

sustainability connect 2020

FALL 2020 EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

Each year, Sustainability Connect provides an opportunity for the MIT community to find their place in the campus sustainability landscape at MIT, to connect with new partners, and advance a more sustainable and just campus. Sustainability Connect 2020 was a unique year, transitioning to a virtual format that sought to recognize the special need for dialogue around the inter-connectivity of justice, science, and sustainability.

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Through partnership with the Environmental Solutions Initiative (ESI) and the Institute Community and Equity Office (ICEO), attendees engaged in meaningful conversation and idea-sharing through three concurrent workshops:

- Workshop 1: Building and strengthening connections within the MIT sustainability community
- Workshop 2: Exploring the social justice and sustainability nexus in Colombia, the U.S., and campus
- Workshop 3: Campus as a testbed—From research to decision-making

Key themes and guidance for the future of sustainability at MIT emerged across workshops:

- **A desire for more opportunities for connection across roles.** In Workshop 1, many attendees were grateful to find spaces, like Sustainability Connect, to unite individuals focused on sustainability for opportunities for collaboration, networking, and alignment that do not otherwise exist, particularly with campus dispersed during the pandemic.
- **A recommendation that MIT explore an appropriate social justice goal for the next five years of its climate action planning.** Workshop 2 provided the space to engage in a conversation around justice through the lenses of Colombia, the US, and campus, which highlighted the need for a deeper dive to chart a course forward.
- **An affirmation that campus is an essential place for testing ideas.** Workshop 3 attendees explored the use of the campus as a testbed, its impact, and what opportunities there are as we chart a path forward.

WORKSHOP 1: BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE MIT SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNITY

What we did

The workshop featured storytellers sharing sustainability experiences at MIT along with advice for collaborating and co-solving sustainability challenges. Storytellers included: Undergraduate Association Sustainability Committee Chair Megan Xu; CRSP Renovations Interior Designer Becca Leanos; Associate Dean for Public Service and Senior Director of PKG Kate Trimble; and MIT Architecture Professor Caroline Jones. The speakers highlighted cross-campus and cross-disciplinary sustainability resources with themes of **networking, culture as a driver for change, ethics, and alignment.**

What we learned

After hearing from the speakers, workshop attendees shared what resonated with them from the talks, what they need to support their sustainability efforts, and other ideas to support connections across the MIT sustainability community. The following themes and ideas were raised.

Accessible language and communications: In order to build a stronger and more dynamic network of individuals solving for sustainability at MIT, attendees shared a desire for clear communication, accessible language and terminology to support individual fluency in sustainability policy and advocacy.

Culture: Attendees shared the belief that framing sustainability at MIT needs to go beyond objective to contextual, situational, and social. Workshop members asked what cultural shifts need to happen and how we, the MIT community, can catalyze such shifts. Attendees also noted there is a strong drive at MIT to tackle the technical issue of sustainability, and the separate challenge of supporting culture changes at MIT to foment broader social and behavioral change.

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Ethics: The concept of ethics was raised noting that there is no ethics requirement for students to learn at MIT (common at some universities) and that a focus on ethics extends into sustainability and personal behaviors.

Alignment: Attendees were excited for the alignment opportunities the event provided and hope for more opportunities to work beyond silos that may exist. Many attendees welcomed additional opportunities to make connections across roles at MIT (student, staff, faculty) to support new and innovative ideas and actions.

Resources

[Departments, labs, and centers with a mission focused on sustainability](#)

[MIT's Plan for Action on Climate Change](#)

[Start your sustainability journey with MITOS](#)

[MIT Data and Metrics + Sustainability DataPool](#)

[Environment and Sustainability undergraduate courses](#)

[Environment and Sustainability degree programs](#)

[Sustainability and climate student and alumni groups](#)



WORKSHOP 2: EXPLORING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY NEXUS IN COLOMBIA, THE U.S., AND CAMPUS

What we did

This workshop featured a conversation between Professor Janelle Knox Hayes of DUSP and Luis Gilberto Murillo-Urrutia, MLK Fellow at ESI & Former Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development for Colombia. The conversation explored two big themes from Minister Murillo's and Professor Knox-Hayes' experience and research in Colombia and the U.S.:

