Talking Sustainability

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The following is a semi-fictional short story based on a series of workshops that took place in Helsingborg, Sweden, between October 2022 and March 2023. Ideas and discussions have been condensed to emphasize the key takeaways. Characters are fictional.

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Chapter 1
Deciphering Sustainability

Is this too complex? Marina wondered as she thought about the different layers of sustainability science. She lifted her sight toward the coworking space she was visiting that day. Next week, she will be giving a workshop... She had several years of experience in sustainability studies and sometimes she would be afraid of overcomplicating it. The concept had been gaining momentum in recent years and more people were starting to become engaged in it. However, this popularity also meant sustainability was starting to be used as a buzzword; with the goal of generating clicks and likes on the Internet, or in the marketing strategy of private companies who had no real intention to be sustainable. Despite this, the implications of approaches to sustainability or the different frameworks used were far from being talked about in the ordinary lives of people. No one seemed to take the initiative to start the conversation. People wouldn't make small talk about it. Maybe because of a lack of knowledge or because the discussion could bring uncomfortable reflections.

Marina was now designing a workshop to initiate conversations about sustainability among citizens. This was a project to create more spaces to learn and discuss the topic, while generating awareness to a wider audience. *But where to start. On a deeper level, sustainability could be interchanged with our philosophy of life, couldn't it?*

However, maybe this was not the best way to open the conversation. An option could be to start with one of the most common frameworks that divides sustainability into three pillars: **environmental, social and economic.** This framework argues that a balance is essential between the three of them to ensure a sustainable future. However, this hadn't happened in the twenty-first century society. The economic pillar had been consciously exploited by some groups for their own benefit and greed, compromising the other two. Ironically, the unbalance created by this abuse was only nearing the collapse of the environmental and social pillars, which would eventually make the economic one redundant.

Marina broke her train of thought to talk to a co-worker sitting a few meters from her. His name was Thomas. Every time she came to work at this place, she would find him here, as an employee of a company that provided digital services.

"Do you know what the planetary boundaries are?" Marina asked him.

"Will you judge me if I say no?" he answered with a friendly yet curious smile.

It's true that there are environmentalists who are very judgmental

towards people who are not involved in the sustainability sphere, aren't they? Marina thought and smiled back. "Of course not, we all ignore a lot of things. It's just that most of the newspaper articles you see about sustainability focus on climate change."

"Maybe… I assume climate change is only one of the planetary boundaries, right?" Thomas asked.

"Right, to keep the stability of the Earth's ecosystems. It is one of the most important ones though, because it can irreversibly perturb the other eight."

Thomas felt uneasy. His job wasn't very related to sustainability, but he was aware of global warming, biodiversity loss and other issues. He noticed that he frequently pushes the thought of global warming down. It's not surprising since it seems like a gargantuan task to undertake… But he knew that avoidance wasn't going to help anything. He's felt a longing to get involved in sustainability, but: where to start and how? Thomas took a zip of his coffee and looked back at his laptop. *Maybe more of this another day. Right now, I have a deadline.*

Marina saw Thomas looking back at his laptop without saying another word. She lowered her sight to her notebook and read the second heading she had written: 'social sustainability'. *Now how to explain this?* She stood up, took her jacket, and crossed several desks where other co-workers were engaged in their tasks. She got into the backyard of the building where several trees provided shadow from the midday sun: the perfect temperature for this time of day. She sat on one of the benches in front of a small fountain designed to appear as a pile of rocks. Her privilege to work with sustainability was not unacknowledged to her. She had the opportunity to choose her career after having a good education without having to take unfavorable loans. She also had never encountered any health problems, any small ones had been resolved quickly and covered by her healthcare. It's a pretty good system. The government had systems in place to keep people from going bankrupt without any social support. But she also knew this was not the case for the vast majority of people in the world.

If people's basic needs are unfulfilled, how can one expect people to engage with sustainability or even have the space to care at all?

It made sense, humans first need to secure food, water, health, shelter, etc. in order to survive in present day society. How can we expect people to act sustainability if their basic needs aren't met? Besides, it might not mean that they don't care –maybe they don't have the space or resources to take action…*This sounds like a great topic to discuss in the workshop.*

Marina knew this all made perfect sense in her head but was eager to find out how other people view the issue. Society often tells us that the solution to our problems can be fixed with a product or service. We've been hardwired to expect results quickly and easily and companies are profiting off of this. In this way, companies have exploited our sense of self and fulfillment, by offering a 'silver bullet' solution. All you need is money. But how many times have these products failed to deliver on their promise of providing happiness? Does this lead to happiness that is sustainable, or is it a momentary distraction or fix? And how many more times will they fail until the natural environment is destroyed? Excited about debating this topic in the workshop, Marina wrote it in her notebook and stood up from the bench to walk back to her desk.

As she was arriving at the desk to sit down, Thomas threw a question to her.

"Do you think we should go back to the Stone Age? Maybe that is more sustainable."

Marina laughed and asked ironically "Do you believe in balance Thomas?".

"No," Thomas answered jokingly.

"Maybe rewinding human 'progress' would be the best for the ecosystems. It is sad that with all this human potential, intelligence, and knowledge; we ended up at this point."

