER

---

My school also won the Zayed Sustainability Prize in 2017. Our winning project reduced the school's electricity costs, helping to save money to enroll more girls. It was truly an 'Aha' moment for me. Seeing more girls access education and break the cycle of poverty. The Prize has been key to my educational journey.

We are only on Earth for so long, and while we are here, we must make transformational changes for the generations that are to come. We must put people at the centre of every solution we make.

---

**“It is about time we embraced ‘Sawubona’. It’s time we saw each other. It’s time to listen to each other, because if we don’t do that, we will just end up in a room full of brilliant ideas where everyone is competing to be heard.”**

- Jackline Wambua

---

Today, every leader says we must listen to our communities. Here at the Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum, we see pictures of communities that have been impacted by the Prize; we see how agriculture has transformed lives.

But the question is, where are these communities in this auditorium?. What can we learn from the conversations at this forum, and the recommendations of our speakers, about what it means to have a community?

There is a word I like in Zulu called 'Sawubona'. It means I see you, I value you, and I am here. As we go into our communities, as we formulate solutions, we must practise seeing each other. We must recognise the voices at the table and those not at the table. Because if we don't do that, we will continue to make recommendations while climate change keeps running, much faster than we can.

As a young leader of sustainability projects in Kenya, helping victims of domestic violence reintegrate into the community, I value the Prize for seeing me – for giving me the tools to become what I am today.

It is a matter of realising that the true heroes are often back at home. As leaders, for all our education and all our wonderful ideas, we must listen, for both what we can hear and what we cannot hear.

It is about time we embraced 'Sawubona'. It's time we saw each other. It's time to listen to each other, because if we don't do that, we will just end up in a room full of brilliant ideas where everyone is competing to be heard.

The changemakers of tomorrow are not in history. They are not the ones we see on our TVs. We are here. I encourage everyone to practise Sawubona – to listen, to see one another, to hear those communities not at the table. That is the only way we can transform the brilliant ideas of our young people into tangible solutions.



Jackline Wambua

## Impact through Innovation

# VIEWING SOCIAL IMPACT THROUGH THE LENS OF THE BENEFICIARY

To tackle some of the world's greatest sustainability challenges, innovators must look, and listen, before they leap. The Forum's final panel, titled Impact Through Innovation, debated how organisations can improve access to essential services such as healthcare, water and energy, even in remote and vulnerable communities, through both technical advances and enhanced delivery models.



The statistics are daunting. Three in 10 people, or two billion worldwide, lack access to safe drinking water at home. Breast cancer is the most common cancer but despite advances in technology, nearly three-quarters of the 700,000 women who die from breast cancer every year, are in developing economies. Even as the world grapples with the challenge of producing enough food, agriculture drives deforestation and biodiversity loss, while food systems are one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

The urgent need to address these widespread socio-economic and environmental challenges is today spurring more concerted action around the world. Governments are pushing ahead with shifts in policy and economic practices to close the gaps and deliver the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the decisive 'Decade of Action' (2021-30). Entrepreneurs and the private sector are also harnessing their businesses as a force for good and driving innovation to impact and improve lives.

Against this backdrop, the third panel discussion at the Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum, Impact through Innovation, drove home the fundamental truth that for innovation to truly succeed, the interests, preferences and constraints of the people who will ultimately benefit from it must remain at the forefront of the decision-making process.

The session, which brought together Nicole Iseppi, Managing Director for Global Energy Innovation at the Bezos Earth Fund, and two recipients of the Zayed Sustainability Prize - David Pong, CEO, Watroam, and Guillermo Pepe, Founder and CEO, Mamotest - offered insights into how organisations, large and small, can innovate sustainable solutions to communities in need.

The entrepreneurial journeys described by Pong and Pepe, two changemakers from Southeast Asia and Latin America, respectively, vividly demonstrated that to drive value and effect real change, listening to the voices of beneficiaries is imperative. Because when structural social and economic barriers are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of communities, technology alone cannot bring about change.

---

## **Bridging the gaps in women's access to healthcare**

In Latin America, one man's quest to democratise access to healthcare and drastically reduce breast cancer mortality through potentially life-saving diagnostics began with a conversation with his father, a doctor specialising in breast imaging diagnosis. His frustration at being unable to save lives because women sought care only in the final stages of their illness, caught the attention of Guillermo Pepe, who initiated research into why women were unable to obtain an early diagnosis.

Having lived in Europe for over a decade, Pepe had taken access to healthcare for granted, along with the knowledge that with early diagnosis, most female breast cancer victims survive. He soon discovered four main barriers to women receiving the right diagnosis and care: inadequate technology, a shortage of mammography units outside major cities, the lack of specialist doctors and poor education.

Pepe believed that a telemedicine-based solution that connected mammography units with medical specialists to deliver a diagnosis in less than 24 hours - instead of up to nine months in many cases - was the solution.

However, he soon realised that this was only the beginning. "We were just seeing the tip of the iceberg of the problem," he said.

