

WAT's Sustainable – Episode 12 Transcript

00:00:11 – Maria Fraser Semenoff

WAT is up Waterloo? Welcome to WAT's Sustainable? the official podcast at the University of Waterloo's Sustainability Office. My name is Maria. I'm a third-year Environmental Engineering student at Waterloo and a co-op student at the Sustainability Office. I'm the host of this episode.

Today on Episode 12 of the podcast, I am joined by Jahanvi Desai, a special guest from Impact Alliance, and Mat Thijssen, Director of Sustainability at Waterloo.

We will be discussing sustainable development with a focus on the SDGs. Sustainable development is an important global topic. The 17 SDGs aim to eliminate poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for current and future generations. The University of Waterloo is home to sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Canada, which focuses on SDG research, education and support. SDSN also has a youth chapter with the goal of “mobilizing youth to shape the sustainable world for future generations”.

00:01:19 – Maria

So Jahanvi, can you tell me a bit about yourself?

00:01:23 – Jahanvi Desai

Hello hello! My name is Jahanvi Desai and I use she/her pronouns. I am currently a third-year student in the Environment and Business program at the University of Waterloo and I'm super excited to be chatting with you and Mat today.

00:01:37 – Maria

And Mat, could you give us a short introduction?

00:01:41 – Mathew Thijssen

For sure. Thanks so much Maria and happy to be here as well and thank you so much, Jahanvi, for joining us today. It's great to connect again as one of our former co-op students for the Sustainability Office. But yes, I'm the Director of Sustainability here at Waterloo and engage with lots of our partners across campus, students, staff and faculty, to advance our sustainability objectives and in all its many ways that a campus needs to.

00:02:09 – Maria

And so, can you tell me a bit about the sustainable development goals.

00:02:14 – Jahanvi

Of course. The sustainable development goals (or SDGs for short) are a set of 17 interconnected goals that were adopted by the United Nations in 2015. They serve to act as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by

2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity. They are also sometimes referred to as the global goals or Agenda 2030 because essentially, their vision is of what we want the world to look like in 2030, which is 9 years from now.

00:02:43 – Jahanvi

The 17 SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals (or MDGs for short) in 2015 and they're designed to be a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. I personally really like the SDGs and their framework because they're all encompassing of different interests and passions and not really restrictive for people from specific backgrounds. You could be in the faculty of math or engineering or art or science and studying in programs that are not traditionally related to sustainability. But if you look at the 17 goals, I'm sure you'll find one that relates to your work, or one that you're drawn towards. That's what makes it a really strong framework in my opinion.

00:03:25 – Mathew

Yeah, I think what's also really cool about the SDGs, as Jahanvi said, is they build off of the previous Millennium Development Goals. I think what's different about them is also that it's now applicable for every country around the world. The Millennium Development Goals were largely focused on helping the least developed nations reduce poverty, improve food security and combat extreme hunger and malnutrition. I think the SDGs are meant to finish the job, but also recognize that every country around the world has targets that they need to hit within all of these social, economic and environmental pillars. It's not just for least developed countries. Canada has a role to play globally and within our own borders to achieve the SDGs as well.

00:04:11 – Jahanvi

Yeah and moving beyond that as well, this was a framework that was really praised for its inclusivity and it brought to table businesses, nonprofits, citizens and governments to come together to decide them, which wasn't done for the MDGs. So, definitely a lot of factors that make it a really strong framework.

00:04:33 – Maria

That's really amazing, and I think you've already touched a bit on this, but why would you say sustainable development is so important?

00:04:41 – Jahanvi

Sustainable development strives to make the world a better place while also preserving the most that we can for future generations. It recognizes the need for people to improve their standard of living, but also reminds us that it should not be done at the expense of the environment. More recently, we've started seeing more importance being given to intersectional and sustainable development that targets all three pillars of sustainability which are environmental, social and economic.