Thomas continued to reflect and answered "Well I guess if we think about

balance, everything has an impact on the environment, to a small or large extent. So, the issue is not about going back to caveman times. It would be more about finding how we can sustainably live with the ecosystems we interact and need. Do you think that is possible?"

Marina took a moment to process the idea.

"I believe it is possible, but I think it's complex. It's a really good question, though. I think I will add this question to the workshop and see what people think."

Chapter 2
Individual Impact

 Attendees to the workshop Individual Impact & Collective Structures of Sustainability had taken their seats and were ready to start. Marina gave a general introduction of what to expect during the workshop. She then proceeded to explain the first activity: "We will now start with a meditation session. This is because I believe the practice opens new doors to perceptions of ourselves and societ – beyond the well-known fact that meditation has health benefits that have been proven by research. It allows innovation to flourish and bring new outside-the-box strategies to deal with sustainability challenges. In a world where corporations are competing for our attention, reclaiming our time for ourselves is an act of freedom. I hope this resonates with you at some level and encourages you to give it a chance if you have never done it before."

 Everyone in the room seemed willing to try. Marina played the pre-recorded meditation guidance from a specialist in the field. The session lasted for 10 minutes. After the session, people shared their thoughts about the experience, which were mostly positive. Many of the attendees mentioned they had already tried meditation, which Marina found interesting. She realized that in the last years, increasing connections were made between contemplative practices and sustainability.
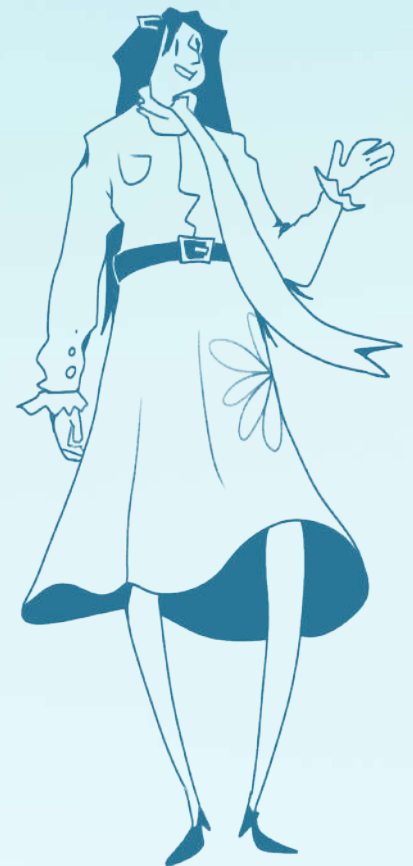
The workshop then moved to the next stage: small group discussions. Participants were given a prompt: **What actions can individuals take to contribute toward sustainability? Agree on two actions, a low impact one and a high impact one.** The four teams split up and discussed for several minutes. Then, they would share their answers with the entire room. To keep track of the answers and facilitate them as reference for discussion, Marina collected all of them and projected them on a screen. The answers given were:

Team	Low impact	High impact
1.	Changing to renewable energy	Becoming vegetarian
2.	Spreading awareness	Use sustainable transport
3.	Recycling	Avoid flying
4.	Consuming local and second-hand	Participating in organizations

"Ok good answers, thanks everyone!" Marina said to the room and then proposed: "Would anyone like to comment on the answers of another team and describe why you think they may be different from yours?" After a few seconds of silence, one of the attendees who was named Damian ventured to give the first answer.

"When reading others' answers, I was thinking, for example, flying, it is indeed the most polluting way of traveling. However, most of these emissions come from business traveling, so if we avoid it ourselves as individuals, it really does not change much. Unless it is companies that implement the avoidance of flying in their policies, then that would have a greater impact."
Another attendee, Klara, continued the discussion: "Yes, I agree, but for example talking about sustainable transport, if there is not a proper train network, and subsidies are better for flying than trains… That makes it both more efficient and cheaper to use planes, doesn't it? How does one choose trains over planes under this logic?" People in the room felt this was a real situation.

"Anything about the other answers?" Marina encouraged the room.

Zoe decided to take the word up next. "Our team wrote for example 'changing to renewable energy' as low impact because this is not possible everywhere. Maybe in some countries you can choose, especially those that have more renewables in their network and have the technology to let you choose. But some countries don't have this and are still highly

dependent on fossil fuels and gas. So, it is not easy for individuals to decide over this impact. What we wrote on the high impact side 'becoming vegetarian', we believe it could be more accessible. And even though it is constrained by culture and the food industry lobbying in many countries, we thought this could be a more reasonable opportunity for individuals to have an impact. Since it is quite clear the detrimental environmental effects that beef has on so many areas such as land, emissions, consumption of water and the need of feeding cattle. And this without mentioning the ethical implications of the entire meat industry, not just beef."

