

Welcome Message to 1st GRF-SPaC Regional – Arequipa, 19/10/2014

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A warm welcome to the first LatAm regional meeting of GRF-SPaC. Thank you Ricardo Zavala and the Arequipa Bar Association for hosting us. Thank you all for coming a long way and for your interest and commitment.

I am an academic and an activist: trained as a chemist; I taught Science and Society; and Technology Assessment at Dutch Universities; then moved to the US in 2003 where I currently work with Tellus Institute, Boston and Clark University on sustainable consumption. I was part of a small group of people who created SCORAI in North America in 2008; and of another group of people and institutions who created GRF in 2011; we also created SCORAI-Europe also in 2011; and SCORAI China in 2014; and I co-organized the first GRF workshop in 2012 in Rio and then the GRF biannual conference in Shanghai, June 2014.

GRF-SPaC is created to bring together researchers and practitioners to address unsustainable consumption and production practices and systems; and to find ways to transform patterns and systems towards more sustainable ones; through research, practice, and policy. We do that through organizing global and regional conferences and workshops like this one, in order to bring people together from different academic disciplines and societal backgrounds; because the challenges are so complicated and multi-dimensional.

What are those challenges? On the one hand, we all want to have a good life; “buen vivir” in Latin America; quality of life, happiness, well-being. We all know through research and practice that good life means good relationships; good health; reaching your aspirations in life. It also means meeting basic needs like housing, food, transportation, and leisure. Yet in most countries in the world people are focused to reach well-being through (often excessive) material consumption. This threatens the environment and exhausts our resources; causes pollution and climate change, deforestation and desertification, deterioration of oceans, and sea level rise. Rockström and coworkers have coined the concept “planetary boundaries” which are presently being crossed-over; and the ecological footprint tells us that we will need 5 planets Earth to sustain of life styles for the 9.5 billion people living in 2050. The trends are worsening: the IPAT formula teaches us that with increasing population and increasing affluence the environmental burden will further increase.

Yet for most individuals the relationships between our own life styles and these environmental problems are unclear. Moreover, most people are not able to change their consumption habits easily, because we are all locked-in into unsustainable lifestyles, infrastructures, and expectations. These are not just individual problems for us as consumers; these are social problems; and ultimately this is a systemic problem of our institutions and our culture.

In addition to those environmental problems cause by overconsumption, we are confronted with problems of inequality and poverty. Many of us consume too much, but most people are not even able

to fulfill their basic needs. The root causes of overconsumption and inequity/poverty are the same: these are systemic problems caused by the dominant neo-liberal economic system; the hegemony of the economic growth paradigm; and through the pervasive hegemonic culture of consumerism. We are also confronted with deficits in our democratic system; where many institutions are captured by big business interests.

The economic and financial systems: we are addicted to economic growth and increase in GDP. However, we know that GDP is the wrong metric; it grows when disasters strike; but it does not measure wellbeing and happiness; instead we should use metrics like the human development index. However, if we all stopped to consume the economic system would collapse. The economic system supports big business and big profits for the wealthy 1%; while keeping wages low; hollowing out employment opportunities in small and medium-sized firms; and influencing government policies to support these practices. **The global financial system** drives those developments and is totally out of control. Global institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and WTO make things worse by pushing austerity politics and freeing up trade barriers while undermining environmental and consumer protection. We consumers are induced to consume those products that we do not really need for our wellbeing; but which pollute the environment.

The cultural system: since WW2 it has created a culture of rampant consumerism: through mass media and advertisements most Americans, Europeans, and the elites in developing countries are seduced to celebrate consumption; and most of us believe that we should live like Americans in the suburbs: with multiple cars and fridges, big houses that need to be heated and cooled, and filled with stuff we do not need; eating processed food that comes from far. By now we know that such a lifestyle does not make us happy; but most Americans are habituated to it and locked in, and do not see alternatives; and our institutions resist change. However, in the USA the Millennium generation appears to value different lifestyles: they prefer living in city centers, in smaller apartments; do not get drivers licenses or cars but take public transit and prefer biking; and they prefer locally grown and organic food.

This is the context of unsustainable individual consumption patterns; change may be generational; but it needs to be systemic change, which changes the economic system, the culture, the government, as well as our individual habits. How to accomplish that?

Some say: we need a **social movement**; that addresses these issues of overconsumption. However, the environmental movement has failed us, by focusing too much on nature and pollution; and too little on economics and culture. The environmental justice movement has been somewhat more successful; but until recently did not focus on the economic and financial systems. We also need to collaborate with anti-corruption movements and movements to clean up governments; and movements that celebrate traditional sustainable consumption patterns of indigenous people.

Others believe more in **small-scale experiments** and building intentional communities on the ground. These have been called **niche experiments**; bounded socio-technical experiments; grassroots innovations. Many are local: slow food, slow money, transition towns, community banks, workers coops. Through connection between bottom-up experiments alternative institutions could be created that

challenge the mainstream. Still others think that mediation could help to resolve underlying conflicts between the “haves”, the overconsumers; and the “have-nots”, the “underconsumers”.

It is clear that technologies like renewable energy, energy conservation, dematerialization, green product design, can help, but cannot solve these problems alone. In addition, the social media could be a powerful resource in building counter movements. However, the energy-efficiencies are easily overwhelmed by more consumers and consumption; and the money saved leads to rebound effects. We need better education for sustainable consumption and production; we need communication research to help reframe the issues in a way people of different backgrounds can understand.

What is the role of research and researchers? Theories of change are deficient and incomplete; many researchers investigate empirically examples of social movements and niche experiments; and analyze factors of success and failure. They also can conceptualize systemic change; and collectively try to develop theories and models of social change toward sustainability. The role of researchers is thus not only publicizing data and producing knowledge; but also to act as **Organic Intellectuals** (Gramsci) to address and attack unsustainable practices and systems; and theorize as well as experiment to find ways to overcome the present unsustainable system. Not only knowledge is needed, but also collective wisdom.

What is then the role of **GRF-SPaC**? In my view the main role is to bring together people who think deeply about these issues; and collectively search for answers; through organizing meetings like this one, exchanging information and knowledge and wisdom; but also through creating a community where we feel safe and challenged to think deeply; and creating the infrastructure that supports these activities.

I am very happy that this workshop finally came to be; since 2012 Maite and I have been talking about this; and Jeff and I have been working within GRF to create regional activities and chapters. In those early days Luis Flores has also been very helpful for us to make the connections with Latin America and open the door for us; thank you Luis. When Fabian joined us, first in Rio, later in Shanghai, we recognize that it is his incredible dedication and work, together with his colleagues at Market Analysis in Brazil, that made this workshop happen.

I hope and expect that this workshop will be the first step in creating a regional chapter of GRF in Latin America; that it will fruitfully cooperate with other chapters around the world and with GRF-globally; and that it will be helpful in addressing the deep-seated challenges of environment, equity, overconsumption and poverty; in the context of democratic governance and full participation by all groups in society; and that it will stimulate inter and transdisciplinary research to support those efforts.

Thank you and I officially open this workshop