HOW DO WE INCLUDE UNDERREPRESENTED VOICES IN THE SUSTAINABILITY CONVERSATION?

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Abstract

In a speech given at the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships 20th Anniversary Statewide Event in the Cargill Building on the St. Paul Campus of the University of Minnesota on November 21, 2017, Virajita Singh, Assistant Vice Provost in the Office for Equity and Diversity, addressed the question, "How do we include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation?" The speech describes the work of The Partnerships as observed by the speaker, and its connection to the Design for Community Resilience program. It also introduces the concepts of Partnership and Design Thinking, and suggests a process for including underrepresented voices in the work informed by Design Thinking.

Key Words*:* Design Thinking; Partnership; Design for Community Resilience; Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships; Diversity Community of Practice; Intercultural Development Inventory; sustainability

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today – it is an honor to be here. (I'm taking my cue from Dean Durgan's talk last night and calling the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships simply "The Partnerships" throughout my talk). I am going

to start by telling you about my connection and relationship with The Partnerships and their meaning for my work, and then we can examine the question together that was posed to me, that is also the title of the presentation: How do we include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation? We may encounter some detours along the way to answering that question, but I hope that it will all make sense at the end.

The 20th anniversary of the formation of The Partnerships is a very special moment in time. My own relationship with the Partnerships goes a long way back – over a decade. It started as a synergistic collaboration, an outcome of the process that The Partnerships is always using, of being on the lookout for University expertise to serve community needs. The Partnerships became very interested in the possibility of using the College of Design's Center for Sustainable Building Research, which I'll call CSBR, to work with communities to find design solutions, specifically sustainable design solutions. At the same time, working with John Carmody, who was then the director of CSBR, I had been conducting research in post-occupancy evaluations (that asks people about their experience and studies the impact buildings have on them) in the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota on Department of Natural Resources sustainable building projects. Post-occupancy evaluations ask people about their experiences with buildings and study the impact buildings have on people. I was looking to continue to offer my design research and teaching expertise in service of communities.

Personally speaking, my own participatory design work had begun as an architect in India, based in New Delhi but working with rural communities in Rajasthan, in northwestern India, on sustainable schools. I was naturally excited by the possibilities of using design expertise in service of Design communities in greater Minnesota. (Rural communities across the world share common themes and interests). This is where Design for Community Resilience (DCR) began: as a program that works with communities to provide architecture, landscape architecture, and community-engaged expertise with researchers from the CSBR and students, typically from graduate

programs in Landscape Architecture, Architecture, and Urban Planning. Joe Polacek, who is here today and will be presenting with other students, is a graduate student in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, working with DCR. We're working together on designing a National Loon Center in Crosslake, Minnesota for the Central Region.

Since that beginning, DCR and The Partnerships have worked together on a series of projects, about three to four a year, involving design of buildings and landscapes to serve communities in Minnesota. Over the years, I have had the good fortune to work with every region of the Partnerships - the Northwest, Northeast, Central, Southwest and Southeast regions. Our own work within the DCR program has continued to grow in response to The Partnerships projects, with my colleague Daniel Handeen joining on some of its work alongside his work with The Partnerships on cold climate winter greenhouses, and CSBR's current director Richard Graves bringing expertise on regenerative design that involves finding ways for people and nature to co-create and co-evolve.

Before there were strong efforts to establish the notion of "community-university", this idea of an equitable partnership between communities and the university through the work of the Office of Public Engagement under the leadership of Andy Furco and his team, The Partnerships were embodying this approach on the ground with citizen boards and with university faculty members joining community members in decision-making and providing project funding. The outstanding work and leadership by the statewide office with Kathy Draeger and Caryn Mohr's leadership, and that of executive directors in the regions - Linda Kingery in the Northwest, Okey Ukaga in the Northeast, Molly Zins in the Central, Erin Meier in the Southeast, and David Fluegel in the Southwest (Dorothy Rosemeier before that in what was the West Central region), and now the new Southwest Director Anne Dybsetter - is central to all of this. The incredibly experienced, talented board members and the staff they are working with, whose perspectives and expertise come from many disciplines and many walks of life, are key to The Partnerships' work and impact.

Two things have always stood out for me in The Partnerships' work. One, their commitment to true partnership and collaboration (not just partnership in name – the kind that lists names together on websites and brochures, you know) but a partnership that is applied every moment in decision-making and action. And, two, their commitment to design and design thinking, recognizing its potential to improve the quality of life for greater Minnesota communities to address social, economic, and environmental aspects. This excitement about design from The Partnerships' leadership, including executive directors, board members, and staff, is real and genuine.