Johan nodded his head and replied: "I agree, the food industry is something that requires a big transformation in terms of regulation and culture, and that can bring about a larger change. We wrote recycling as low impact and I believe it goes hand in hand with consuming locally which another team wrote in this category. It feels these are some things to do as responsible citizens, but they will not bring a big impact. I like Team 4's idea of participating in organizations. It feels like many of the changes needed here would only happen if people organize in some way and push for it. So, thinking about this, if I would do the exercise again, I would probably change my mind and write that instead of avoiding flying."
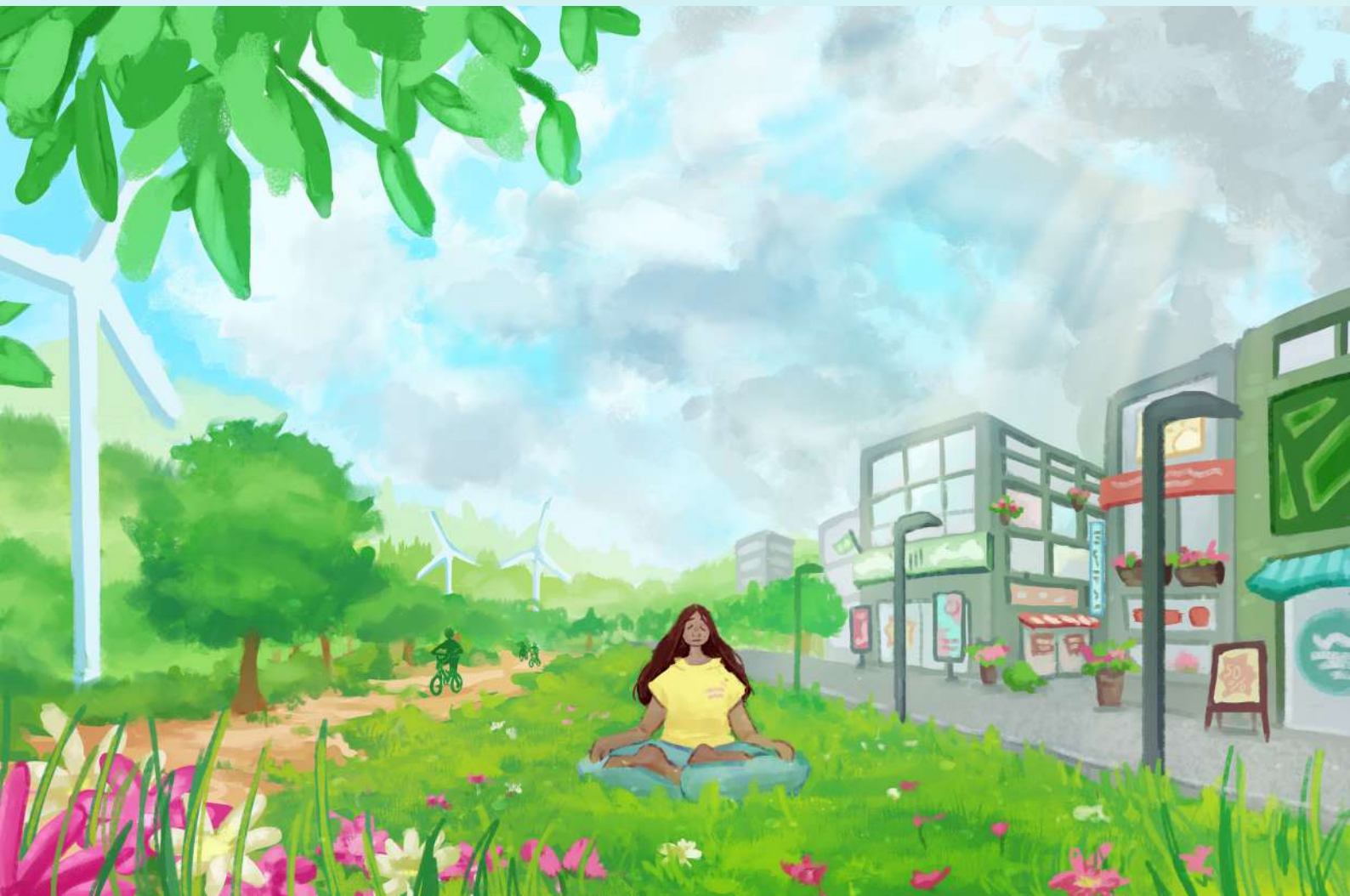
Klara participated again: "I find the one about spreading awareness interesting. It really depends on the level of reach an individual can have. If you do it only with your small circle of people maybe the impact is low; however, if you give a course on sustainability or talk to wider audiences, this can increase your impact considerably. Famous people should do more on this aspect I believe, although many see it as a political stance... which doesn't make sense."

Marina took the word next: "Thanks all for your very interesting reflections. Many of the arguments you made are linked with the next part of the workshop which I will introduce after the break. I just want to mention and encourage you to try and do as many of these things as possible, even if you don't believe they have a high impact. A sustainable transformation must come from all angles. And yes, there are things that may not be an option for each of us. No one can be the perfect sustainability role model; we need to find a balance that works for each of us. However, many things we do only out of habit, and habits can be changed to be aligned with the type of future we want. And who knows, maybe on the way we inspire more and more people!" She smiled. "We will now take a fifteen-minute break and we'll be back to talk about collective structures which some of you have already mentioned. See you in a bit!"

Chapter 3
Collective Structures

 Marina walked back into the workshop room. The blue walls had small windows facing other areas of the building's second floor and there was a large window facing the backyard. She waited while people came back in the room and felt happy about attendees connecting with each other. It had been a good first half of the workshop, with a lot of interesting input and ideas that could be developed for more discussion afterwards. She took a few more seconds while conversations faded slowly.