00:05:12 – Mathew

I think that intersectionality is so key and such a good point and one of the reasons why we even shouldn't do development without looking at the environmental pillar. We

can't do development without looking at the environmental pillar, especially in the long term. I love the visualization of these 17 goals where it really shows we have these economic goals at the top and we want to achieve good quality jobs around the world and industry and innovation that actually works for people. To do that, you need basic access to services like food and water and healthcare. To get those, you need access to a stable planet underneath, like climate stability and functioning ecological system or systems. It really hammers home that we don't get to the top of that pyramid without building or protecting the base first. I think that's a big shift in our development paradigms to be really clear on that fact.

00:06:14 – Maria

Yes, definitely in first world countries, we don't necessarily think as much about the environmental aspect as the economic aspect.

00:06:23 – Maria

Can you comment on how the world has progressed on the SDGs so far? Do you think that Canada and the world will be able to meet the 2030 goals?

00:06:33 – Jahanvi

Very interesting question and one that I have strived to answer before. I would say that because of the nature of the goals and the fact that they bring in multiple stakeholders to advance the agenda, businesses, governments, nonprofits, the framework has seen a lot of success so far. The United Nations releases an annual sustainable development goals report that I would recommend listeners check out if they're interested. It highlights how the world is doing. A few highlights of the 2020 report: we saw maternal and child health improved significantly, access to electricity has expanded in the poorest of communities and women representation in government has improved as well. However, given that 2020 had its own challenges, the positives were offset by the disruption that COVID-19 caused on SDG progress. As we move into 2021, we marked the decade of action for the SDGs and we really have to focus on building resilient communities as we recover from the pandemic.

I'm moving to the answer of whether we can meet the 2030 agenda. I have made this comment before at an event that was hosted about if Agenda 2030 is a dream or reality. I personally am of the opinion that is highly unlikely that all countries will meet all the goals by 2030. Honestly that's OK because even with the Millennium Development Goals, that came before the SDGs, not all the goals were achieved, but a notable improvement was that global extreme poverty was halved. I think it's important to have a vision to work towards. Not achieving is OK, but making progress is what counts and these frameworks often build upon themselves. Even if we haven't achieved these goals by 2030, will have a new vision to aim for in 2045, and we can just keep on making incremental progress to get where we want to be. That's my kind of take on it. What do you guys think? Are we on track to achieve the goals by 2030?

00:08:28 – Mathew

Yeah, I tend to agree with you Jahanvi. I think the pandemic has certainly set back a lot of the progress and momentum that was being built. I think even pre-COVID it was still a moon shot. This was still a really ambitious agenda here, trying to accomplish everything at the same time. You look at any one of those pillars and the really beautiful thing about the SDGs is it's connecting so much under one framework. One of the pillars that I'm most familiar with is SDG 13 on climate action. There's a whole body of international agreements and progress that's trying to be made purely under that pillar, and of course, connected with lots of other stuff. We're not on track to hit that by any stretch of the imagination for the goals that we need to get to from the Paris Agreement. So not all of that is explicitly tracked and linked under the SDGs and the indicators that are there. But you can see that there's just this big gap between where we need to be going, even just on that pillar, and what's actually happening on the ground. It's not that we're not moving in the right direction, but we might not be going fast enough to get us there. Because of that, there's chain reactions for everything else that's in the SDGs. That's that intersectionality we were talking about before coming through. We're making progress, but I don't think it's fast enough to hit the targets that have been set out.

00:10:00 – Maria

Yeah, I also agree that it would be hard for the whole world to meet the 2030 agenda, although I think it's really amazing how we've been seeing more and more climate change being discussed at a lot of events, in the news, etc. I think that's an important starting point. I also think with COVID-19, we've really seen the world come together to protect public health. If the same sort of thing could happen with climate action, I think that we'd be able to go a long way.

00:10:32 – Maria

Now a few questions for Mat. How much progress has the University of Waterloo made on the SDGs so far?