Perhaps it was the inspiring talks by former Dean and current director of the Minnesota Design Center, Tom Fisher, that fired up this interest in design, but what I do know is that when I started work on creating Design Thinking @ College of Design, a program in the College of Design to offer design thinking as an innovation process for non-profits and communities, you in the Partnerships, led by Kathy Draeger, said, "We want that!" That led to a series of explorations using design thinking with the Statewide Coordinating Committee (SCC) board members around four areas of focus – clean energy, natural resources, sustainable agriculture and food systems, and sustainable tourism – including projects with the several communities that comprise the city of Bemidji, USDA-funded food systems work with partners in North Dakota and South Dakota, and also broadening it to University of Minnesota Extension work nationally as part of the 13 university extension teams organized as Extension Reconsidered. Using design thinking, Extension Reconsidered asked the question, "What might the next 100 years of Extension look like?" This passion and commitment for design, of course, makes me a fan of The Partnerships. When someone loves the field you are in in the way the Partnerships do, you simply have to love them back - you have no choice in the matter!

PARTNERSHIP AND DESIGN THINKING

These two concepts that emerge in the Partnerships' work – partnership and a commitment to design and design thinking - are key to addressing the question, "How do we include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation?" Let me take a few minutes to elaborate on this. At the core of the concept of partnership is a fundamentally unique approach. Because the word 'partnership' is used casually and is overused, we may miss its meaning. I have been fortunate to be involved with some groundbreaking work in the discipline of Partnership Studies as a member of the editorial board of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies (IJPS)* (ijps.umn.edu) that features outstanding global and local partnership work from across disciplines. The *IJPS* was the first open-access journal sponsored by the University of Minnesota; it features community voices along with academic voices. (As I mention this it reminds me that The Partnerships' work and the voices of the communities it serves and board members should be featured in this journal).

But going back to the root of Partnership Studies, it is based on the work of Riane Eisler and others in cultural transformation theory. Some of you may know Eisler's work from her remarkable book, The *Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future (*1987, 1995, New York: HarperCollins), that introduced the concept of Partnership Theory. Cultural transformation theory says that there exists a continuum from partnership to domination. Consider that one extreme of the continuum has pure domination and the other extreme has pure partnership. You will note that every society has a mixture of partnership and domination. If we look for an example of extreme domination, Nazi Germany comes to mind and if you looked for an example of extreme partnership – well, I would say, we haven't seen it yet. Democracy tends towards partnership and egalitarian values, but mixed in with capitalism and other ideologies, it falls short of reaching its full potential.

In any case, the recognition of the partnership-domination continuum applies to countries and cultures and organizations, and perhaps to individuals as well. In any given decision I am personally making in the workplace or at home, I can tend towards partnership or towards domination. Of course, sometimes partnership may be perceived as domination (ask my teenage son about his experiences with parental decisions!) but that's another story. How well we support the partnership paradigm of mutual respect, social and economic justice, and gender and environmental balance, determines the direction of cultural transformation.

The second concept that characterizes The Partnerships' work is design and design thinking - in a way, at its core is creativity. Design is one of the few disciplines that is about creating a future. Many disciplines have a focus on, a predilection for, the past. Focusing on the past is important. We need to know where we came from and how we got to the present time we are in; as Santayana's stark quote reminds us, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (*Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress*. 1955. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons).

Yet, I'd like to remind us that, with even the best lessons of history, if we don't have a grasp of how we are going to approach the future and shape or design it, we are apt to recreate the past many times over. And this does no good for the future of humanity. Design inherently is about creating a new future - hopefully a better one.

Before I talk more about the steps in design thinking, I'd like to point out that design is dependent on partnership. In many ways, design is a process with no guarantees of its outcome. Design can have a good outcome or a bad one - it really depends on many external factors, and is centered on the intentions and ethical actions of the designer and the community designing and implementing the design. For a design example of domination, Albert Speer, one of the architects of the Third Reich, has gone down in design history for his exemplary work for Hitler's vision, but his work was in the service of domination, and will always be measured in those terms. So even as we design, we

need to have the intention and follow-through of implementing partnership goals throughout the process.