 "I hope you had a good coffee break and exchanged some interesting reflections" she began. "I want to start this second part of the workshop with a distinction, which I think is very important when discussing sustainability. This distinction is between individual change and structural change. In the first half of the workshop, most of the answers were focused on the individual level; meaning we should change habits and make more sustainable decisions. However, as we discussed the answers with the group, I really liked how structural elements started to appear in the conversation. As some of you well said, these structural aspects can constrain our decisions, limiting our ability to reduce our environmental impact, and limiting our relationship with sustainability.

 "It is interesting and not surprising that these individual actions seem to be the most popular in many digital media trends. Globalization and our economic system encourage people to become the perfect consumers, for example by promoting the continuous acquisition of goods, arguing that as long they are 'green', it is possible to continue this trend without consequences. This is a discourse which argues that there is nothing wrong with wanting more things as long as they are produced sustainably." Marina paused for a moment... "Of course, we need to consume certain things to satisfy our basic needs, and ideally these would be produced sustainably. However, there is no argument for extending our consumption

to things we don't really need. This consumption will also not lead to long-lasting happiness, despite producers' promises.

"As Klara mentioned, spreading awareness is an interesting one because it goes one level above from becoming a 'good consumer'. Here, we are moving from looking at our relationship with sustainability to be more than a consumption based one. We start engaging in a more impactful individual way. I can think of some more actions at this level. For example, voting for environmentally concerned parties, signing petitions, donating money to impactful organizations, and moving personal investments and pension savings out of funds that have fossil fuel companies in their portfolio. Many of these actions are also necessary to continue to push for a sustainable transition." Marina paused again as she wanted to be clear on the next sentence. "Nevertheless, one of the goals of our workshops is to argue that these actions I mentioned are still not enough. And since I have talked a lot now, would anyone want to participate and answer why they are not enough?"

Several seconds went by while attendees were thinking and sorting out possible answers. Zoe was the one to take up the word this time. "I think it is what Damian was hinting at before the break. These actions rest on the assumption that everyone will do them. Which is not necessarily true for people who are not actively interested or simply because it is inconvenient for them." There was a short pause in the room.

Johan complemented: "Also because it is hard to act alone. If people around you aren't trying to work toward these changes, then it may be hard to find motivation. For example, activism is based on several people working toward certain goals. This forvms a sense of identity and unity and brings motivation that if the right causes are pursued, activism can bring about positive change, for example, in sustainability."

"Very true." Marina agreed. "As you mention, activism and social movements can accelerate changes in structures. This is what I would like to discuss now. First, the definition of collective structures: These are impersonal social relations that regulate individuals' connections to material resources and institutions. They constrain and create specific patterns of human action. There are different ways of categorizing them, but a very common one in academia is in three spheres: **economic, political, and social.** What I would like you to do now is to split into three teams, with different members in each team than before. I will assign you one of these three structures for you to answer the following questions: *How does this structure limit/influence our actions? And how does this structure contradict sustainability?*" Let's take fifteen minutes to come up with a team answer and we will reconvene back to discuss as a group."
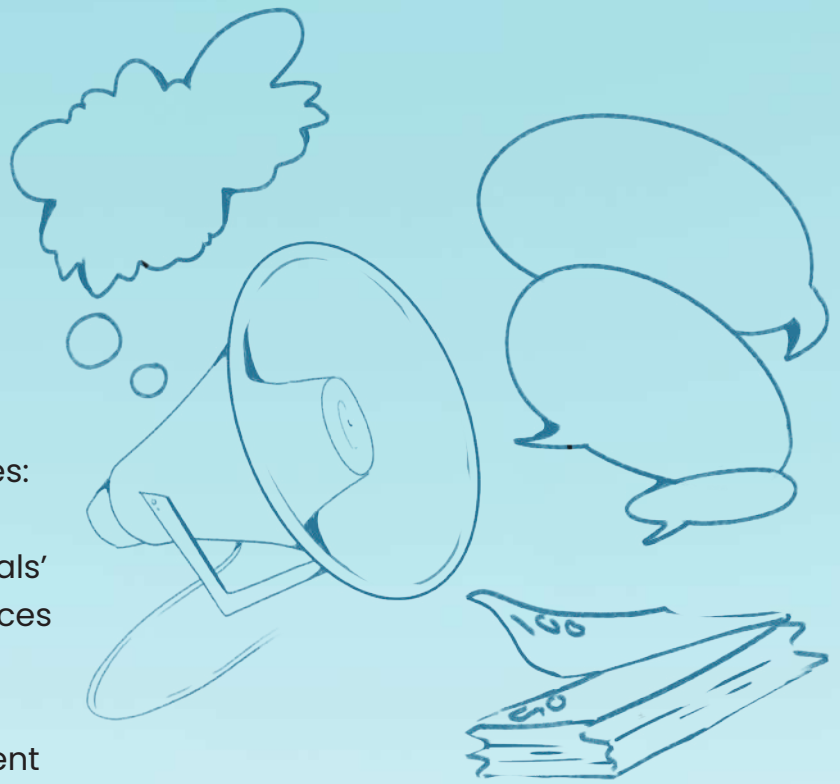
Marina walked around and got close to each of the teams, making sure everything was clear and at the same time, listening to some of the discussions. After the time had passed, she told the group: "Each team will now share their answer with the entire group. Let's listen to all the three teams before discussing so we have all the information and thoughts available. The team that had the economic structure, would you like to start?"