00:10:41 – Mathew

It's a great question and I think we're actually just starting to build the framework for even thinking about the SDGs as it relates to a university. I think one of the brilliant points about the SDGs, that Jahanvi mentioned, was the targets are set at the national level, but there's now a ton of conversations about how do businesses, how do organizations, how do cities and things that are either sub national or transnational start integrating the SDGs into the work that they do?

I think that's a bit of a journey. I don't think anybody has gotten there yet. One of the projects that we're starting to do at Waterloo is kicking off that conversation. We have all of these environmental targets, we're making some really good progress on our equity, diversity and indigeneity initiatives on campus, and really trying to amplify those conversations. How do we link those together with the SDGs as a framework? Also incorporating things like health and well-being and so many other pillars that are embedded in the SDGs. A couple years ago, Times Higher Education launched their

inaugural sustainability ranking and they use the SDGs as a framework. For listeners, Times Higher Ed is one of the biggest global rankings that lots of campuses pay attention to. It was a really big deal that they were starting to use the SDGs and focus on the sustainability impacts and contributions that campuses can make. That was a push for us to think a little bit more holistically about sustainability at the university.

00:12:16 – Mathew

We did really well in the first couple years of the ranking and we're still in the top 100 globally. I can't remember how many institutions are participating now. I think it was over 1000 last year. I think we're well on our way, we just haven't thought about those as strategically with the SDGs as a lens. I think it's interesting because in each different sector, municipalities and businesses and higher education, we have to take these big global targets, like eliminate all poverty for the SDGs, and ask what does that mean for a university to do? Take climate action: there are targets that are happening at the national or international level. What does that mean for the University of Waterloo? It's about distilling those big things and making them relevant or what our understanding, what our contribution is, in each of those different areas. I think it'll probably be safe to say there's always going to be room for improvement.

00:13:17 – Maria

Definitely, and what sorts of initiatives on campus are there to advance sustainable development? And how are they related to the goals?

00:13:27 – Mathew

I think we could talk about initiatives that hit individual goals themselves, and then there's also initiatives that tackle the SDGs as a whole. Things like Sustainable Development Solutions Network Canada that's mobilizing research on campus and from partner institutions around Canada to work towards achieving the SDGs in the Canadian context. Whether through public policy or public and private partnerships, it's about mobilizing momentum around the SDGs and drawing on the research expertise that we have across higher education institutions and other knowledge institutions across Canada.

00:14:05 - Mathew

Jahanvi here is from the student chapter of that to catalyze momentum for students to be engaged in this as well. They will, you will, inherit the future, and so I think it's definitely necessary to have students as part of that, and also a tremendous learning experience. When I talked to students, I think you see though the future that is coming and what it needs to be, and there's a passion that's engaged there. I think engaging students on the SDGs is really critical and I'd love to hear some of Jahanvi's take, in a sec, on what students have been contributing to this journey as well. But, I'll just note again, we have a climate action plan for the university. There are teams on campus that are working on student mental health, employee wellbeing, all these other kind of pieces that fit under the broader SDG puzzle. We don't always think of it as a puzzle in that

sense. Sometimes, we think about them as discrete pieces, and that's OK too. But there is a lot of action that's happening across across all 17 goals.

00:15:13 – Maria

That's really amazing, and it's definitely important as part of the working towards the 2030 agenda.

So Jahanvi, would you be able to tell us a bit about Impact Alliance?

00:15:24 - Jahanvi

For sure. Impact Alliance is the SDG student hub at the University of Waterloo, and we aim to work towards learning about, engaging with, and taking action on the Sustainable Development Goals. A little bit of context on how we get placed: we are a hub under the SDG students program, which is an initiative that aims to mobilize universities around the world, leverage their knowledge, skills and youth to engage in conversations about the goals and contribute to its progress.

Similar to the student hub at the University of Waterloo, we have similar sister hubs at UofT, York, UBC and even around the world. This initiative, the SDG Students Program, is supervised by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network youth chapter that was launched to empower youth globally to create solutions to the problems we face today.