- **Structural inequalities:** The cumulative impacts of structural racism over time
- **Community voice:** How we move toward more representation in governance and decision-making, in order to understand and overcome structural challenges that show up in our environments
- [Link to slides \(PDF\)](#)

The workshop concluded with breakout sessions that explored **three questions** about the MIT campus:

- If our campus was environmentally-just, how would you know? What would be different?
- What structures, systems, and/or policies do you see at MIT that might impede our ability to achieve environmental justice at the Institute?
- What are some of MIT's unique strengths, and how could these strengths be used to make progress towards environmental justice at the department and campus levels?

What we learned

Our short breakout session only scratched the surface, in terms of answering these three questions. MITOS will schedule a follow up conversation this fall/winter (open to the MIT community) to continue to explore these three questions, as the Office seeks to more meaningfully incorporate social justice into its sustainability framework. Some takeaways from the breakout session included:

- A big question was raised: What would be an appropriate social justice goal for the next five years of MIT climate action, complementing or extending the new "Climate Grand Challenges" research program?

How can we make decision-making around food, energy, and water more visible for the campus community?

- Many brought up issues around air quality and green space: indoor, outdoor, rooftops, etc. A conversation began about valuing the well-being and social benefits provided by green spaces and tree canopy (which may be harder to quantify) both for MIT and the surrounding communities. What would more restorative ecological landscapes look like at MIT?
- We discussed questions and ideas about the role of data and decision-making, such as:
 - How can we enable decision-making around food, energy, and water to be more visible for the campus community?
 - An acknowledgement that one of MIT's strengths is around data, and we can be courageous about sharing data.

Additional conversations related to creating an environmentally just campus included:

- The connection between fossil fuels and environmental justice on campus.
- Designing infrastructure to be more inclusive—from bathrooms to transportation infrastructure for people with disabilities.
- Ensuring climate justice is part of our community-wide discussions around climate action at MIT.
- Breaking down any barriers at MIT in coursework for doing intersectional work around racial justice, science, sustainability, etc.



WORKSHOP 3: CAMPUS AS A TESTBED—FROM RESEARCH TO DECISION

What we did

Workshop attendees focused on what utilizing the campus as a test bed means to them and how the idea could be expanded upon to support their work and research across MIT. After hearing from researchers using the campus as a testbed—including MIT Center for Global Change Science Research Scientist and MITOS Faculty Fellow Ken Strzepek; Executive Director, Concrete Sustainability Hub and MITOS Faculty Fellow Jeremy Gregory; PhD Candidate, Department of Mechanical Engineering Peter Godart; and MIT CTL Research Scientist and Director of Sustainable Supply Chains Alexis Bateman—attendees broke into groups to discuss, along with the researchers, a number of guiding questions.

- What new research should be done?
- What applied practices have gaps that warrant research?
- What can we learn about scaling sustainability solutions tested and studied on campus?

What we learned

- Attendees viewed using the campus as a testbed in a number of ways including:
 - Leveraging experience and perspectives across staff, researchers, faculty jointly to achieve sustainable practices and address challenges
 - MIT leading to test new sustainability initiatives
 - Engaging educational research with real problems
- Waste, circular economies, transportation, and procurement were identified as areas that have gaps in research on campus
- Attendees also identified a need for research to better focus on “Scope 3 emissions” (indirect emissions from sources such as MIT-sponsored travel, commuting, waste and capital goods) and the environmental impact of MIT innovations
- With regard to scaling sustainability solutions found at MIT, conversation revolved around investments that have an economic return, and identifying ways for others to mimic solutions in a way that is scalable and cost effective.

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WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Though the three workshop sessions were unique, each ended with a common call: **Let's keep this conversation going.** A 45-minute workshop merely sets the stage for deep conversations needed around sustainability connection and community building, social justice, and campus as a testbed.

We invite you to join us for continued conversations about each topic—keep an eye on your inbox for invites for sessions to take place this fall and winter. Until then, if you have If you have any questions, ideas, and/or resources to share, contact the Office of Sustainability team at sustainablemit@mit.edu