"Sure!" Zoe replied. "We think the economic structure can be super limiting because it is what most people prioritize. And with good reason since as you mentioned before, we need certain resources and services to subsist and develop, which in some countries can be very expensive. And now, talking about how it contradicts sustainability, well the main indicator of 'prosperity' for many countries is economic growth. This type of growth requires the extraction of material resources to provide goods and services. Calling this by its name which is capitalism, this system takes advantage

of extracting the value of nature and people, compromising environmental and social sustainability."

Damian, who was on Zoe's team this time wanted to add: "We also discussed technology and how it is linked to the economic structure because there is this popular idea of green growth. Many trends assume technology will solve all our problems. Unfortunately, people don't realize this is not true and that technology can be used for both good and bad. The general discourse is that new technologies will enable us to solve all sustainability challenges and at the same time they will create more wealth… There is a lot of research disproving this argument, and even pointing out that wealth created will be more unequally distributed than it is already."

"Thanks to the economic team! Let's move to the political team." Marina said as Klara was chosen by her team to share the answer: "Actually, we struggled to isolate the political structure from the economic one. Governments are heavily influenced by industries in their jurisdictions. And many times, they give subsidies to some of these, either because of close ties between decision-makers and executives, or because—even though a company is not necessarily sustainable—it will increase the number of jobs available to inhabitants. We think the solution for this is to enable a just transition where policies and regulations start prioritizing an economy that doesn't mess up the environment and stop subsidizing polluting industries such as fossil fuels."

"Thanks Klara, and the last answer will be provided by…" Marina said as she looked at the remaining team. Johan was the one to speak. "We talked about culture and gender. On one hand culture is very influenced by advertisements and social media nowadays. Who are our role models? Is it activists like Greta Thunberg? Or is it a rich influencer on Instagram?

I believe the trickiest part of this is that culture may affect us unconsciously. Especially if we don't train our critical thinking and we fail to be self-aware and introspective on how we conduct our lives. Talking about gender now, this is a structure that has certainly limited women for centuries. Some progress has been made and access to information is easier, but there is still a long way to go. Not only to create equality but also to understand the intersectionality of societies, and for minorities to have their fair share of representation in decisions. Often, the people who are affected the most and who have the most knowledge, don't have a seat at the decision-making table. For example, in managing certain natural ecosystems, minorities and women have more knowledge and historically vast amounts of experience."

Marina thanked Johan for this last answer. She then moved on to start the discussion. The workshop went on for another twenty minutes. At the end, Marina thanked the participants again for their active participation and invited them for the upcoming workshops.

Chapter 4
Sustainability in Business

Zoe and Damian had been working together for some months as co-founders in their new start-up. Their goal was to mainstream sustainability in the early stages of the company creation. One of the several actions they'd taken was attending Marina's sustainability workshops to develop new skills and learn how to integrate environmental and social considerations to a business. The workshops had been insightful and they had met like-minded people who could become future business partners. The last workshop they attended was named Sustainability Business Development Goals. This session was designed as a follow-up to the previous workshops to focus on the creation of new businesses and discuss their role in a sustainable future.

Both entrepreneurs were now sitting at a coffee place nearby their office. Changing locations helped them channel new thoughts that could sometimes become actionable ideas. Zoe started to talk about a theme discussed in the last workshop. "It's sometimes challenging to innovate in a profit-driven business culture…" Zoe said before taking the first zip of her coffee. "Like, some investors… Yes, they are gradually more interested in solutions that mitigate climate change; however, they also want larger profit margins and quick returns on their money. And this is a best-case scenario… I feel. The rest of them just want to increase their bank account."

Before joining Zoe in this enterprise, Damian had worked for some years in a large, multinational company. Everything was so structured there, with so much internal bureaucracy that changing things seemed to take years. And of course, the most important part for the company was the annual report which mostly focused on the financial performance and the benefits yielded to shareholders. That's what really mattered in the company, he felt. Way more than their claim of improving the world which was persuasively communicated by the marketing team. Of course, there were some

companies doing good, but it was hard to know their intrinsic motives.

"Yes, we've been carrying this mindset for decades at least." Damian answered Zoe. "I think we need to have more transparency on the ownership of companies for example. And have a good understanding of what is the real purpose of each company as well as how they are distributing or reinvesting profits."

Stronger light started to enter through one of the windows and directly illuminated their table. Upon looking at it, Damian realized it would only be momentarily, as the sun shone through a small hole in the heavily clouded sky.

Damian continued. "It is also hard to measure the true impact that each company has without robust measuring tools. Many times, environmental impact assessments are incomplete and may show positive balances. However, it's because the assessments don't include the entire supply chain effects, or other indirect repercussions, like involuntary displacement of residents in an area. Carbon offsets, for example, how long have they been around, and I am not sure how much they've helped... I wonder if

companies at some point will care about the environment and people, independently of revenue."

"Well but that's the inherent nature of traditional businesses, no?" Zoe replied "We need new companies which are not primarily driven by making money. We need companies that yes, use money as a tool in some way, but their goal is directed toward positive environmental and social outcomes."

"Any idea of how to do that?" Damian asked.