00:16:17 – Maria

How long has Impact Alliance been at Waterloo?

00:16:21 – Jahanvi

Impact Alliance has its roots in the Global Solutions Conference and Goose Chase, which were two of our inaugural events that took place in 2019. The group was founded with the need to bridge gaps between the faculties and different student clubs on campus. A lot of us were working on sustainability without knowing of others, and there were a lot of overlaps. To bridge those, a bunch of engineering and environmental students came together to create Impact Alliance. Then, in March 2020, we transformed to becoming the SDG Student Hub for youth at Waterloo. The campus coordinator before me, Krystal Yee, took over and launched us right at the beginning of the pandemic.

Quick shout out to Krystal, the most amazing friend and campus coordinator Impact Alliance has ever seen. She essentially had the idea of engaging students with the SDGs virtually and started leveraging social media to launch our very first social media series (17 goals for the 17 weeks) that put us on the map. As the terms progressed, we grew and took on more projects and collaborations and expanded. It is only because of her, honestly, that we were able to launch and get where we are today.

00:17:25 – Maria

That's so amazing and it's been amazing to see all the initiatives Impact Alliance has done in the last year in a bit. Congratulations!

00:17:35 – Maria

Can you talk about a bit about what Impact Alliance does?

00:17:39 – Jahanvi

As the SDG student hub, we aim to have events where you can learn about the different SDGs and also participate and actually contribute to progress on these goals. We have done multiple certifications where hub members get together and study an SDG topic. We also have a very strong social media presence. If you're on Instagram, give us a follow @SDGimpactalliance. We often do informational series relating to world events and how they relate to the SDGs. For example, we are doing a series right now in partnership with the Center for Career Action on how the SDGs help define careers from different faculties. Over the spring 2021 term, we launched the Impact Calendar as well, which brings together sustainability events from all around Waterloo region and at the university. We also launched the Impact Newsletter, which breaks down complex issues into actionable, digestible information for students to engage with. One of our banner events was the SDG Impact challenge that was held in March of 2021. This was a solutions hackathon where students were challenged with solving sustainable development problems faced in Waterloo Region.

Some of the exciting events we have upcoming are multiple crash course certifications. We are planning on hosting climate change consultations to get youth involved in the topic of climate change and what they want to see from climate change policies. We're also gearing up and planning for the 2nd edition of the SDG Impact Challenge.

00:19:06 – Jahanvi

It's very quick and easy to join us. You have to fill out a Google form that can be found on the Linktree on our Instagram or on our website. You can check it out at impactalliance.ca. I'm sure I might have missed some of our events, so I recommend checking out our website to learn more about what we have done in the past. I'll turn to you now, Maria, having been part of Impact Alliance as a member and as a solutions officer. What would you say has been your favorite event to date?

00:19:33 - Maria

My favorite event was definitely the SDG impact challenge which I helped to organize. After attending a global solutions hackathon with "We Don't Have Time" back in April 2020, I decided I wanted to organize something similar at Waterloo because it was such an impactful event. The SDG impact challenge was definitely a lot of work to put together, but it was great working with an amazing team and it was amazing to see so many passionate students come together to develop solutions to address sustainability challenges in our community. I really look forward to the second edition of the SDG impact challenge next winter.

00:20:13 – Maria

As a student or staff member at Waterloo, how can I contribute to sustainable

development on campus, in my community or globally? Do either of you have any suggestions about that?

00:20:26 – Jahanvi

I can speak to it from the student perspective. I would say the first step is just talking about it. Not as many people as you think actually know about the SDGs or the Sustainable Development Goals framework. Just discussing this, getting it out in the open, getting more people interested, is very exciting. Second, would be getting involved. As students, you can join Impact Alliance. We host a variety of projects over the year and are also open to everyone's ideas and events and projects that can advance sustainable development on campus and in our community as a whole. But I wouldn't just say join IA. I would say join anything. Get involved in general. A lot of clubs are advancing sustainable development without knowing it. One of my personal favorites is Blueprint. They leverage technology and work in student teams for social good and public welfare. Also check out WUSA Sustainability directory or the Sustainability Officers list of student clubs. Any club is a great place to start honestly.

