

Reimagining Our Relationship with Oceans: Reflections from an SDG Digital Transformation Lab Dialog During UNGA 81

Ocean Health as Human Health, Discoveries from the Sea, Community-Led Restoration, Bridging Green-Blue Corridors, AI Innovations for Oceans, and the Funding Gap

Last month, during the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly and New York Climate Week, the SDG Digital Transformation and Sustainability Solutions Lab (SDG Lab), Pegasus Capital Advisors (Pegasus) and UNDP co-hosted two events that brought together academics, philanthropists, investors, and practitioners. The first, on September 22nd, invited participants to reimagine our relationship with oceans.

“**Ocean health is human health,**” said Sahba Sobhani, Director of UNDP Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development, emphasizing that the ocean holds value we haven’t yet measured. Craig Cogut, Founder, Chairman, and CEO of Pegasus Capital Advisors and co-founder of the SDG Lab, framed the stakes: **getting oceans right is existential, and it is also an economic opportunity.** Radhika Shah co-founder of the SDG Lab and founding Co-President of the Stanford Alumni Alliance on Innovation for Global Impact challenged participants to think differently as Green-Blue Corridors bridging Land and the seas emerge and we start engaging more deeply with the oceans as a live lab of sorts—to be less extractive, more sustainable and regenerative than we have been in our interaction with land.



AI Is an Essential Tool for Oceans & Solutions Must Be Possible, Feasible, and Just

Stanford Professor Bill Barnett, who was joined by Marissa Mendoza (Associate Director for the Stanford Initiative on Business and Environmental Sustainability), spoke about his work and offered a three-part test for any solution: **it must be technically possible, feasible, and morally just.** Establishing a useful frame for the rest of the session, on the role of technology, Barnett said:

Artificial intelligence will be seen as an essential tool as humankind ramps up the generation of important ocean-based solutions to humanity’s fundamental sustainability problems. Blue food, the preservation of ocean biodiversity, the conservation of fisheries and the acceleration of preservation efforts can all be aided by the rapid development made possible through artificial intelligence. At the same time, we must

double down our efforts to make sure that the bottom billion is not left behind as these advancements continue.

What the Ocean Holds That We Don't Yet Understand



Dr. Franck Zal, a marine biologist and co-founder and CEO of Hemarina, presented his company's **intertidal marine-worm-derived technology for human organ preservation and more**, a platform with 63 patents. Radhika Shah shared about exploratory discussions with Stanford Medical School academics about potential prenatal applications. Craig Cogut then raised the question to the room, "What else don't we know about?" meaning that protecting ecosystems also protects solutions we have yet to discover.

Communities at the Center

Muneerah Merchant, CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation USA and a member of the SDG Lab's Philanthropy Advisory board, described the foundation's work on poverty eradication across 13 countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, with a goal of reaching 10 million people. The focus areas of their Indian Ocean initiative spanning multiple countries include mangrove protection and restoration, regenerative fishing and farming, seaweed, water, clean energy, nutrition, and community-owned initiatives, with an emphasis on women.

Closing the Funding Gap

Heather Grady, EVP and Chief Strategy and Sustainability officer of the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) and a member of the SDG Lab's Philanthropy Advisory board made the case for multiyear operational funding and for philanthropy as catalytic capital for the untested. Examples included the Blue Convergence Fund and Oceans 5, RPA's longest-running ocean project.

Satya Tripathi, former United Nations Assistant Secretary General, Secretary General of the Global Alliance for a Sustainable Planet, and a member of the SDG Lab's Global Executive Advisory board shared about the role of catalytic partnerships. These partnerships have enabled Green-Blue Corridors in India, including the



women-self-help groups that anchored the natural farming initiative catalyzed by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. He also discussed the future possibilities of sustainable ocean rejuvenation providing livelihoods to millions of people living in rural communities along India's long coastline.

Sahba Sobhani offered the group a diagnosis: oceans are the classic tragedy of the commons, and they are failing for lack of institutions, financing, and data. They are also the most underfunded of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). AI can help, Sobhani noted, by tracking illegal fishing patterns and making evidence-based predictions.

Restoration on the Ground



Hanna Layton, speaking on behalf of Amanda Hearst and Brianna Schultz, presented Well/Beings, a New York nonprofit that has backed 63 projects across the Amazon and the Caribbean since 2018, mostly funding mangrove restoration. Former Silicon Valley tech executive, philanthropist Ambarish Malpani (who was joined by fellow philanthropist Uma Venkataraman) shared about his new initiative recycling previously "unrecyclable" plastic waste.

Roundtable Highlights

The open-ended, interactive roundtable discussion that followed turned to using AI to scale coral mapping and restoration and to mangroves as the connective tissue of coastal ecosystems. Heiko Henning, COO of Voyacy Regen, shared about 3D-printed coral. GridMine's Emma Gallo cautioned: AI for good still needs to point in the right direction. Ashoka Fellow Khushboo Awasthi shared about the Shikshagraha movement which is transforming public education in India, and tech impact investor Ashit Patel explored weaving in oceans-focused project-based learning initiatives for children in Indian public schools via the Shikshagraha platform. Heewoong Kim, Senior Advisor to the United Nations Joint SDG Fund, also participated in the discussion.

Craig Cogut raised an open question to the session: who pays for coral reefs? Is it hotels, governments, others? Participants went on to discuss green-blue corridors with ports and an ecosystem of actors working together. Sahba Sobhani called for a **"coalition of the able and willing."** Answering that call will mean building systems and institutions, not just projects.



This article reflects solely the views of the SDG Digital Transformation and Sustainability Solutions Lab, not Pegasus Capital Advisors, L.P. or its personnel.