Zoe had been an avid student of sustainability since she was a teenager. She had both studied and worked in related fields since graduating university. After her master's degree, she did not feel like following an academic career. Instead, she wanted to have more hands-on experience working directly with society. With all the advancements in science these days, she felt that the most problematic aspect was the disconnection between newly generated knowledge and the failure to integrate it in the daily lives of people.

"We can start by setting up the example ourselves. It should be clear that our company's purpose is directed at making the most positive possible benefit to natural ecosystems, and at the same time, making improvements in people's lives. We already have the vision of the future we are aiming for, and our analysis argues that it is sustainable. However, during our journey there, we must make periodic assessments of both positive and negative impacts." She explained.

Damian felt inspired from the idea. He remembered that a positive aspect of his previous job was the employee development program. This aimed to constantly give new skills and working tools to employees to cope with the fast-paced, ever-changing world.

"I think what you mention can be achieved by being very conscious of the impact and value of our company, including every employee. We must ensure their well-being, so they thrive at work. We should be aware that a high number of working hours does not generate the best result and has a negative impact on workers' health. We can explore things like a four-day working week, for example. What we should definitely have is training on

sustainability like the workshops we've been attending. I also think training on digitalisation and cybersecurity are a must, considering the new rising technologies, like A.I., etc. We should facilitate communication so that it is never a challenge for employees to share ideas and learning opportunities amongst colleagues."

Zoe had at this point taken out her notebook to write down many of the ideas they'd discussed so far. Now she was writing this last thought from Damian. "I agree, we should have these as part of the corporate policies. We shouldn't assume people are already knowledgeable in these areas. I believe they are super important in addition to the basics of a new business. And if we want employees' full trust, and society's, we must be completely transparent, as you said before. We need to be vigilant and be very careful not to provide misleading information or engage in things like greenwashing."

Damian was smiling as he reached for his jacket. "I think we have some great starting points here. I like how this is going, it really feels like building a business of the future. Exciting!"
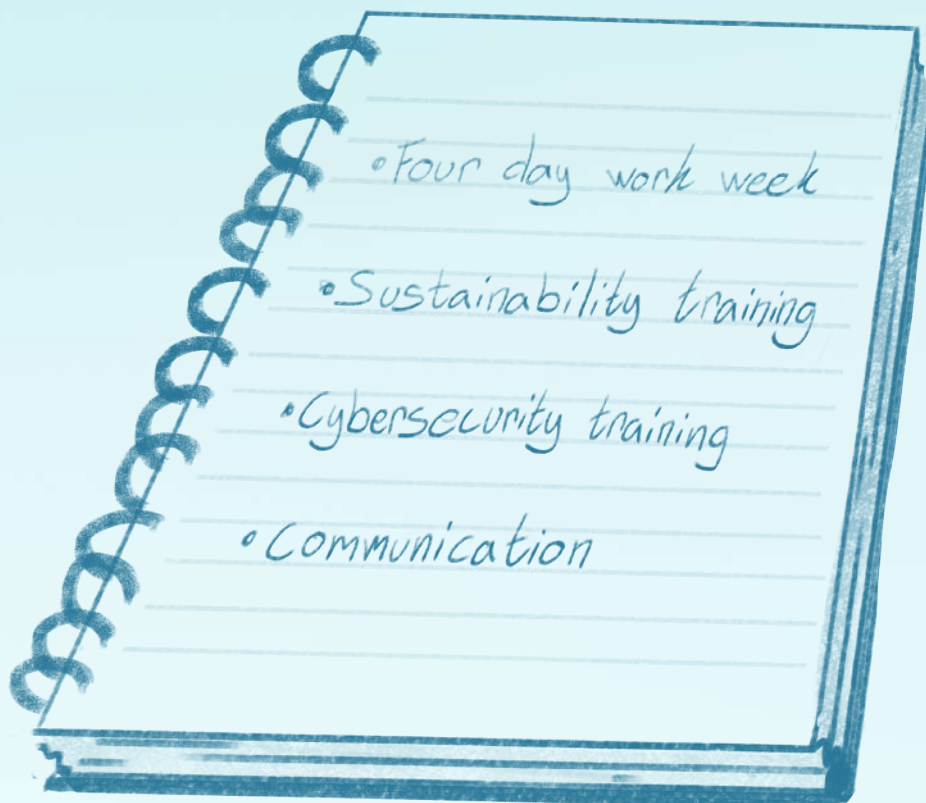
Chapter 5
The Future

More than a decade had passed since Johan attended Marina's sustainability workshops. He was now sitting at one of the many libraries in the city that had been appearing in the last years. The cubicle was designed for people to work on their own facing a large glass window that overlooked the pedestrian street. On the opposite side of the library, several rooms of different sizes could be used for community meetings free of charge. The library–besides selling, renting, and exchanging books–now served as an incubator for new projects that could benefit the community. It also facilitated citizen interactions and areas to hold meetings to plan and execute new ideas.

Johan was now packing his things to leave. He walked to the hall where the entrance of the building was located. He stopped to look at the 'activity wall'. This wall enlisted ongoing projects in the city which people could join. An agroforestry project caught his attention. He was impressed by the number of available open positions. The local production of food continued to rise as imports from foreign countries decreased. Some years ago, these type of projects were only possible thanks to the work of volunteers. Now, with the transition to local production and the introduction of a new local currency, an alternative economy was starting to get more traction. People didn't rely only on global currencies but had the possibility to acquire basic things through this new currency, which also supported locally owned businesses.