So, what was the way forward for women diagnosed with breast cancer? How could they access additional tests like an ultrasound or a biopsy? How would a diagnosis ensure survival? The complexity of these questions vexed Pepe. "We were really worried about how to solve this because we were just opening a door, and they weren't able to get treatment on time."

Undeterred, Pepe devised a platform that today facilitates 100 per cent traceability of women patients and continuous follow up until they receive treatment. Founded in 2013, Mamotest is the first tele mammography network in Latin America. Recognised by the Zayed Sustainability Prize in 2022, it operates state-of-the-art diagnostic centres in underserved areas to provide high-quality mammograms at low cost, enabling women to overcome geographical, technological and economic barriers to access healthcare. Remarkably, the data-driven end-to-end solution has increased breast cancer survival rates, with improved access to both treatment and medicine.

## **Purposeful impact**

"It took us nine years to get there," said Pepe. "Technology is important, but it's only part of the equation. We need to understand the problem and how to implement the technology, and to evenly distribute it to democratise access to quality healthcare."

Breakthrough technologies that have revolutionised healthcare in developed countries may not necessarily work in regions where connectivity is still an issue, said Pepe, who strongly believes that there is an urgent need for social impact businesses to address the biggest problems facing humanity.

---

**"Be a missionary, not a mercenary. Go for a mission, go for a purpose in life. And you can make money by solving the biggest social problems in the world."**  
- Guillermo Pepe

---

When he founded Mamotest a decade ago, people found it hard to understand the concept of an impact-driven business, said Pepe. "We had a purpose - we wanted to save lives, but we also had a business. It was hard to explain that to people in the beginning."





“In the future, it is going to be a must for all companies to have social impact,” said the entrepreneur.

“So, my advice to the next generation is to seize this opportunity. Be a missionary, not a mercenary. Go for a mission, go for a purpose in life. And you can make money by solving the biggest social problems in the world.”

### **A roadmap for clean water solutions**

For Singapore-based David Pong, it was a vision to end global water scarcity that inspired the creation of Wateroam, a water innovation social enterprise dedicated to developing water filtration solutions.

Graduating from university eight years ago, he was determined to address the global water crisis which still affects an estimated two billion people today, whose consumption of contaminated water from surface water sources often leads to fatal outbreaks of waterborne diseases, such as diarrhoea and dysentery.

The goal for Pong and his two co-founders was to develop water filtration systems that were affordable, easy to deploy, simple to use and set up and operable without electricity. Coming from a country with universal access to safe drinking water, however, forced them to undergo a steep learning curve.

“We started off with big, complicated systems with a lot of tubing, and we expected the local people to use them,” remembers Pong, explaining that up to 20 prototypes were designed, some involving a 10-step process to operate. “We even printed out instructions expecting people to read them, but unsurprisingly, this wasn’t the case!”

### **The power of listening**

After six months of going back to the drawing board, Pong said the team switched their approach.

“We realised that listening and having empathy was key. Our trips were no longer about solving the problem ourselves; it was about sitting down and listening to what people had to say, particularly the local women, as they were mostly responsible for finding safe drinking water for their family.”

According to Pong, the “Aha!” moment arrived when they saw one of the villagers pumping up the tyre of his bicycle. “We realised that intuitive action was universally understood and so we made it the basis of our flagship product, a bicycle-pump-operated water filtration system.”

Thanks to funding from the Zayed Sustainability Prize, the Wateroam filtration system has reached an estimated 250,000 people across 40 developing nations, including those hit by natural and humanitarian disasters, and more recently, the victims of the 2022 floods in Pakistan and the war in Ukraine.

Echoing the experience of Guillermo Pepe at Mamotest, Pong said that technologies conceived in the developed world are often ineffective in remote and hard-to-reach communities. “We must find new ways to help these communities,” he said. “We must listen and have empathy for local people, rather than make too many assumptions on the ground. And for innovation to be adaptable and feasible in the long run, it must really come from the heart.”

### **Philanthropy shows the way forward**

What are large corporations doing to turn the tide against arguably the planet’s greatest existential threat – climate change? One of the world’s wealthiest individuals, Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, has made it a priority with a US\$10 billion grant to restore nature, transform food systems, and take collective action to create a more sustainable future.



One of the fund's central strategies is to accelerate the adoption of technological innovation to solve "multi-industry" issues, as Nicole Iseppi, Managing Director for Global Innovation, explains.

"Food systems generate about 23 per cent of total global greenhouse gas emissions, and as 50 per cent of all land around the world is used for some form of food production, we are looking at the food and agriculture industry through the eyes of climate and renewables. We believe that net zero farming machinery, bio-fertilisers and other innovations can accelerate the transition more quickly."

Like her fellow speakers Guillermo Pepe and David Pong, she believes that knowledge-sharing and listening play a fundamental role, pointing to the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet, recently launched in collaboration with The Rockefeller Foundation and The IKEA Foundation.

With their help, the Bezos Earth Fund is exploring ways to help developing countries innovate climate solutions, working in partnership with the private sector, with a focus on Africa and Southeast Asia.

