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# **Insights from Sustainable Cleveland 2019: An Initiative Driving Sustainable Regional Development by Large Scale Summits, Collective Visioning, and lots of Creativity, Culture, and Appreciation**

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## **Abstract**

### *Purpose*

Given the current growing challenges regarding sustainability, the need for massive engagement, creative solutions, and large scale change is evident. The challenges are e.g. clearly elaborated in the 17 sustainable development goals recently proposed by the United Nations. In facing these global challenges on a regional level, there is an urgent need for spreading and advancing best practice on how to involve the various citizens of a region in collectively co-designing, driving, and realizing a more sustainable region and future for all.

An initiative that currently is up and running, engaging hundreds of people annually, continuously evolving, and showing promising results of such abilities is Sustainable Cleveland 2019 (“Sustainable Cleveland”, 2016). Starting in 2009, it is a 10-year initiative that engages and invites everyone in the region around Cleveland to work together to design and develop a thriving and resilient Cleveland that leverages its wealth of assets to build economic, social and environmental well-being for all. Since the start, results from the initiative show enhancements of both economic as well as social, cultural, and environmental development of Cleveland and the surrounding region. The initiative is interesting for many reasons, one being the change management approach of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a promising research based approach from Case Western Reserve University (which is located in the region), which was applied at a large scale and in close collaboration with representatives from the cultural and creative sectors. It is an approach that actively enables, engages, and invites people in co-designing and self-organizing for realizing a more sustainable future in what might be described as an “appreciative social movement” (Boland, 2013). The approach relies on a process that actively explores citizens’ appreciative perspectives on the best of what is, their dreams and hopes for the future, and how they see that this future can be designed and realized. At the heart of the initiative is a thoughtfully designed AI large group summit, annually gathering hundreds of participants from all parts of society in a process of co-creation during two days. Interestingly, the application of AI has also been generally observed to provide the fastest, most consistent, and transformative results when focusing on sustainability (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012). Furthermore, the initiative is organized around annual celebration topics as a means to create a common focus within the region on one specific sustainability challenge such as “Clean water”, “Vital Neighborhoods” or “Zero Waste. The term itself, “Celebration Topics”, reflects how the initiative consistently and deliberately applies an “Appreciative Eye”, as described by Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987).

The purpose of this paper is to identify and contribute insights concerning the strengths of the Sustainable Cleveland 2019 initiative, with a special focus on how it uses the cultural and creative

sectors as resources and drivers for sustainable regional development. The cultural and creative sectors refer in this paper to the performing arts and the seven creative fields especially highlighted by UNESCO – Crafts and Folk Arts, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Media Arts, and Music.

### *Approach*

The paper is based on a case study conducted by the eight authors. Data has mainly been collected by participant observations and interviews with participants and organizers before, during, and after the Sustainable Cleveland summit in September 2015. The initial analysis was conducted during a follow up workshop in October 2015 and was preceded by structured individual reflections. Based on the workshop results, a secondary analysis was conducted where the strengths relating to the cultural and creative sectors were picked out and grouped into themes.

### *Findings*

As a result, several strengths were identified. During the secondary analysis, those strengths were grouped into three themes as presented below.

#### 1. Making the core process of Sustainable Cleveland 2019 more engaging and fruitful:

One of the most obvious related strengths is the way the initiative uses practices from the cultural and creative sectors to increase the engagement in, and output of, the core processes. Many of the methods used within the initiative, such as for visioning, creating new ideas, and playfully prototype as a way to explore new ideas, have its roots in the cultural and creative sectors. One example is the practice of “rapid prototyping”, brought in from the design studio IDEO.

#### 2. Nurturing a reverence for the environment, raising awareness, and inspiring action:

Another strength that relates to using the cultural and creative sectors as resources and drivers for sustainable regional development is the initiative’s close collaboration with local institutions of e.g. theater and music for putting focus on, engaging in, and elaborating the understanding of the annual celebration topics. One example is the short plays “Fire on the Water”, given by the Cleveland Public Theatre during the year of 2015 when the celebration topic was “Clean Water”. This activity focused on issues of sustainability in fun, intimate and personal ways. The work focused on how the environment can shape identity and celebrate the remarkable recovery of Cleveland’s waterways. Another example is the play “Air Waves”, given in 2014, weaving sustainability themes into a story of loss, reckoning, forgiveness and honeybees. Generally, the cultural and creative sectors are very much used as resources to nurture a reverence for the environment and raise awareness about critical issues related to sustainability. More about how the Cleveland Public Theatre, Tri-C, and Inlet Dance Theatre have been using the performing arts to raise consciousness and inspire action around water can be seen in a video produced by the initiative (“New video: How performing arts advance sustainability”, 2016).

#### 3. The cultural and creative sectors themselves are the focus of sustainability action:

Finally, the cultural and creative sectors themselves are also the focus for sustainable development and action. Obviously, challenges such as decreasing waste, avoiding toxic substances, and lowering energy consumption are relevant also within these sectors themselves. Gastronomy, in terms of “Local Food”, was furthermore chosen as the overall celebration topic of the initiative in 2012 which made this an area for considerable sustainable development actions. As a result, several accomplishments were, and are continuously, achieved related to gastronomy within the initiative (“Local Foods”, 2016).

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