He stepped out of the building and walked to the tech repair shop where he would get his phone shipped to the manufacturer for fixing a functionality problem. There was still a dependence on multinational companies for some products and services like technology, but policy and regulations were now much stricter in terms of environmental protection. They ensured the transparency of supply chains and the right to repair for customers. Companies were now recycling and repurposing, achieving a carbon-negative and circular economy. Things like greenwashing and planned obsolescence were now frowned upon, with severe penalties if incurred. At the same time, sustainability targets were now binding with stricter timeframes. Johan felt connected to these new rules as he had for decades been joining social movements to put pressure on politicians. He felt happy he never let up on his commitment to contribute to some change.

"You will have it back the day after tomorrow." The shop clerk said. "Thanks" Johan answered and proceeded to leave the shop. As he came outside, the area was reaching a point in the day
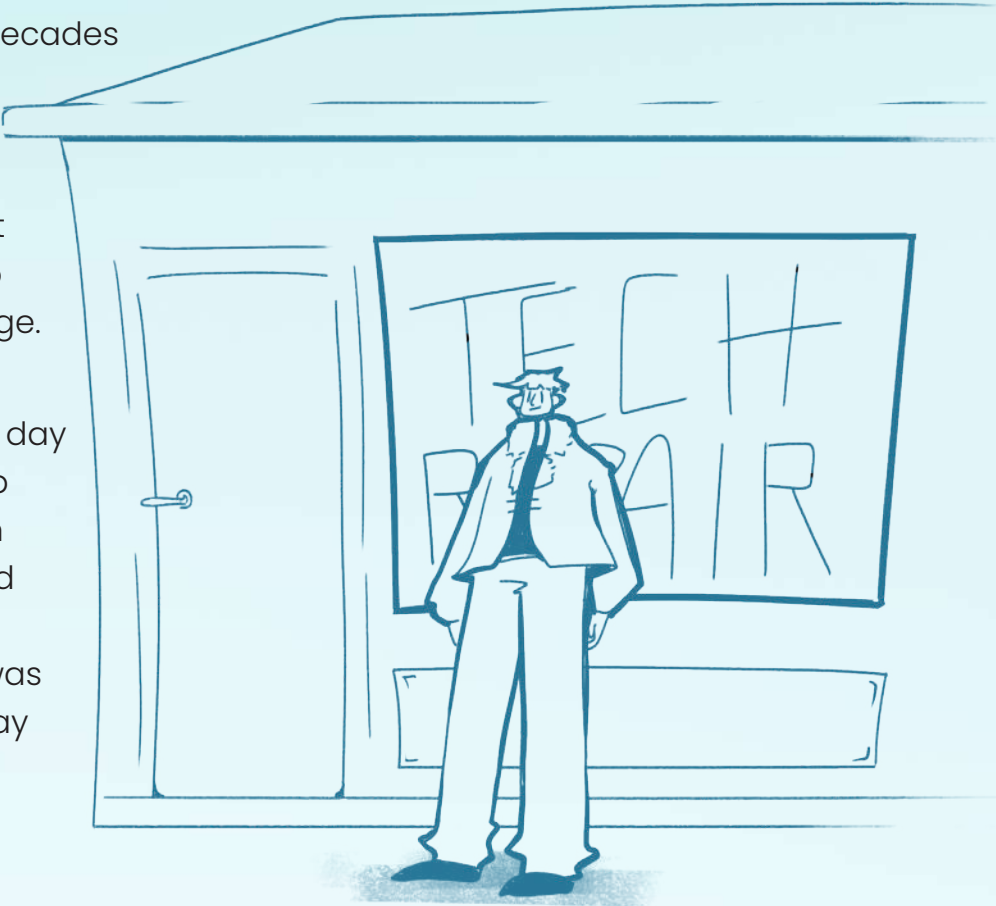
where people would take a break from their daily routines. Walking around at this time reflected the calmness and sense of safety in the city. Not only physical safety but mental as well thanks to the social connectedness that had been emerging in public spaces. This had happened due to the increase of multicultural activities which helped to integrate and build more inclusive interactions every day. Art and cultural events were happening often, with after-event mingles and hangouts. Not everyone was comfortable at the beginning to become social and talk to people. However, these events had the premise of being a welcoming safe space for people to be who they are, without fear or judgment.

 Johan was still standing in front of the shop, hesitant on where to go next. *Looks like everyone went out to the streets at this moment,* he thought. He was partially correct. People valued time outdoors at this hour since the sun was shining and days were shorter. The city had a lot of communal areas which allowed people to escape briefly from their activities and get some headspace for inspiration. People now lived closer to their jobs and cars were heavily reduced, which meant it was faster and easier to commute between home, work, and other interesting places. Johan felt like joining the moment to take a break as well. He headed into an 'innovation café' nearby.

 "A latte with oat-milk please" he ordered at the counter. While waiting for it, he walked to the "activity wall" of the café. He realized it mostly mirrored the content from the library. This one had a few more local crowdfunding projects which had become very popular lately. People appreciated having opportunities to invest in projects in their own neighborhood.

"Hello!" He heard a voice from his back. He turned around.

"Hi Marina! Great to see you!"