The design thinking process is broad and deep, and nuanced in many ways. Yet in the last couple of decades, that process has been described and simplified to make it easily applied by those not trained in design. A lot of the credit for this goes to the design firm IDEO and Stanford University's d.school, but as I mentioned, work in this field is very strongly represented in the College of Design. One easy description of the design theory process is the 5-step model of Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. In brief, this means that you think like a designer who is designing the process. (Did I mention that design thinking as I am describing it is used more and more for designing processes, not just products?). You think with empathy about the needs of users in the system you are designing for. You define and home in on the core problem that you are trying to solve. Then you ideate in a designerly way, which means that you go beyond words to sketch pictures of possible solutions. You then create prototypes (physical models of the concepts and ideas) that lead you to play creatively with ideas at a much deeper level to allow for a much more creative solution. Finally, you test the solution. I know this sounds deceptively simple, and those not familiar with this process are probably thinking, "I'm not sure of its effectiveness," but I can assure you that with the right intentions and follow-through, and grounded in partnership with a community, it is possible to achieve great results that advance a community's future. Many of you in The Partnerships have used this process in your work, so you know.

INCLUDING UNDERREPRESENTED VOICES

Now we are ready to address the question, "How do we include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation?" First, let's ask, who do we mean by underrepresented voices or communities? This is a conversation that The Partnerships might consider having in one of the upcoming SCC meetings and in each region. For

now, let's examine the definition of who is included in the notion of diversity at the University.

The Office for Equity and Diversity defines what we mean by diversity at the University of Minnesota:

It is our responsibility as an institution—as part of our commitment to creating a welcoming and affirming climate—to serve and support the following individuals and groups at the University of Minnesota:

American Indians and other indigenous populations

- People of color, including underrepresented groups and new immigrant populations
- People with both apparent and non-apparent disabilities
- People who identify as women
- People of various gender and sexual identities and expressions
- First-generation students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

We also address issues of access and climate for individuals who might encounter barriers based on their religious expression, age, national origin, ethnicity, or veteran status. Furthermore, we recognize the importance of working with people who claim more than one of the above identities.

(https://diversity.umn.edu/aboutoed)

As you can tell, almost everyone is included here, and, when you get to the heart of it, the definition really marks the embracing of differences, period. Is this easy to do? Not really. Embracing some of these differences may push against our deeply held beliefs and assumptions that come from where we were raised, our family traditions, religious upbringing, and more. This process of working through our assumptions and changing them is easier talked about than done. It may trigger resistance and emotional reactions within us, and, in our busy, fast-paced lives, it may feel like "Who has the time and energy for that?" Yet, I know from working with The Partnerships for over a decade,

the answer is, "You do!" With the same thoughtful considerations and conversations you have brought to all the complex work of advancing sustainable development in the rural and urban socio-political context of greater Minnesota, this challenge is about broadening and deepening those conversations and considerations and bringing more people to the table with you. As a thought experiment, let's work through the 5 steps of design thinking and see what emerges.

First, start with empathy.

Think of the experience from a minority perspective, and what do you see? You may see the experience of not being asked, of not being listened to, and perhaps broken promises and pain. Then think of the experience from the majority perspective, and you may see the comfort and ease that comes from being part of the group that has safety in numbers and has their way, and perhaps an unintentional heavy-handedness that comes with it. Lived experience matters; bringing a diversity of lived experience to The Partnerships work, which you already do to a great extent, and expanding the circle of lived experiences, will make the work even better. Being empathic means that there may be a need to sit with the pain of another human being or a group, to look collective histories in the face and realize that the celebratory histories of my ancestors may collide with the genocide of your ancestors. There is nothing you or I can do to erase those histories, but we can stand side by side and look at those histories together, and then resolve together to change the course of the future for ourselves and our children and their children. This is possible through empathy.

Second, define the problem.

To include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation, ask yourself and your group: What is the real problem at hand? Am I/are we expecting the 'included' voices to respond on our terms? Is our definition of sustainability and what it means open to new perspectives? Is the real question: How do we accept differences and move forward to a common goal? Is the real issue the fact that we need to learn that our common humanity is higher than our particular identities of race, ethnicity, religion,

and sexual orientation? Are our outdated notions of scarcity and abundance getting in the way?