00:21:26 - Jahanvi

Anyone is also eligible to subscribe to the Impact newsletter. Our monthly additions give you tips that you can integrate into your daily life to contribute to the SDGs. A small action like riding your bike or voting in your local election honestly makes a difference and contributes to the SDGs in a very small way. There are many ways to get started, but, speaking to more of a staff point of view, I will pass it to Mat.

00:21:52 – Mathew

I'll echo the same point. Just talking about it, getting it on the agenda, having those conversations with your peers, whether they're students or staff coworkers. Sustainability is a broad topic that is going to define every career pathway, every job, every industry. They will all be impacted by these big challenges. We might not think about it that way yet, but when you understand the science of what's happening on climate change, we're going to need to deal with it at some point. We're going to need to deal with ecosystem change. We're going to need to deal with the inequality that comes out of this, or we're going to need to design our solutions in a way that integrates those equity lenses into the solutions that we have.

I think you're right, and that's part of the challenge with a lot of sustainability stuff. It's one of those taboo topics that you don't bring up at the dinner table, and you don't engage with friends on because everybody gets a little weirded out when you start talking about sustainability. But we can't solve it if we can't even talk about it. Normalizing it and making a part of conversation doesn't mean we have to be annoying. We just need to bring it up and think about ways to integrate it.

00:23:14 – Mathew

One thing that I always try to share with people is a framing from Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson. She is part of this podcast called "How to Save a Planet", which is fantastic,

and they talk about really forward thinking ways of what we need to do to solve climate change. She has this framework that she has put out there that there's so many things that we need to do that it can be very overwhelming. Think about it as a Venn diagram. She recommends the three circles in the Venn diagram are: what needs to be done or what are the solutions we need to start working on? What am I really good at or what are the skills and the passion, or the skills and the capabilities that I have? And what do I love or what brings me joy? If you can find the intersection of those three things, then maybe there's a really powerful starting point for you to find something that isn't going to burn you out, and that will be really engaging for you to be involved in whatever way.

If you really care about and love coding, there's a group on campus for that. If you're into art or communicating, there's a role for that to play in the low carbon and sustainability transition. I think that's the key takeaway: find your niche and find what brings you happiness and then apply it to these really big challenges that need to be solved.

00:24:44 – Maria

I definitely think that although climate change needs to be solved collectively, individual actions definitely make a difference. Finding ways to change small habits in your life slowly and building up can definitely help work toward the sustainable development goals.

00:25:00 - Mathew

Yeah, it often gets polarized between individual action versus systemic change, and I think it's a false framing. We have to do both because we don't get to the systemic change unless we show some bottom-up support and build a movement around this.

We're not going to solve climate change just by you and me riding our bikes to campus, but that builds the momentum for other policy changes that can actually make a bigger impact. And so, I agree completely. It needs to be both.

00:25:38 - Mathew

I again wanted to thank Jahanvi for joining us today. It's amazing and always inspiring to see what student groups on campus are doing to advance sustainability. I think Impact Alliance is a fantastic example of that intersectional thinking we've been talking about and really trying to draw what on first glance seems like some really disparate groups together and working on different topics but weaving the thread between those to show how they can be mutually supportive. So, Jahanvi, thanks so much. It's great to see you again.

00:26:11 – Jahanvi

Thank you so much for having me.

00:26:13 – Maria

I hope that you have been inspired to get involved with sustainability action in your community. If you enjoyed this episode, make sure to subscribe so you can get notified

about future podcasts. Also, follow us on social media @uwsustainable on Instagram and Twitter so you can see all of the other sustainability content that we share.