"We are looking at new business models and ways to improve execution through innovation, through technologies like metro-grids and distributed renewable energy, to reduce the cost of renewables in regions like Africa, so that they can increase their deployment," says Iseppi.

"There are some amazing start-ups, amazing entrepreneurs, amazing ideas everywhere. But how do we catalyse them to reach market scale? That is something else we are exploring at the Bezos Earth Fund, to work together to find and scale better solutions."



**David Pong**  
Chief Executive Officer &  
Co-founder Wateroam



“We are tackling the global water crisis where two billion people are forced to drink contaminated water from surface water sources. We started with the intention to develop water filtration systems that are decentralised, affordable, easy to deploy, simple to use and to set up, and can even be independent of electricity.”



**Nicole Iseppi**  
Director of Energy Innovation  
Bezos Earth Fund

“Food systems generate about 23 per cent of total global greenhouse gas emissions, and as 50 per cent of all land around the world is used for some form of food production, we are looking at the food and agriculture industry through the eyes of climate and renewables.”

**Guillermo Pepe**  
Founder & Chief Executive Officer,  
Mamotest



“I always say that technology is here, but it’s not evenly distributed. We have to find a way to distribute it and to democratise access to quality healthcare.”



## WE MUST LISTEN TO WHAT THE EARTH IS TELLING US

---

“He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present or future, for it is from the past that we learn,” said Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, the Founding Father of the United Arab Emirates, whose inspiring legacy the Zayed Sustainability Prize carries forward.

Our present-day climate challenges also call for humility and the willingness to learn from the past. As the speakers at the 2023 Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum observed, realising a more sustainable future demands that we understand and adapt to the rhythm of nature, and listen to those who live off the land and sea. That is the essence of truly ambitious, inclusive climate action.


For all the remarkable technological advances made in the twenty-first century, a quarter of the world’s population still relies on subsistence farming, a way of life that has remained relatively unchanged for generations. Meanwhile, as the world’s population has soared - predominantly in the countries of the Global South, our food systems have grown to account for nearly a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions.

Fixing food challenges will therefore go a long way in mitigating the threats of climate change, illness and disease. And it must be done on a massive scale, to attract the large-scale involvement of the private sector and more affordable investment.

Dually, a significant portion of the global population, estimated to be around 730 million people, lack access to electricity, while over two billion people do not have access to safe drinking water. This disparity is particularly acute in last mile communities, where access to necessities is often limited or non-existent, and where the negative impacts of climate change, such as droughts and flooding, are increasingly severe.

While a silver bullet to defeat the existential threat of climate change remains elusive, today’s AI-powered digital transformation is generating an unprecedented volume of information, at a previously unimagined speed. This is leading to better decision-making, particularly in developing regions which, historically, have lacked quality data. More reliable forecasting of outbreaks of vector-borne diseases like malaria stimulated by rising global temperatures, is one of the many benefits of this new trend. Better data is also enabling more targeted interventions, and the more efficient use of public and philanthropic money.

Technological advances like smart phones and the internet have allowed nations in the Global South to leapfrog in their development. Unsurprisingly, venture capitalists predict that the unicorn companies of the future will increasingly be those that focus on the sustainability challenges of these countries.



---

However, the most effective innovations are not always the most high-tech. Indeed, as the winners of the Zayed Sustainability Prize have proved, often the most widely adopted solutions are those which are the simplest to use, and which complement existing cultural practices. Policy innovation is equally important. The imperative of sustainable development demands regulatory changes, such as the implementation of new measures to help lower the risk of sustainable financing for private banks and a new carbon trading regime to allow smallholder farmers to monetise their emissions savings.

As His Excellency Dr Sultan Al Jaber, the UAE Special Envoy for Climate Change, COP28 President-Designate and Director General of the Zayed Sustainability Prize, has stated, the world needs a business mindset to tackle the climate crisis. This is true even in last mile communities, where Zayed Sustainability Prize winners have introduced off-grid renewable energy solutions as an alternative to diesel-powered heating, lighting and water extraction. This is helping farmers to not only save the money they would have otherwise spent on polluting fossil fuels, but ultimately to profit from the shift to clean energy.

New market approaches are emerging, best illustrated by the rise in social impact businesses, where contributing to the collective good is as important as the profit returns. In the future, enterprises that generate yields beyond money, as Adrian Grenier has described, could become more common.

With funding needed at every step of a company's evolution from a start-up into a global corporation, the stewardship of the financial sector will play a critical role. As Jerome Ponrouch, Head of CSR and Sustainability for the Middle East and Africa at BNP Paribas, observes, the sustainability strategies of the world's largest financial institutions are a powerful governance tool.

Ultimately, however, the realisation of more ambitious, more inclusive sustainable development will depend on the engagement of our youth. This in turn will rely on the willingness of today's sustainability leaders to provide all our young people, including those from the world's least developed countries, a seat at the table. The United Arab Emirates has committed to do so as the host of COP28 this year. The determination of our young people to see sustainable development as an exciting opportunity and not just as a matter of great responsibility, will allow all countries to witness a brighter tomorrow.