I often have design thinking workshop participants outline the problem at hand. I tried a couple and they sound almost funny. Here's one: *We need to include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation but our identities, our expectations, and our resistance to change are getting in the way*. Here's another one: *We need to include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation, but they don't seem to understand the plan we've laid out for them*. How do these sound to you? This is sometimes how this work is approached. At the university, we have many stakeholders, with many groups we are beholden to and are funded by. Certainly the state legislature is one, but since the legislature funds only about 17% of the university budget, the reality is that we have corporate partners and funders too, in addition to community partners. Is the problem, then, that we have not yet resolved in our work the problem of equity between these different voices? Are underrepresented communities and voices being drowned out in the priorities and agendas of our traditional partners who are seen as the heavy hitters in our world? So, define the problem.

Third, ideate for the solutions.

To include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation, generate many ideas. Bring fun and humor to the process. This may seem hard, but I know that The Partnerships know how to be serious and how to have fun. Make new friends; start with the one or two underrepresented persons you know, and each of you can do the same – pretty soon it will be a party. Partner first with underrepresented people, and discuss sustainability later. If you can't bring underrepresented voices to the conversation, please try to take the conversation to them – go to where they are. Celebrate with underrepresented communities. Attend a Somali festival in St. Cloud. Join the Micronesian community in a boat launch in Milan. Invite both Somali and Micronesian friends to Scandinavian week in Thief River Falls. Build relationships and trust, and then

loosen up about your own cultures and other people's cultures. I was raised in Mumbai in a Hindu family, went to a Catholic convent school, and had best friends who were Christian, Muslim, and Hindu. A range of cultural experiences and relationships is good, and is now possible in Minnesota in our backyards; you don't have to travel to faraway exotic lands for unique experiences.

Fourth and fifth, prototype and test.
In a constantly shifting landscape, we cannot prototype fixed solutions, but we can perhaps prototype an evolving structure and process. The Diversity Community of Practice (DCoP), a group of staff, faculty, and administrators working on equity and diversity topics at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus, is one example. Started four years ago by my predecessor, the DCoP has continued to grow during my time into a community of more than 100 members in more than 50 units across campus working on diversity issues. Just last Friday the DCoP Assessment Committee hosted a one-day conference, the Diversity Data Deep Dive, that drew 200 people to register. I'd like to acknowledge Assistant Dean of Extension Renee Pardello's contributions to that effort. To include underrepresented voices in the sustainability conversation, plan to learn with curiosity and immersion, plan to work together, plan to share stories and improvise, and repeat the process.

Now I know all of this is familiar to you, since I have seen you in action for over a decade. The recent projects that you are starting, such as grants, are in the works for a Hmong Community Center and the Central Region's report on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in 12 Central Minnesota Counties. Work is underway with the White Earth, Red Lake, and Leech Lake reservations to find ways to work together.

There are many resources available for this work. Some of you have access to the outstanding training opportunities that Renee Pardello and her team have to offer; others have access to the Office for Equity and Diversity Certificate workshops and/or

to Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessments. Do take advantage of these resources, and call on our offices at the university to support you as you proceed.

Finally, Minnesotans are depending on The Partnerships to help lead the way. Recent work by Ground Level, the American Public Media Research Lab, shows the need: "Just 57 percent of respondents said the state was on the right track in welcoming immigrants and refugees. Broken down by geography, the split between urban and rural Minnesotans was clear: In urban areas like the seven-county Twin Cities region, Rochester and Duluth, from 59 percent to 73 percent of respondents thought the state was on the right track in welcoming refugees and immigrants. But in St. Cloud and rural areas, those who said the state was on the right track ranged from just 36 to 46 percent" (https://www.apmresearchlab.org/stories/2017/11/13/ground-level).

I know that The Partnerships can include underrepresented voices in conversations and action; both underrepresented communities and the future of Minnesota are waiting! Thank you.

Virajita Singh, M.Arch, is Assistant Vice Provost in the Office of Equity and Diversity at the University of Minnesota, where she brings her expertise in design thinking, public interest design, and partnership studies to catalyze and support equity and diversity work of colleges and other academic units across the University. Trained as an architect, Virajita is also Senior Research Fellow and faculty in the College of Design where she leads the Design for Community Resilience program she founded at the Center for Sustainable Building Research which provides sustainable design assistance to greater Minnesota communities. From 2011 to 2015 she began and led Design Thinking College of Design at the University of Minnesota a collaborative group that worked with the creative potential of individuals and organizations across sectors to innovate in fulfilling their mission using the emerging field of design thinking. Her current academic work is focused on exploring the applied intersections of cultural transformation theory, partnership models, and design thinking as a strategy particularly as it applies to higher education context.

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