He stared at a poster she was holding with both hands.

"Are you pasting that on the wall?"

"Yes, I just passed by to do so."

"Nice coincidence! What is the poster about?"

"You know, new workshops, my thing." Marina answered with a smile as she moved over to find a space on the wall. After managing to set it up in place, she saw Johan getting his coffee.

"Would you like to join?" He asked.

"Sure! I can join for a bit, let me get something to drink."

Marina came back with a hot tea and sat on a sofa in front of Johan.

"So, what is the content of these new workshops?" He asked, interested.

"They are again about sustainability! I just started to design them, but I want to promote them well in advance." She paused before continuing.

"If you recall, I spoke about sustainability not being a static concept

but a dynamic one. I want to discuss with people what the concept of sustainability means nowadays and test some ideas I've been thinking about recently."

"Yes, I think I remember I agreed with that argument. We can never just sit and believe everything is done already, right?"

"Exactly! I would like to add certain concepts such as personal growth, philosophy, and some other related disciplines. But the essence will be the same as the ones you took long ago. Learning and building around attendees' knowledge and experiences."
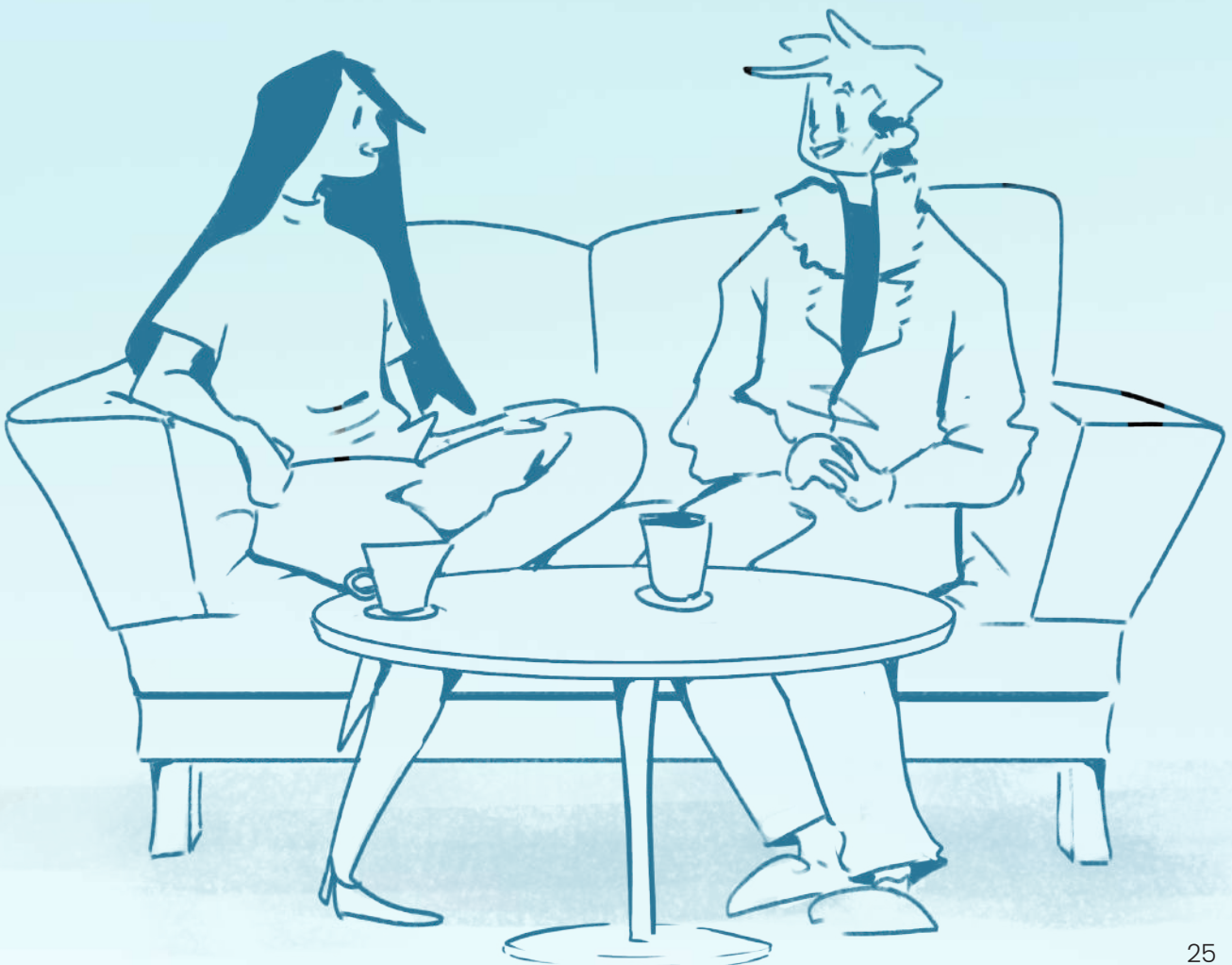
"Yes, that gives very valuable input."

"What do you think about helping me in designing them?" Marina asked him. "Would that be of interest to you?"

Johan thought for a moment about his other obligations.

"Yes, I think I would like that! I can certainly spend some time working on this."

"Great!" Marina celebrated, as she proposed to Johan to meet in the following days.

THE END